**Victorian local councils and gender equality: Examining commitments to diversity and the experiences of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds**

# Acknowledgements

We acknowledge that we are located and conducting this work on the unceded lands of the peoples of the Kulin nations. We pay our respects to their elders, past and present.

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# Acronyms

BIPOC Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour

CALD Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

CGEPS Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector

DFFH Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

EMT Executive Management Team

GEAP Gender Equality Action Plan

LGA Local Government Area

LOTE Languages Other Than English

NESB Non-English-Speaking Background

RCFV Royal Commission into Family Violence (Vic)

# A note on terminology

In this report, we use the terminology ‘migrant and refugee backgrounds’ and often refer to participants as ‘migrant and refugee women’. This reflects the use of terminology widely adopted in Australia in the research and policy context, including in the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032; it includes individuals who live in Australia and were born overseas or were born in Australia but whose parents or grandparents were born overseas (Chen 2017; Henry et al. 2022; Segrave 2017, 2018; Vaughan et al. 2015, 2016). The term provides recognition of the ways in which lived experience is shaped by the migration and settlement process, as well as other aspects of social location, including race and ethnicity, citizenship or migration status, class, and cultural heritage. It is not a term that suggests that all migrants and refugees, or all migrant and refugee women, have the same experiences and backgrounds. We recognise that people from migrant and refugee backgrounds have diverse experiences and identities and may not necessarily identify solely as migrants or refugees.

# List of tables

[**Table 1**: Summary of resident populations of six participating councils 15](#_Toc133225839)

[**Table 2**: Summary of focus groups 16](#_Toc133225840)

[**Table 3** Summarised content analysis of GEAP for six invited councils 18](#_Toc133225841)

# Contents

[Acknowledgements 1](#_Toc133281761)

[Acronyms 2](#_Toc133281762)

[A note on terminology 2](#_Toc133281763)

[List of tables 3](#_Toc133281764)

[Contents 4](#_Toc133281765)

[Executive summary 5](#_Toc133281766)

[Key findings 6](#_Toc133281767)

[Recommendations 8](#_Toc133281768)

[Introduction 1](#_Toc133281769)

[Methods 3](#_Toc133281770)

[Data collection 3](#_Toc133281771)

[Sampling 4](#_Toc133281772)

[Data analysis 5](#_Toc133281773)

[A note on the audit data 5](#_Toc133281774)

[Phase One: Review of GEAPS 6](#_Toc133281775)

[Phase Two: Examining experience and practice 7](#_Toc133281776)

[Section One: Employee experience 7](#_Toc133281777)

[1.1 Gender equality and cultural diversity in the workplace: Perspectives and observations 7](#_Toc133281778)

[1.2. Lived experiences and challenges 8](#_Toc133281779)

[1.3. Organisational culture, gender policies and practices 12](#_Toc133281780)

[Section Two: Council views, strategy, actions 28](#_Toc133281781)

[2.1. Gender equality, inclusion and diversity: Views and ambitions 28](#_Toc133281782)

[2.2. Strategies and practices: Focusing on specific practices to diversify gender equality in the workforce 32](#_Toc133281783)

[Section Three: Intersectionality and the meaning of diversity and inclusion 39](#_Toc133281784)

[3.1. Women’s perspectives on intersectional gender equality policies 39](#_Toc133281785)

[3.2. Observations on the use of the term ‘intersectionality’ 40](#_Toc133281786)

[Conclusion and next steps 42](#_Toc133281787)

[References 43](#_Toc133281788)

# Executive summary

Councils are the first layer of government in Australia’s complex governance system and a key employment and service provider for the community. This study was designed to explore how conceptions of gender equality are accompanied by understandings of the experiences of different groups of women, in this case migrant and refugee women. We wanted to examine how the pursuit of gender equality in Victoria, Australia, takes into consideration the diversity of women’s needs and experiences. We focused this study on local councils because of their critical role in leading change. We focus on migrant and refugee women, including but not limited to women whose first language is English, given the importance of prioritising the recognition of these women’s experience. As of 2021, approximately 27.6% of Australia's total population were born outside Australia and 48.2% of the population have at least one parent born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022).[[1]](#footnote-1) This reflects an Australia that is constantly evolving and becoming more diverse, and as such it is crucial for the public sector to take the lead in ensuring that our policies and practices are in line with these changes.

The findings we detail in this report are best understood as both a challenge and an opportunity for the Victorian Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector (CGEPS, hereafter the Commission) and for local councils. We privilege the experiences of migrant and refugee women who work across local councils and illuminate systematic barriers to their career progression. We consider local councils’ executive management team (EMT) members’ views on the need for specific and substantive infrastructure to support migrant and refugee women into local council employment and career development pathways with feasible options for promotion. While we highlight some challenging and less motivating findings, they can serve to highlight where more work needs to be done. The commitment to gender equality can continue to mature and become a more comprehensive and inclusive pledge.

This report draws on the insights of 72 participants from six invited local councils in Victoria. We chose three councils representing local government areas (LGAs) with highly diverse populations and three in less diverse LGAs. We found that this difference in diversity did not strongly influence the findings. This was in part a reflection of very different approaches the councils take to gender equality action plans. Yet, from focus group discussions in particular, we found that women’s experiences were broadly similar across all six councils invited to participate. Therefore, we do not offer any direct comparisons between councils in this study. The report is not based on a representative sample and cannot provide a comprehensive account of the individual experiences of all migrant and refugee women working across local governments in Victoria. Rather, it offers a unique snapshot of a sample of women from the six invited local councils and the executive management charged with leading these councils’ gender equality action plans.

Overall, the findings affirm the need to pay specific attention to migrant and refugee women’s experiences. It is crucial to consider this cohort’s diversity of identity and circumstances while tailoring efforts to improve their workplace experiences. Before presenting the detailed report, we highlight the key findings and recommendations below.

# Key findings

* **Gender equality as stage one and diversity as the next step:** Both employee and EMT cohorts saw the diversification of understandings and the pursuit of gender equality as the next stage in the ongoing progress of creating more equitable workplaces. EMTs believed that gender equality is important, yet they also recognised a disparity between the number of female employees and their representation in, and access to, career paths at every stage.
* **Recruitment:** Both employee and EMT cohorts expressed a desire to diversify their workforce. The EMT groups aimed to make the recruitment process more fair, straightforward and attractive to people from migrant and refugee communities. On the other hand, while the recruitment experience of migrant and refugee women was largely positive, it felt like a ‘diversity box ticking’ process for some women. Other employees mentioned multi-layered, subtle discrimination and barriers to securing work in local governments.
* **Promotion and pathways:** The cohorts identified some critical issues regarding pathways to promotion in the workplace and observed little conversation or organisation-wide policies around retention strategies. As a result, some women who participated in this study felt there was no opportunity for advancement or professional growth in their current workplaces. According to participants’ perspectives, senior leadership failed to value some women’s leadership styles, which they construed as reflecting, in part, a cultural barrier to recognising and adapting to different leadership styles.
* **Cultural and linguistic diversity:** Language skills were highly valued in community-facing roles, but they were also seen as a barrier to promotion and career advancement. The employee cohort did not see promotion and leadership as areas where diversity is valued or proactively pursued, with specific discouragement occurring in some cases (e.g. concerning the employee’s English language skills, despite high performance in their role).
* **Creating a safe workplace is a work in progress:** Employee participants identified various ways they experienced mistreatment and abuse but lacked a pathway to sharing these incidents. They also said that policies and guidelines around safe workplaces were not safe. EMT participants reflected concerns regarding the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace and the limited number of employees who come forward about it.
* **Little representation of cultural and language diversity within councils:** There is little participation of migrant and refugee women in diversity working groups or committees in which they could share their experiences to inform policies and practices. From an EMT perspective, it was clear that no consideration is given to who is at the table and who was included in conversations, and that there is no significant proactive effort to include migrant and refugee women in leadership. Inclusion and diversity are not currently key priorities in the pursuit of gender equality; in some ways, EMTs view them as a data issue, and they remain unseen.
* **Use of an intersectional lens:** Employee participants noticed that the term ‘intersectionality’ was used in policies and guidelines without a clear meaning and was used to signal diversity without clear commitment. The EMTs employed the term differently, indicating a knowledge gap and a failure to operationalise a commitment to a diverse workforce.

We hope these findings can support conversations and practices – to drive consideration of whom gender equality is for and highlight the need for a multiplicity of strategies and review mechanisms. While this report is focused on local government, the findings and recommendations are relevant to other defined entities under the *Gender Equality Act 2020.* We hope they can accelerate the agenda to carefully consider the nature and practice of diversity and inclusion.

# Recommendations

The recommendations in this report centre on enhancing the integration of gender equality and diversity into the everyday processes of local governments promoting these values. This report provides recommendations that are mainly tailored to local governments and the Commission. However, we believe that recommendations for councils can be considered more broadly by other defined entities under the Gender Equality Act.

**Recommendation One: Careful consideration is important in assessing the next steps in implementing an intersectional lens.** We advise using the term ‘intersectionality’ with caution.[[2]](#footnote-2) The pursuit of tangible measurables concerning a quantitative analysis of staffing profiles needs to be accompanied by a qualitative examination of how women are supported and protected in the workplace. A proactive commitment to gender equality should recognize the diversity of women's perspectives and the importance of including women from diverse backgrounds at every level of organisation and leadership. This inclusive approach should be a key focus in pursuing gender equality.

**Recommendations for councils:**

**Recommendation Two: Prioritise working groups and committees to advance a workforce diversification agenda that includes migrant and refugee women, irrespective of the broader resident population.** This will ensure:

1. transparency in opportunity, including specificity of intention around diversity
2. recognition that the objective is not solely to fulfil minimum diversity requirements, but rather to foster an environment appreciative and inclusive of the unique talents and perspectives that diversity brings.

**Recommendation Three: Encourage more migrant and refugee women to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their professional lives.** This can be accomplished by engaging migrant women in the co-design or co-production of gender equality and diversity policies and programs.

**Recommendation Four: Proactively promote council jobs targeting migrant and refugee communities in their LGAs, with an understanding of their unique migrant and refugee experiences**. Councils should be aware of the pre-existing experiences of migrant and refugee communities navigating ‘power dynamics’ and government institutions in Australia as well as their home countries.

**Recommendations for the Commission as a sector leader:**

We also believe that the Commission has an opportunity to be a thought leader in operationalising a commitment to workforce diversity that goes beyond merely checking off minority groups as a survey or data requirement. The Commission can:

**Recommendation Five: Work to advance conversations around diverse experiences and needs in the public sector by acknowledging that not all gender-equality-focused work benefits all women equally.**

**Recommendation Six: Prioritise lived experiences of migrant and refugee women in the public sector to inform reviews.** Cultural and linguistic diversity data regarding workplace experiences, particularly negative ones such as discrimination, is limited.

# Introduction

Critics have pointed out the silence in the Australian public sector regarding gender and its intersection with other aspects of diversity, such as disability, diverse backgrounds, sexual orientation, and gender identity (Carey & Dickinson 2015). Recently, Australian state and territory governments have committed to being at the forefront of progressing gender equality in the public sector (Williamson et al. 2019). Victoria has made significant progress towards achieving the 50% target for board representation set by the state government’s ‘Safe and Strong’ gender equality strategy, with 44% of councillors currently being women; it is the first Australian state to come close to reaching that target (Premier of Victoria 2020). However, the public sector workforce is overwhelmingly composed of English-speaking Australians (Victorian Public Sector Commission 2022). Just below one-fifth (18 per cent) of Victorian public sector employees were born overseas, and 16.2 per cent speak a language other than English with their family and community (Victorian Public Sector Commission 2022).

The *Gender Equality Act 2020* (Act) was passed in the Victorian Parliament in February 2020 and came into force on 31 March 2021. The Act is the first of its kind in Australia; it applies to almost 300 Victorian public sector organisations (known as ‘defined entities’), including local governments. The Act requires defined entities to develop, publish and implement a Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) every four years based on a workplace gender audit. They are also required to report publicly on their progress every two years, undertake gender impact assessments on all new initiatives, and consider other identities – such as gender identity, race, and disability – to address disadvantage or discrimination.

However, little is known about the experiences of migrant and refugee women in relation to other forms of disadvantage or discrimination they may face based on their gender, ethnicity, race, or other attributes. Furthermore, their views on gender equality policies and practices in the public sector remain largely undocumented. To address these knowledge gaps, this research has produced the first qualitative insights into the experiences of a specific cohort of migrant and refugee women in Victorian local councils, regarding workplace gender equality. Local councils play a significant role in the Victorian community, employing approximately 45,000 Victorians and providing crucial support and services (Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector 2021), making them central to communities across Victoria and an ideal site for our research.

The project sought to:

* Identify systemic causes of gender inequality and other forms of disadvantage that women from migrant and refugee women may experience in the workplace; and better understand the experience of people who identify as women from migrant and refugee backgrounds employed by local councils in Victoria.
* Explore how EMTs in local councils understand their roles in, and responsibilities related to, identifying and removing barriers to equality for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds; and map where the understandings and actions of EMTS do and do not align with the experience of those who are intended to benefit from these policies and practices.
* Produce research that will inform the Commission’s work and local councils’ workplace strategies to create implementable policies and practices with the help of evidence gathered from the study, which aligns with the goals and values of the *Gender Equality Act 2020*.

This report will supplement existing data and assist local councils in designing meaningful strategies and measures for gender equality that are responsive and inclusive to the needs of employees from migrant and refugee backgrounds who are a minority in the workplace. The report will also offer insights for other defined entities keen to advance a comprehensive approach to gender equality and review the design and implementation of their gender equality action plans – including how they resonate with all employees.

# Methods

This research was conducted in two distinct phases.

**Phase one: Content analysis of six invited local council GEAPs**

This phase aimed to evaluate each council’s understanding and commitment regarding an intersectional approach to ensuring gender equality for migrant and refugee women employees within their respective settings.

**Phase two: Focus group discussions and individual interviews**

This phase utilised focus group discussions and individual interviews to gain insight into participants’ experiences of gender equality in the workplace.

## Data collection

The findings presented in this report are based on an analysis of 25 semi-structured focus group discussions conducted via Zoom. Additionally, we interviewed four women employees who requested a one-on-one interview instead of participating in a group discussion. The research team engaged 81 participants, including EMTs and women-employee cohorts from six invited Victorian local councils. Local council areas were identified according to population data. Councils A, B and C have substantial population diversity, while councils D, E and F do not. Although a direct comparison is not beneficial in a study of this nature, contrasting councils with more diverse populations against those with less diversity allows for a degree of exploration regarding the understanding and addressing of the needs and requirements of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Table 1: Summary of resident populations of six participating councils[[3]](#footnote-3)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Councils** | **Female** | **Born Overseas** | **LOTE\* at Home** |
| Council A | 49% | 54% | **63%** |
| Council B | 50% | 48% | **57%** |
| Council C | 50% | 24% | **52%** |
| Council D | 51% | 24% | **18%** |
| Council E | 51% | 24% | **8%** |
| Council F | 52% | 18% | **5%** |
|  | \* Languages other than English | | | |

1. **EMT members’ focus group (maximum of eight participants; one hour):** The objective was to comprehend the EMTs’ visions and strategies for the future, as well as to pinpoint their perceptions of obstacles and challenges that women face, particularly women from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
2. **Women employees’ focus group (maximum of six participants; one hour):** This focus group aimed to investigate women’s experiences, their awareness of gender equality initiatives in place for migrant and refugee women, and potential improvements to these measures. Participation from 1.5- or second-generation[[4]](#footnote-4) migrant women who primarily speak English but use another language at home was encouraged. In four cases, we interviewed women who requested a one-on-one interview rather than participate in a group discussion.

Table : Summary of focus groups

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | EMT cohort | Women employee cohort |
| Total number of focus groups | 7 | 18 |
| Total number of interviews | - | 4 |
| Total number of participants | 33 | 48 |

Data collection took place between November 2022 and January 2023. The Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (34688) approved the research design and methodology.

## Sampling

In alignment with our purposive sampling approach, we collaborated with each participating local council via a key contact provided to us by the Victorian Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. This key contact also liaised with the Commission in relation to the GEAP and other aspects of reporting under the Act. We made two requests of this contact. The first was to identify key executives who would be relevant to this study for a focus group discussion. Usually, we had the key contact set up the time and invite participants, who were given the explanatory statement and consent information to read ahead of the focus group discussion. We set up a link and conducted these group interviews over Zoom.

The second request for the key contact was to share the opportunity for inclusion with women employees via the most appropriate network. Participants were alerted to the project and given the research team’s contact details so they could sign up. It was made clear that this was not a council-funded project, and that they would be de-identified in any reports from the study. We clarified that we would not be informing the councils of how many, if any, of their employees participated in the discussions. Potential participants were given the option to join a mixed focus group with members from different local councils or, for those concerned about confidentiality, to engage directly with one of the research team members at a convenient time. Women were encouraged to use pseudonyms during the Zoom calls and were permitted to disable their cameras to ensure de-identification. This approach facilitated the examination of similarities and differences across the broader population. Women who participated were given a gift of thanks for their time, as these focus groups were often conducted after hours, during their own time, and the discussion was not part of their employment.

**Challenges in data collection**

Women employed on casual or fixed-term contracts expressed reservations about participating; this was because recruitment typically occurred through people and culture teams, including gender equality advisors or coordinators working within their organisations. Additionally, employees from councils lacking cultural or linguistic diversity in the workplace exhibited increased hesitancy to participate, fearing identification by their employers.

Collaborating with local councils can introduce various challenges, particularly regarding the extent of support provided by EMTs in recruiting and promoting this research. Notably, when direct managers or team leaders demonstrate minimal interest in understanding the experiences of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, engaging with the staff cohort becomes exceedingly difficult. However, leadership groups exhibited support and engagement once the focus groups were established.

## Data analysis

A thematic analysis was employed to analyse the focus group discussions; it was guided by the research questions that structured and designed the study. NVivo software was utilised to code the themes. All data were de-identified prior to being entered into the database.

We acknowledge that the analysis is confined to specific identity markers and does not delve into an exhaustive discussion of other marginalised identities, such as sexual orientation and disability.

## A note on the audit data

The original design of this project included a review of the workplace gender audit data collected under the *Gender Equality Act 2020* and submitted to the Commission by local councils. The primary objective was to comprehend the level of detail available within the audit data and discern its parameters. However, due to various complications, the data was received later in the project, during the concluding stages of qualitative data collection. We would note that participating councils shared their data with us only in a few instances. Upon reviewing the audit data, subsequent to the completion of the qualitative research, it was determined that the data offered minimal insight into the issues central to this report. Participants in this study highlighted both the value and the limits of the audit data. For this reason, we do not provide any audit data in this report but recommend monitoring updates from the Commission concerning overall data based on initial and ongoing audit reports.

# Phase One: Review of GEAPS

We provide an overview here based on a content review of the GEAPS for each of the six councils included in this study. This exercise was a foundational one: it allowed some insight into whether and how councils are articulating concerns surrounding pursuing gender equality with the awareness of the need for an approach that is inclusive of a diverse population. We examined the GEAPs with a view to the extent to which the language utilised by the council was clear around the terminology of intersectionality, diversity, inclusion and/or whether specific mention was made of migrant and refugee women. Based on this content analysis we were able to rank the councils from sparing, to frequent, to consistent mentions of intersectionality and commitment to a diversity approach within the GEAPs. This is detailed in Table three below.

Table Summarised content analysis of GEAP for six invited councils

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| LGA/population diversity | Specific mention/details in GEAP | | | |
| Intersectionality\* | Language diversity | Cultural diversity | Migrant/Refugee women |
| Council A/  Highly diverse | Sparing | No | No | No |
| Council B/  Highly diverse | Frequent | No | Yes | No |
| Council C/  Highly diverse | Frequent | No | Indirectly | No |
| Council D/  Less diverse | Sparing | No | Yes | Yes |
| Council E/  Less diverse | Consistent | no | Yes | No |
| Council F/  Less diverse | Sparing | No | No | No |

\*This is a summarised account of a detailed content analysis. We report on the term intersectionality in terms of frequency because this term is used by all Councils with various meanings. We report other key areas like mentions of language and cultural diversity, and mentions of migrant and refugee women, as present or not, because it offers greater clarity that in some cases these are not mentioned at all.

The utility of this analysis was to offer some insight into the extent to which approaches to building gender equality plans embrace at the planning stage, a view to being inclusive of women from a range of backgrounds and, arguably, with a range of needs. Critically, while plans serve as valuable guidelines, it is essential to emphasize that their true significance lies in their execution and operationalisation. The most important aspect of this research project was the second phase, which we detail below. We were able to explore how EMTs of these Councils were thinking about gender equality and diversity, with a focus on migrant and refugee women, and how migrant and refugee women employees experience local Councils as a workplace. We argue that the insights prove testament to the importance of ensuring that implementation is always at the forefront of our assessment, and prioritizing employee experiences as a key component of monitoring and measuring the successful achievement of commitments.

# Phase Two: Examining experience and practice

## Section One: Employee experience

In this section, our aim is to highlight the experiences of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and their observations about diversity in the workplace.

### 1.1 Gender equality and cultural diversity in the workplace: Perspectives and observations

The women in the study generally expressed satisfaction with the gender balance in their workplaces. For example, several participants from different councils mentioned having a female CEO as a notable achievement.

*[Council C] also gives much flexibility for women. You can find that there is gender diversity from the top to the bottom. So, our CEO is a woman. We have some directors who are women. [INTERVIEW, COUNCIL C]*

*You'll see [women] up until a certain level, yes, but going upwards, it's very Caucasian and male dominated still. Mind you, it's changing. We have a female CEO, so that's one thing good, right? It's wonderful. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL B]*

However, other participants observed that upper management teams still lacked gender diversity.

*Unfortunately, I see that the people that are making the higher-end decisions are male. That is a bit of a concern, because probably all the councils I've been to, the people sitting making the decisions, the top-end decisions, are male. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL E]*

*We have a lot of women occupying [middle] leadership positions, so I don't think there's a barrier there. But above middle management, there is an exclusivity with more males and almost all white. [MIXED GROUP\_ACROSS COUNCILS]*

Several women noted a significant imbalance in terms of cultural diversity in senior leadership positions. One participant asked others in a focus group, ‘When you think about it, where is the team leader that’s a female one, and that is not Caucasian? Do you know any? I don't know any’ [*FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A*]. Councils with highly diverse populations tended to have a proportionately larger number of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds in middle-level management positions compared to councils with less diverse populations. However, there was a strong recognition from those who are from highly diverse LGAs that ‘Council absolutely represents the community they serve and is diverse. But as for management, no’ [*FOUCS GROUP, COUNCIL A*].

*There's a lot more diversity in terms of that coordinator level, which is that middle management […] There are a lot more females and gender diverse and culturally diverse individuals in that group. But the next level up, in terms of management, it's pretty much white females and males. Mainly males. Generally, white Australians. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

On the other hand, councils with less diversity were more likely to lack women from migrant and refugee backgrounds in leadership roles. When we asked about gender and cultural diversity in leadership, one participant noted that *‘*there are women [in leadership], but I haven’t seen women of colour. And I haven’t even seen [many] women of colour in the council itself’ *[FOCUS GROUP, COUCNIL E]*

In line with an earlier observation, several participants noted that their workforce did not adequately represent the diversity of their LGAs.

*Because we are such a diverse municipality and we represent so many different cultures and ethnicities, I would think that there would be more people working at council from different cultural backgrounds and migrant backgrounds, but it's not really represented amongst the staff […] So, when you walk in the streets of [de-identified council area 1], what you see out there is not what you get inside the building. So that's quite stark. When I first started at [organisation E],* *that was one of the things I noticed, that is the outside world didn't mirror the inside world. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL E]*

This statement highlights the need for more diverse representation in leadership roles as well as in the general workforce, particularly for women from culturally diverse backgrounds. This call for a more comprehensive pursuit of gender equality was reflected in participants’ views. **Women emphasised the importance of taking further actions towards achieving cultural and gender diversity, for example, acknowledging the complexity and time involved.**

*Even though gender is diverse, we’ve now added another layer by saying, ‘Okay, yes, we can recognise gender diversity’. Now let us look at cultural diversity and have representations from the different cultures as much as possible. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

This view was generally shared by the women who participated in this study. It shapes the discussions that were had in the focus groups and the following analysis around various aspects of work and the workplace.

### 1.2. Lived experiences and challenges

In this section we focus on three key issues that were consistently raised throughout the interviews: the attitudes and behaviours migrant and refugee women experience at work; the actions women take to fit in; and how being bi-or multilingual, with language skills stronger in languages other than English, can be both a help and a burden in the workplace. These insights are critical to revealing differences between the rhetoric of inclusivity and gender equality and employees’ actual experiences. Such differences highlight the importance of ongoing work to ensure that well-intentioned reform is also well implemented – and is experienced as intended.

#### Attitudes and behaviours towards migrant and refugee women

Migrant women working in predominantly male fields (e.g. IT) were more likely to face additional challenges and gender bias. They faced discrimination based on their intersecting identities, which compounded the challenges they already faced as women in fields dominated by men.

*There is a person from [de-identified] background who has never delivered a [task 1], was trusted more over me just because he’s older, male and he comes from [de-identified] background, and I always question that. He doesn’t even know how [sector 1] works, but they put more faith in him just because I’m a female, migrant, young and they can’t relate to me, or they would think that I don’t have more experience. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

*Their assumption is that I don’t know. I don’t know the history, or I don’t know enough, or I’m not good enough or whatever. Or I would have not understood because probably it’s too English, or probably it’s too white, or probably it’s quite masculine or whatever the case may be. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL B]*

These experiences underscore the biases and stereotypes in present attitudes and behaviours towards migrant women.

Many women reported that they needed to invest additional effort in proving their professionalism or capability in the workplace. As a result, some women experienced feelings of vulnerability.

*I came in my high school years, and I’ve worked in Australia for a long time, but being a small, female, Asian-looking migrant, you feel like you have to fight for everything, and as [Interviewee 5] said, you do have to prove harder. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL C]*

*I always have to be vulnerable and go to you and say, ‘Would you mind to proofread my report?’ Because my report, [if] it’s not proofread, will not be accepted [...] And I’m constantly [feeling] vulnerable. I’m constantly working from that. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

#### Reflections on being ‘other’ and trying to ‘fit in’: The impacts of stereotypes

A participant reflected on her experience of feeling pressure to present herself as strong and capable, sometimes at the expense of her cultural identity. She said, ‘I feel like I turn more into trying to be a bit more Caucasian to fit in [to the workplace]’ *[FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A].*

Migrant and refugee women reflected on how their experiences in the workplace are shaped by a sense of otherness and the need to prove that they belong. This also suggests that some women may feel the need to conform to dominant workplace cultures to establish a sense of belonging or to demonstrate their value and competence.

Participants also shared their accounts of being stereotyped and lumped together as a single group. This points to a lack of understanding of the reality of diversity and the need of inclusion within the workplace. During the focus group discussions, several women related experiences facing situations in which the various intricacies of a diverse workplace were not understood:

*There’s a lot of different nuances within being multicultural […] There’s a spectrum of it. There might be someone from a culturally diverse background who was born and raised in Australia. They’re just from a different cultural group. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL B]*

*I was asked, ‘You should go here because I saw a lot of women who are wearing hijab. They’re probably refugees. You can support them. It’s just the assumption that if you wear a hijab that you’re a refugee. That’s not always true. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

*When I started working in this position, there were two [ethnicity 2] students who wants to interview our [team 3], and then my senior manager asked me to interpret for them, but I speak [LOTE 1], and I don’t speak [LOTE 2]. So, I said, ‘Sorry, I don’t speak [LOTE 2]’. And I saw senior manager goes, ‘Oh really?’ She looked little bit disappointed and surprised. [MIXED GROUP\_ACROSS COUNCILS]*

While these stories differ in context, they clearly demonstrate the harmful impact of stereotyping and homogenising individuals from diverse backgrounds in the workplace. As expressed by the participants themselves, there are nuances and complexities to diverse workplaces, and assumptions based on superficial characteristics can be misleading and alienating for employees.

The women also shared a common experience: a lack of celebration of and respect for different cultures *within* the workplace. They noted that councils celebrate different cultures in the community across all six invited councils, yet there is neither acknowledgement nor celebration of cultural differences and sensitivities within their respective organizations. One participant said,

*we haven’t never seen a Diwali post or something saying ‘Happy Diwali to all those celebrating’ or ‘Enjoy your Eid celebrations’ or something like that. There’s nothing. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

While a few councils do host a cultural day to celebrate and promote diversity within their organisations, these were often small-scale events with limited participation. Two employees who attended a focus group also shared their experience of attending a workplace Christmas event where cultural sensitivities were lacking.

*I clearly remember one Christmas event. I remember we had a buffet, and they were using the same spoon for the pork and for the chicken, and [another interviewee] did not eat anything. I didn’t eat [anything as well]. I said [to the organiser], ‘You’re using the same set of tongs’, and they [colleague] said, ‘I’ve got one tong, what am I supposed to do about it?’ [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

The organiser's response to the issue was dismissive and unhelpful, which made both participants feel unsupported and excluded. Critically, neither felt it was a safe place to raise the issue of why this would be unacceptable or inappropriate to them. It is naturally the case that some religious or other customs may be unknown to colleagues, but this exchange illuminates that dismissing a query can have very negative impacts on the overall experience of being part of a working environment. This is a small insight into how important it is not simply to count a ‘cultural event’ or harmony day activity as evidence of embracing the diversity of the employee working group. There is a responsibility to be open and educated and proactive so that everyone has a role to play in learning and being challenged about everyday practices.

#### The dual nature of language skills: A help or a hindrance?

According to general policies across councils, skills such as fluency in an additional language are considered strengths, yet participants shared mixed experiences of working in predominantly English-speaking environments.

*I reiterate that I enjoy working here, but as a woman from a culturally diverse background, a woman who speaks English as a second language, sometimes I feel less confident going to bigger meetings and speaking because my audience is largely mainly English-speaking audience. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL E]*

A participant working in a council located in a highly diverse area shared a reflection of recently noticing that some of the terminology or language used at her council was not inclusive towards people from linguistically diverse backgrounds or those unfamiliar with English.

*If you don’t speak the language perfectly, you’re treated almost like you've got a disability, you’ve got a handicap […] I had a battle with my team just about a couple of days ago about the simplicity of language. We should be talking all in a way that everyone can understand us; I think it’s the expression of the culture, and inclusion and respect. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

This demonstrates that workplaces can be environments that can adversely affect the confidence and effectiveness of women who speak English as their second language, leading them to feel excluded or disrespected.

On the other hand, it was interesting to observe that speaking languages other than English was viewed as a favourable attribute for women in community-facing roles. For instance, one woman noted, ‘In my case, it was an advantage, because I speak two languages… I think in [workplace] it was valued’ [*FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL C*]. In other cases, these additional skills were also seen as beneficial, because councils sometimes recruit employees from linguistic backgrounds who can interact with clients who also speak their language.

*We recently just hired a [non-English]-speaking administration officer, so we were very specific with who we needed. There were a wide range of applications, but we needed that person to be fluent in English and [non-English language]. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

This highlights inconsistency in recognising and valuing language skills across different departments of the council. It can lead to inequalities of opportunities and career advancement for employees with such skills, possibly hindering growth and even leading to discrimination.

### 1.3. Organisational culture, gender policies and practices

This section provides an overview of women’s experiences and observations regarding gender equality policies and practices within local councils. We focus on culture, but only in quite specific ways, relating to recruitment and experiences in the local council workforce. We note, however, that the broader issue of workplace culture was raised by women who pointed to the importance of meaningful, rather than rhetorical, commitment.

*I have just read this morning from the VMC commissioner saying over 50% of people – Victorians – are either born overseas or have a heritage, so it's almost now the majority. But it's not in the way that the work culture, if you're talking about work culture, plays out. So, for me, therefore inclusion of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and for that issue to really be seriously addressed, that means that those issues need to be led by the CEO. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

The issues we detail below are specific to organisational practice, but as this participant noted, it begins with the CEO committing to listen and learn from women about their experiences as part of a commitment to gender equality in the workforce.

#### Recruitment

Some aspects of recruitment pointed to important issues in migrant and refugee women’s experience of access to local council employment opportunities. These related to the recruitment policies and practices, and women’s specific barriers to getting jobs in local councils.

##### Recruitment policies and practices: diversifying the workforce

Most participants had strong levels of satisfaction in their recruitment experiences, expressing confidence that they had been hired for their skills and that the process was inclusive and straightforward. A participant from Council D noted that councils were ‘professional’ and ‘focused on talent and skillsets rather than other identities’. Another participant, from Council E, stated that the ‘recruitment process was easy’ and felt ‘inclusive and safe’. Other participants from a council in one of the highly diverse LGAs also shared their interview experiences:

*I feel like they really looked at my work experience, especially during the interview. Obviously, they can see that I have an ethnic background, but that never really came up. All the questions were obviously about the job and what I would do in certain situations, my knowledge with legislation, stuff like that. So, I feel like it was a very fair process. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL C]*

*This council in particular, I think that they do not just put, ‘We welcome everyone’ in the employment disclaimer in the ad for the job. I think that they're actually putting that in practice. [INTERVIEW, COUNCIL A]*

Participants also noted some councils’ efforts to diversify the recruitment process, including compulsory training before employees were appointed to selection committees.

*We [the council] are actually educating the managers to make sure that they actually ask the right questions and that they are gender balanced and that they are aware of how many people within their team, such as [department 3], they have more male dominance in there. But however, the managers try to make sure that they attract women within the workplace. [INTERVIEW, COUNCIL C]*

*We did training around how to be aware of our biases and unconscious biases and how that might impact how we recruit or who we recruit […] So, that training has been rolled across our council, and it's mandatory for anyone who wants to sit on, needs to recruit or wants to sit on a recruitment panel. So, when you now recruit, you can't have anyone on your panel who hasn't done the training. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

*There is a trend because when I was hired a couple of months ago, the hiring team really wanted to get that diversity in because they wanted to get the intersectional lens into the work that they do because they think that having that experience of being someone from a different background will benefit their program. So, I see that there is a great interest. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL E]*

**Alongside positive experiences of education and efforts to be more inclusive, some participants expressed uncertainty about whether putting a diversity statement in the position description and/or hiring employees from diverse backgrounds was simply a way to check a box and meet diversity and inclusion goals.**

*I think it is good to say that [Council C] is culturally diverse, but the question as well that I often ask, sometimes it's not by being mean, but when we hire people, what they will ask is ‘do you speak another language?’ Is it because they do believe in the cultural inclusion and diversity or is it because they just need to fill in or tick the boxes? [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL C]*

*But then the Council A] does advertise and that was one of the things that I was drawn to this council. They did advertise that they welcome anyone. So, I don't know if this was the impact and that resulted in me getting hired. But some councils they put, ‘Oh, we welcome people from culturally diverse backgrounds’ in their lines, but I don't think that when they're doing the hiring, they're actually putting that policy out. [INTERVIEW, COUNCIL A]*

Similarly, the issue of diversity in hiring panels was raised repeatedly

*Visibility is…essential. Women should clearly see who’s working in these councils. If they see a lot of white men and women working in the councils, then they will be reluctant to apply for these jobs because they don’t see diversity […] If I come here and I can see someone in a leadership role who looks like me, then I will have confidence, and I will feel that this is a place where I can grow and have a better career because I’m confident that there is an example, a role model, which I can follow. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL E]*

It was recognised that there was often a lack of diversity in the selection panel, which was off-putting to many participants in this study.

Additional key issues, as we detail later, are career progression and the proactive efforts of councils to directly support migrant and refugee women to build their careers. First, however, we consider some the barriers to employment that participants discussed.

##### Barriers to employment for migrant and refugee women: Getting the job and negotiating contracts

Participants shared some of their job-searching experiences and the challenges they faced as women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. One participant spoke about receiving feedback on her English skills:

*I applied for many, many councils in [Victorian Region 1] area. And my experience is that a few came back to me and invited me for interviews, and then when I asked for the feedback on why I failed the interview, they reported back to me that they sensed that my English was not good enough or that I didn't voice myself out very well. [INTERVIEW, COUNCIL A]*

Another participant mentioned subtle discrimination and bias towards migrant and refugee community members. She believed that having an English name was beneficial when searching for a job.

***I can understand as a migrant or newly graduated student how hard it would be to break into the job market and the biases they would have****.* ***I have an English-sounding first name, which helps.*** *And I know anecdotally that students that don’t adopt English first names can be discriminated against even before. They don’t even get to interview stage. It’s just when they submit their resumes because there might be the assumption that person or that applicant might not have English language proficiency or get the culture or might have some sort of difficulty. I don’t think it’s overt, obvious discrimination. I think it’s more of an unconscious discrimination that that employers have. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

This choice of selecting a ‘white-sounding’ name is not a new phenomenon; it reflects the reality of unconscious bias in the hiring process. For some participants, being recruited was about being noticed in the pile of names and applications, but for others, it was about understanding the work in a very detailed way. Some participants shared their personal experiences of trying to become part of a local government workforce.

*It did take a lot of learning. It was a learning process. It was a journey. Learning how the hiring process goes, learning how to answer correctly the key selection criteria because they have a structured way of how they want you to answer those questions […] I never had to study how to answer interview questions. It was just something that I already knew how to do it, and I would go for an interview, and I already knew how to answer the questions […]* ***I tried for well over three years applying constantly. I never gave up. I wanted to work at a council, so I was just always researching a lot, going to the library, borrowing books, really learning how to sell myself so I could finally get a job in council.*** *[INTERVIEW, COUNCIL A]*

*I've done all my education in Australia, so I think I'm used to maybe the way things are worded here. But for an international student graduating or a migrant, I think* ***there is that barrier in understanding maybe [local government] job ads and what is required. Whereas here, I've had a lot of professional coaching on what the Australian standard is when you apply for jobs.*** *[FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

It is evident that migrant women face additional difficulties when trying to enter the workforce, whether it be learning the system or the requirements of the job. On the other hand, some participants also shared their reflections on why migrant women hesitate to apply for local council jobs, and what needs to be done for migrant women to feel that local councils are an inclusive place to work.

*I sometimes feel some migrants get stuck with the notion of, ‘Yes, I don’t have my citizenship. I’m not eligible to apply’. […] It is again about creating some awareness that people from all walks of life can and should apply in the government sector. [MIXED GROUP\_ACROSS COUNCILS]*

*It will be really helpful if you find a way to educate women and encourage them [to apply for local council jobs]. Personally, I know some smart women, but they’re just afraid to apply, thinking they will not get selected* ***because they are not local****. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL E]*

This demonstrates that migrant and refugee women perceive limitations in job opportunities and often believe that there is little diversity and inclusion in the hiring process for local council jobs. One participant also shared her reflection on career pathways in local government for women from refugee backgrounds, as below:

*I don’t think refugee women even feel comfortable [applying] for a job in local government. We don’t have any refugees in our workplaces and especially not newly arrived. I think there’s a lot of trauma [among] refugees around institutions and governments, so working for a local government might be quite traumatic or fearful for a refugee […] I don’t know if they would actually feel comfortable working for the council. I feel you’ve got to build that rapport and trust first. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

As stated above, people from refugee backgrounds may have experienced high levels of stress, anxiety, and fear when they interact with government institutions such as immigration.In addition, they may not see themselves as a good fit for the workplace due to their backgrounds.When it comes to recruitment, the importance of building trust and rapport with refugee communities is clear, given their background and complex migrant journey. This should be seen as an opportunity for local councils rather than a burden.

#### Retention: Aspects of working life

Most participants said they were not aware of any retention practices tailored to meet the needs and goals of a diverse cohort. Many also believed that retention practices depended heavily on the level of interest shown by management.

*I think I would definitely promote the local government as an employer of choice for many migrants and refugee backgrounds. But to see that the council is really proactively retaining staff, I would say there are no strategies at all. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

*I feel like that really comes down to your team and who you work for and who you report to in terms of retention. For me anyway, I think the fact that I'm surrounded by such a diverse group keeps me there. And because my supervisor is quite understanding of my situations and my responsibilities outside of work, is quite good. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL B]*

Key aspects of retention are remuneration and the way people are permitted to work. We explore each in some detail before turning to the issue of who gets to shape the workplace. We examine how women spoke about various forms of inclusion and diversity in councils.

##### **Equal pay[[5]](#footnote-5)**

Although many participants did not notice a significant gender pay gap among new hires within their council, some participants did acknowledge that men tend to get promoted faster than women.

*[If] it is for the same role, you get paid fully [equally], but I think there’s a tendency for the male to get promoted before the female, and then when you’re promoted, you get higher pay. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

*I know for certain that our current CEO has been paid less than what the previous CEO was paid. We’ve also got an interesting banding area, where some of the team leaders are on a band 6, which is my role, while some of the team leaders are band 7. If you analyse these bands separately, I think you would probably see a difference. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

These comments suggest that there may be the presence of a gender gap, in terms of who advances into higher-level roles and their compensation upon achieving advanced positions. They underscore the importance of taking on the complexity of the gender pay gap issue, something that is not specific to migrant and refugee women. The issue should be interrogated in the broader context of women’s experiences in the workplace.

##### **Flexible work**

Most participants expressed satisfaction with the flexible working arrangements available to them as employees of a local council.Flexibility was cited as a primary reason for many women choosing to work in councils. For example, some who had worked in other industries cited it as a key factor in their decision to switch careers. In certain areas, however, some women experienced pressure to work full-time or on-site, despite the existence of flexible work policies across all levels of the organisation. One participant, who identified as a second-generation migrant woman (and the sole caregiver for her mother), wished to work part-time but was unable to do so:

*I’m a caregiver for my 92-year-old mother, and I would love to go part-time, but I can’t. I’ve basically been told, ‘Well, that’s the job that you signed on for…’ And I’ve said, ‘Well, my mother wasn’t ill when I signed on six years ago.’ [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL E]*

We can see that this participant’s experience as a second-generation migrant woman (and the daughter of a migrant) is not being fully understood. Being denied the option to work flexible hours, this participant has found it challenging to balance work and caregiving responsibilities for her migrant mother who needs her interpreting and other assistance.

Other participants also noted the inflexibility of working arrangements within their workplaces:

*The culture around there is like this: you come into the office, you do your nine to five, and there’s no leaving early. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

*Your work-life balance depends on the manager and those in higher positions as well, because their personal beliefs and attitudes towards such policies may come into play. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

As evidenced by these responses, the approach to gender equality policies and practices such as flexible work arrangements, varied among teams. They depended on factors such as the nature of the work, the approach of the manager/team leaders and the organisational culture.

To some extent, a lack of flexible work arrangements hindered women’s advancement to higher positions; most if not all senior leadership roles require full-time capacity. As a participant from Council A stated, ‘You need to be full-time to get up to a leadership position’ [*FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A*]. This burden may force women who work part-time to choose between advancing their careers and meeting their caregiving responsibilities. This will be further detailed in the next section, where we discuss barriers to promotion, but it is worth noting here that the issue was also raised by the EMT participants.

##### **Participation in working groups or diversity groups**

One participant noted that *the Gender Equality Act 2020*, which came into effect in 2021 for all local governments, has made gender equality more prominent and part of a larger agenda item.

*I think because there has been a legislation that came out only in 2020 with the Gender Equality Act for all local government, that has become more prominent because it's part of a legislation. I think that's why every council is driving to have an employer gender equity officer, have lots of working groups, have that gender equity ambassadors. That's what we have in our council, but I think because it has been driven by an act, that's why it has become a whole agenda item, or else before that it was a very hit-miss. [MIXED GROUP\_ACROSS COUNCILS]*

However, many participants noted that gender or cultural diversity working groups lacked representation of migrant and refugee women. We observed that only one of the participants was part of a gender equality or diversity working group. This woman, who was invited to represent the gender equality working group, works in one of the less diverse councils; she informed us that she is the only woman of colour and holds a minority identity in that group.

One participant started a BIPOC group for better representation of BIPOC people in their council:

*Challenging on our part [is] because we feel we don't have anything to refer to, jobs or roles, not roles, but work that has been done prior to us, essentially, we're laying the groundwork. It's a very long and slow process, because obviously we are not the priority [...] We have one person supporting us in council so far, which we are really totally appreciate and is helping us get noticed. [INTERVIEW, COUNCIL B]*

Starting a BIPOC group can be a proactive step towards improving representation and promoting diversity and inclusion within an organisation. **Participants also discussed the importance of creating a culturally safe space for migrant and refugee women to speak up.**

*It would be very beneficial as a group for us to get together quarterly and maybe vent [about] what we are feeling in the workplace. I know we cannot have a different band; we cannot go up the chain because of budgeting issues or whatever, but it’s more like a forum where we support each other and say, ‘Yes, I’m facing the same issues you’re facing. What is your solution, how are you dealing with it?’, so like a support network. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

Overall, women’s experiences within local councils reveal a need for greater diversity representation in decision-making and policymaking. There is also a need for a better understanding of the unique barriers and challenges faced by female employees. Women should have places to come together to share their experiences and support each other. We see these things as critical to advancing women in the workplace and improving their work experiences.

#### Promotion: Pathways and barriers to remaining and succeeding in council employment

These discussions revealed an absence of initiatives, such as cross-training, professional development programs, and career advancement opportunities, that could create a supportive and engaging work environment. Such initiatives would encourage women employees to stay with councils longer, reducing turnover and building a more skilled and committed workforce.

We also asked women about promotion pathways, and during the focus groups and one-on-one interviews, participants identified several barriers that might prevent migrant and refugee women from advancing in their careers. These include gender; a lack of personal connections, as a recent migrant; cultural and language barriers; and other systemic barriers, such as the aforementioned inflexible work arrangements in leadership roles.

##### Gender

The participants shared their views about how gender is viewed within their organisations and how gender roles and responsibilities outside of work can affect women’s chances for promotion. During a focus group, one participant commented that ‘women are not very supported in career advancements [within the organisation]. Juggling work and family commitments is often deemed unfavourable in various departments’ [*FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL B*]. Another participant shared her recent experience of promotion within her team:

*We were having afternoon tea when he [the manager] told us, ‘Oh, I picked that person because she doesn’t have any kids or a plan for kids.’ I have a baby, and all my other colleagues are moms with children, but that person [who got promoted], she’s single, and she doesn’t have a plan to get married. So he said, ‘because she doesn’t have a family, she can commit herself to work. So I chose her.’ That’s what he told us. [MIXED GROUP\_ACROSS COUNCILS]*

The story suggests that gender roles and responsibilities continue to create obstacles to women’s career advancement. That they are being viewed negatively by management also impacts the promotion of gender equality in the organisation and the workplace.

Another gender-related issue that emerged in the study is the challenge of balancing career ambitions with other responsibilities. Family responsibilities in particular hold women back from applying for promotions – out of uncertainty about whether they can give the role the necessary time and effort. One participant shared the case of a colleague who had to step down from a leadership position after juggling work and external responsibilities.

*I think you’ve really got to think as a woman, as a wife. I think you’ve got to look at your other responsibilities in life [… ] Recently, a colleague from a different council got promoted, and she’s white and she’s got kids, and it was all too much. She had a breakdown and she said [to me], ‘This [opportunity] is amazing, [and it’s a] perfect job but at the wrong time.’ She said, ‘I’ve got young kids, and they take a lot of time and effort, but I really should have thought about it a bit more.’ She ended up not continuing with that position and went back to her previous role. Then there were the usual comments: ‘She couldn’t do that’, or ‘she couldn’t fulfil that role’, or ‘she wasn’t good enough’ or ‘she doesn’t know anything.’ [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

This experience brings into focus the broader obstacles that women encounter in their career journeys, including pervasive negative judgments or stereotypes about a woman's competence to assume senior positions.

As briefly discussed in the previous section (see 1.3 on flexible work), inflexible work arrangements and the lack of part-time opportunities were identified as systemic barriers hindering women from advancing in leadership roles in local councils. Women with other care-related responsibilities face challenges in committing to full-time positions, which restricts their career growth. Participants noted:

*There are certain positions where job sharing is not allowed. If you’re a woman with a family to care for and are unable to commit to working five days a week, that will just hamper your career. I share this opinion with a lot of my co-workers, that if a job can be shared, it should be. I can think of one person who has stayed in the same role and was unable to advance because they could not commit to a five-day workweek. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL B]*

*As I said, for a female, it’s incredibly [hard] to work full-time if you want to have a family. It takes you longer to climb the ladder, because if you want to have a child, you take time out of the workforce. You’re the one who takes the time out. Usually, you might take a year or two, and when you come back, you’re usually looking for a part-time role. All managers are full-time at [organisation 1]. I’ve been lucky to negotiate part-time work as a [position], which is rare in our organisation. There are not a lot of part-time [positions]. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

We found that it was the availability of flexible work arrangements that attracted many women to local councils – yet it is also identified as a *hindrance* to career advancement. This is something that cannot be seen or understood through the survey data.

##### Being a cultural and linguistic minority in the workplace

The above issues pertaining to gender are not specific to the experiences of migrant and refugee women. Some women in the study shared that they hesitated to apply for senior positions because of their gender *and* their cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds. One participant expressed concern about being judged based on her identity as a migrant and refugee woman; she feared it could affect her chances of being promoted.

*I was in a situation recently where I hesitated to apply for a particular position because I had this nagging thought in my head: ‘No, they probably don’t want someone like me being the team leader, because of what I look like. I don’t know whether it’s going to work in their favour or not. How would they feel about having a woman of colour as the team leader compared to someone else?’ etc. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

**Many migrant and refugee women who participated in this study identified building personal connections as a significant challenge for them.** They saw it as a barrier to their career advancement within the organisation. For instance, some shared that the struggle to build relationships affected their ability to go for promotions for which they were qualified.

*One of the things we’ve found, or that we’ve heard a lot about, is that people find it difficult to connect with their white colleagues. They don’t build the relationships as much and don’t go for the promotions they might have if they had done that. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

*You want to step up, but nobody really cares, because you don’t make that much noise, and you don’t have those sorts of connections. We are just migrants, so we’re still learning, and I’m finding it difficult to climb up the ladder in local government, yet not because I can’t do the work. It’s more that they feel that I might not be able to do the job, and I think that could only be coming from my being a migrant. That’s the only difference I can see. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

This highlights how cultural barriers facing women from migrant and refugee backgrounds can impact their work experiences, despite high performance in their roles. Such factors are critical to understanding their experiences, and they challenge some of our findings with EMT participants – some of whom asserted that they do not ‘see colour’ when considering applicants for roles.

Some participants raised concerns around the transparency of the hiring practices for senior roles within councils. They felt it often relies heavily on personal connections between the hiring committee and the successful candidate.

*The thing is, people sitting higher up have been there for many years, and if you don’t get on well with them, there’s no hope in hell that you will get that opportunity. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

*It’s not as simple as, work hard, and you will get the opportunity. You need a godfather to climb up the ladder. Unfortunately, it will take us a while to get that godfather in the organisation to help us climb the ladder. This is not what one person has told me. A few people in the past two months have said that you need a godfather to climb up. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

In another case, a participant reflected on her experience of being promoted based on her years of experience and her familiarity with the individuals who hired her. She expressed uncertainty that she would have had the same opportunity had she been an external candidate with no prior connections.

*I had many years of experience in the field, so I probably got the job because of that. The people who hired me knew me well and knew what I could do. But I wonder if I had come from the outside whether I would have had a similar chance to prove myself. If I came from another organisation, without any opportunity to prove myself other than the interview itself, I think my chances would’ve been significantly lower. [MIXED GROUP\_ACROSS COUNCILS]*

Even women who are successful in their roles and have strong connections in their workplaces have doubts about the equity of hiring practices when it comes to migrant and refugee women. It suggests how important it is for migrant and refugee women to feel a sense of belonging and inclusivity in the workplace. Transparent promotion pathways can be an important tool for organisations to foster a workplace culture of fairness and equality. Part of this depends on having diverse women in leadership.

**Participants expressed their desire to see more women from migrant and refugee backgrounds in leadership roles or in programs tailored to improve their leadership skills and connections in the workplace.**

*I think more work [needs to be done] on how to change perceptions [and] how we can encourage organisations to give women from different cultural backgrounds more opportunities to step into leadership spaces. Even if it is for a trial-based program or something of that sort, to give them an opportunity to learn and grow and see what’s out there. Yes, we might be very direct and not that politically correct, but sometimes you need that sort of leadership as well. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

*I would like to see more diverse women in leadership roles. I would like to see that not just in our council but [… ] in all workspaces.* *[FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL B]*

These findings offer critical insights to challenge organisations’ methods for creating opportunities in the workplace. More proactive efforts are required to understand how best to encourage and enable a broader cohort of eligible applicants to apply for positions and promotions. Seeing diversity in leadership can encourage those seeking to progress in their career; it demonstrates that success is possible for them.

##### Cultural and language barriers

The participants also discussed the cultural and language barriers that may hinder migrant women’s success in the promotion process or in securing a leadership position.

*When you are in that leadership position, you’ll be working with people from diverse backgrounds, and you need to know how to handle their very unique behaviours. And if you’ve just come to Australia, say, three years ago, it’ll be hard to break that barrier. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

Being from a non-English speaking background was identified as a barrier to seeking employment in the councils; it was also seen as a key barrier preventing women from applying for promotion.

*I’ve never thought about promotion. I’m very happy where I am at work, and there’s the language barrier to consider. I’ve been living in Australia for about 13 years now, but I couldn’t speak any English when I first arrived. I still feel that my English isn’t perfect, so I’ve never really thought about promotion, because I understand my limitations. [MIXED GROUP\_ACROSS COUNCILS]*

*I can’t get promoted because I need someone to open the door for me. I need someone to tell me, ‘Look, when you’re about to say something, if you can just say it this way, maybe it’ll be more palatable.’ [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

While participants shared their difficulties in understanding nuances in different situations, one participant emphasised the importance of acknowledging and embracing different styles of leadership. She highlighted the need for further efforts in this area to support and recognise these styles.

*We keep saying you should have your own style of leadership, and to be honest, not everyone is the same. Leadership can’t be done only one way, so let’s try and see how we can be leaders [...] I guess more work is needed in that space. I always feel that young people from migrant backgrounds need to be given more opportunities and trusted a little bit more, especially in this male-dominant field, so that they feel encouraged. This would benefit all females in [industry 1] and encourage them. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

The women in this study offered direct experiences that had led them to conclude that cultural diversity is not appreciated or actively sought in leadership. These are crucial insights: they cannot be overcome by leaders in councils simply asserting that they welcome all women to apply. Fixing the problem requires understanding migrant and refugee women’s experiences and directly involving them in ways to address and overcome these barriers.

##### Lack of trust and opportunities and needing to prove themselves

Another issue of concern, one requiring careful reflection, was raised by some of the women participants: that migrant and refugee women face barriers to promotion because they are not viewed as reliable or competent. In some instances, this was explained in relation to the issue of English competency discussed above:

*I’m not sure if it’s a trust thing, or whether they think you can complete a job or because you don’t speak the language, but there are always unseen barriers if you want to grow. I think it’s easier if you’re white, whether you’re male or female. [MIXED GROUP\_ACROSS COUNCILS]*

*You do seem to have to prove, not to the team, but more to the leadership and executive teams, that you are good enough. Prior to being in the lead role I am in now, I had to prove myself to my executive, because they did not believe I could actually manage the team, even though my team leader, my direct manager, did. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL C]*

Many participants felt that as women and people of colour, they constantly had to prove their ability to perform at an acceptable level in the workplace.

*Being a migrant and a woman – I work as a [profession], so I do come across families with different cultural backgrounds – and for me as a professional, I’ve always felt like I had to prove myself. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL C]*

*In my personal and professional life, after almost 20 years in Australia, I’m still asking for permission to belong. [INTERVIEW, COUNCIL A]*

As discussed above, the participants shared their views on the lack of opportunities for migrant women in the workplace. They expressed the concern that some councils only hire women from migrant and refugee backgrounds for low-level jobs, without providing equal opportunities for career advancement.

*Sometimes I feel they take on migrants who’ll just sit and do the job, but not everybody’s like that. We are here, and we’ve started building our lives. We consider this place our country, so I feel that there should be equal opportunity. I think organisations talk a lot about equal opportunity, but when it comes to implementing it, there is not equal opportunity out there. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

*I’m a very ambitious migrant woman. I’ve been working for council for 12 years, but I’ve had minimal opportunities to progress. Sometimes I think I don’t even get a second look. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A]*

*It’s hard to climb the ladder within local government, and it’s not just my experience. I’ve seen that with a lot of migrants. At the employee level, it’s quite easy to get in and be supported, but as soon as you start talking about, ‘I want a bit more of a challenge. I want to be in that leadership space and have people trust me. Give me that opportunity’, you find you are quickly downplayed in that scenario. That’s across the board – in local and state government as well. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

*I think more work needs to be done in this area: How can we break these perceptions, how can we encourage organisations to give more opportunities to females from different social and cultural backgrounds, how can we get them to step up into those leadership spaces? Even if it’s on a trial basis or something of that sort, we need to be given the opportunity to learn and grow and to see what’s out there. Yes, we might be very direct and not that politically correct, but sometimes you need that sort of leadership as well. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

This suggests that diversity policies are not being fully integrated into the council work culture – that there is a gap between cultural diversity and inclusion policies and their practical application. Such policies need to be implemented more effectively.

On the other hand, one positive aspect raised in discussions involved encouragement given by direct superiors regarding promotional opportunities. Although a general hesitancy to apply for promotions was observed among most of the participants, some of those who had received encouragement from their superiors reflected that they might not have considered applying without this support.

*When I wanted to apply for other positions, I spoke to them, and there wasn’t any time where they made me doubt if I would be able to do it. I feel very privileged and grateful for where I am. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL B]*

*When I moved into council and began working with my current manager, he gave me room to grow as well, which is great. He constantly puts me in the limelight. He gives me opportunities to show what I can do, gives me chances to speak, to be heard, and I like that. So I would say that, while there are no women of colour in leadership positions, our general managers understand that it’s important to identify people who have a lot to contribute and to give them the opportunity to contribute. I appreciate that they do that. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

*My manager has been quite helpful in providing opportunities for me to show what I can bring to the team. Even though I didn’t have that many years of local government experience, he felt that my years of experience externally were a very good addition to the team, and so he pushed for me to get the [role (senior role)]. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

In contrast, some of the participants mentioned how they felt management had discouraged them from applying for promotion, and they noted a perceived lack of opportunities for women of colour compared to their white counterparts. One participant shared this recent experience with the focus group:

*The management said that I shouldn’t apply because they already [had the job lined] up for somebody else. Of course, the other person was a white male. I can’t speak for the others, but if I was thinking of moving up, I really couldn’t see the opportunity. Even if you have the experience, the skills to do the job, I just don’t think we would be recognised or promoted or given the opportunity, as our white male or even white female counterpart would. I know that the council promotes a lot of female leadership and multiculturalism and all that, but a lot of it is in theory. To be honest, in practice, I just haven’t seen it. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D]*

This highlights the experiences of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds who, despite having the qualifications and skills for certain jobs, may feel that they are not given opportunities for promotion or recognition equal to their white counterparts. This quote emphasises the gap between the organisation’s stated commitment to diversity and inclusion and its actual practices. We can also see from these findings that close working relationships are critical, and that practices such as mentoring (with mentors who are well-trained) can disrupt some of the broader structural and workplace-culture barriers migrant and refugee women encounter. One participant spoke about this specifically:

*Definitely, I think it is about time constraint[s]. You can’t just expect people to snap into [recognising] diversity overnight, but I do think if we had more mentorship programs, then we could start seeing more diversity in that group. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL B]*

We consistently noted that, in the midst of many challenges, women in this study had positive and proactive solutions to reshape and enhance their workforce. Once again, we point to the importance of migrant and refugee women driving the conversation about inclusion.

## Section Two: Council views, strategy, actions

In this section we shift the focus to executive management teams (EMTs)’ reflections. They involve general issues and strategies relating to the pursuit of gender equality; they also encompass the more specific issue of prioritising migrant and refugee women in the workforce. Our findings point to important matters – they should not, however, be read as a comprehensive account of local council practices. Rather, they offer important insights into how key leaders in each council were thinking about the issues that are the focus of this report, including those raised by migrant and refugee women employees. Such insights assist in identifying key opportunities to move forward.

As noted at the outset of this report, the councils varied in many ways, including the diversity of their population, the size of their workforce and the resources at their disposal. In the analysis that follows, we do not compare councils, as our findings indicate similar issues across all councils in this sample. Some of the issues related to GEAP work concerning resourcing were raised by smaller council EMTs – their concerns around data collection and analysis and the demands of auditing were experienced as a resource pressure. However, we present the findings below from the standpoint of what is needed in councils and opportunities for the Commission for Gender Equality to support innovation and sustain commitment.

### Gender equality, inclusion and diversity: Views and ambitions

Across the six councils’ EMT focus groups there was consistent support for gender equality. Generally, there was a view that each council was doing well in moving forward on this front, and their workforce was a positive place for women. **No council had specifically adopted a strategy exploring migrant and refugee women as a priority group in any explicit way – nor were we necessarily expecting that such strategies would be in place. Predominant in the interviews was the general attitude that all women were benefiting equally from gender equality pursuits**. **We note this not as a criticism, but as indicative of the state of matters in councils.**

Generally, the gender equality push via the GEA was referred to in positive terms, and the broader principle of a commitment to the pursuit of equality in the workforce was supported. A number of participants sought to emphasise that their council had already been proactive in this area for some time.

We asked council EMTs to reflect on their approach to gender equality and whether it included attention to the diversity of women’s experiences, situations and needs, especially those of migrant and refugee women. In general, this was not foremost as a proactive or central question in the gender equality agenda of councils. One council was an exception; it had been seeking to benchmark this issue (*EMT,* *COUNCIL B*), which we explore below. Otherwise, the common reflection was that diversity had not been foregrounded.

*I think to your point, [interviewer 1], about cultural diversity as another layer, I don't think that's been a huge focus for us. We have been looking more at gender diversity. We're also looking at the Indigenous population of our workforce, which is very low. [EMT, COUNCIL E]*

One participant expressed the view that the lack of diversity in the staff profile reflected the broader population of their LGA:

*We don't have a diverse community generally compared to other municipalities in Victoria. So, to some extent, our workforce reflects a bit of that, and our council, our elected officials reflect a bit of that lack of diversity in some aspects. In other aspects, it is quite diverse, but there are other [...] Cultural diversity, I don't think we're strong in our community, and therefore, our organisation probably isn't as culturally diverse as what I would love. Yeah. That's something that we just have to work with. [EMT, COUNCIL E]*

The discussion around diversity was not often focused on the relationship between the broader population and the representative capacity of the staffing in the council. While the diversity of the race and ethnicity of the workforce was not a priority focus, some participants reflected a view that councils were inclusive of migrant and refugee communities in their work and their operations, which echoed some of the women participants’ statements.

*I think there's also starting to be different cultures and different cultural days being celebrated perhaps more than in other workplaces. [EMT, COUNCIL D]*

*From an inclusive culture perspective though, my assessment is that the organisation is quite inclusive. [EMT, COUNCIL B]*

*I've been here for about 14 years and I've definitely noticed the difference and the beautiful inclusion of people from cultural backgrounds across our organisation. It's just accelerated exponentially and I think it's very representative of our community as well. So that strategy certainly been working. [EMT, COUNCIL D]*

*Having come from a number of different councils to [organisation 1] 12 months ago, I am pleased to see the diversity of our employees in terms of the different cultural groups that are represented. And it'd be interesting to know how we compare, but it is reassuring for me to see that there's a diversity in our workplace visibly as well as in across the council. [EMT, COUNCIL D]*

Generally, when asked about whether, and how, they were perceiving gender equality through a lens of diversity, participants spoke to the future potential work of their council. They often reflected on how difficult this was, given their lack of a strong sense of their workforce via existing data. A number of participants focused on the inability to interrogate data around ‘diversity’, including in the GEAP. One council that was more advanced in this area, pointed to their exploration of other ways to build their capacity to better capture the diversity of their workforce, as a starting point for benchmarking.

*There is a lot of intersectional diversity I think, but we don't have the raw data and part of the strategic plan is how do we create and foster the culture where people self-report? We know from experience that if people are able to self-report and self-describe themselves, then you have good-quality data. We are looking at getting [external membership to a national organisation] which actually does have a diverse and inclusivity annual survey which gives you not only good data about your own organisation but how you benchmark against others. [EMT, COUNCIL B]*

This council shared their recent actions to measure and explore racial and cultural diversity via data collection. They noted that they were seeking to undertake annual surveys around inclusivity and diversity to inform their priorities; in the first iteration they had learned that staff overwhelming supported the idea that the organisation should reflect the diversity of their community. This council’s EMT participants said they were committed, when creating policy, to ‘hearing the right voices and reaching everyone and getting all that intersectionality as well’ [*EMT, COUNCIL B*]. This desire to hear the voices of employees was also vital to EMT participants from Council E, who spoke to the importance of cultural safety in the context of data gathering:

*I think some of the early work that those two team members are doing is probably largely focused around gender. I think some of their next round of sophistication of data collection will dive more deeply into intersectional attributes. We've historically been pretty good at capturing gender data but not intersectional data, so it feels like we're at the very beginning of the opportunities in terms of capturing some of that data, but again […] I think for, me, it's not as simple as asking different questions to capture intersectional data because actually, if we're not a culturally safe environment, then people will be reluctant to share some of their personal information in those regards. [EMT, COUNCIL E]*

The issue of safety to speak or share views in the workplace was raised in a number of ways. It is an important consideration when it comes to interpreting responses to internal workplace surveys and other instruments.

While we did not find an overarching commitment to advancing migrant and refugee women specifically, we did find that some councils had established working groups with a broad remit to consider questions of equity, diversity and/or inclusion *[EMT, COUNCIL C; EMT, COUNCIL A]*. However, they were not described as being comprised of diverse members of the organisation, or as focused on the experiences of those likely to be subjected to discrimination or marginalisation.

*Look, I'm a member of the [inclusion and diversity focused group… We] are doing a number of things under the Gender Equality Action Plan, but [the group] is extremely white and I'll just be frank about it. It's extremely white and it's extremely female-oriented […] I wish I could say we meet regularly every month, but […] there's been really valid reasons [for the fact that] we haven't met for the last six months. So unfortunately I have to say at the moment we meet sporadically, we are not culturally diverse, we don't represent our workforce but we would like to. [EMT, COUNCIL A]*

This very honest appraisal of an inclusion and diversity-focused working group echoes the key findings from our interviews with some of the migrant and refugee women employed by these councils: that they are not part of driving an agenda to operationalise impactful strategies on inclusion, diversity or gender equality. This account indicates that many different factors are balanced and pursued by any local council, where competing pressures and priorities are a constant. As a result, some commitments may stagnate or slow down. We’d argue that the insights in this study highlight the importance of intentional and proactive consideration for who leads and who is invited to be involved in such groups. Simply adding a ‘diversity’ position is not the solution.

**Beyond scattered commitments to data collection and workforce committees, there did exist a recognition of the challenges involved in building a workforce inclusive of migrant and refugee women. For example, doing so would entail a range of activities, such as monitoring all aspects of operation, including recruitment, retention, and promotion pathways.**

*​​To get that kind of either cultural, ethnic, however you want to describe it, diversity captured as a data point can be quite challenging and therefore if you don't have the data, you can't do the post-analysis, which is are we retaining, are we attracting, do we have people at different levels of leadership and therefore are we able to retain people as well? [EMT, COUNCIL B]*

Participants from the same council also spoke to the importance of cultural safety in the conducting of such work.

*How do you create an inclusive and safe culture so people will self-report because there's no way to force people to say or describe themselves. So how do you create an inclusive culture so that people can self-report in whatever data tools that we have and feel comfortable that we are using that data in a constructive, inclusive value-building way as opposed to a way that people are concerned about. So, as you can imagine, if folks believe they're coming from or reporting on something which reflect the minority status, that may come with conscious or unconscious fear and therefore do not want to report it. So that's probably the foundational pieces that we have is what does our data look like? [EMT, COUNCIL B]*

The broad and consistent view around pursuing a more diverse approach to gender equality was that while it is important, it is also a slow and challenging process.

*I think the other thing for me that's been a little bit challenging is the intersectionality of gender equity. So, I think we had a reasonable lens around gender equity, and we've been making some progress over time before the act came in, but now, we're learning far more about the nuances of intersectional issues in this space. So, that's, again, that opens up a whole bunch of new conversations at layers that are, I think, are more complicated than what we've been used to. So, I think that's where I'm finding some of the challenges. [EMT, COUNCIL E]*

*Gender diversity in teams that historically have been biased towards one or other gender, and just watching those metrics change over time is one thing that we're active. I think they're relatively slow-moving changes, but we watch them because we are looking for change in them. [EMT, COUNCIL F]*

Some participants saw the issue as highlighting the GEAP as a compliance mechanism rather than a meaningful pathway to change.

*I'll be honest, can I be honest? Unfortunately, look, let me put it to you this way. So I'm part of a [professional] network with my peer equivalents in [other places]. And it became very evident to me that the GEAP was another legislative requirement that had to be ticked off [...] So yes, those councils are successful in meeting all the legislative requirements and all the requirements in the GEAP [but] I think that the genuine barometer is […] we're compliant but […] the other part of it [is] how do we truly measure that success? Well, it's clear we're only at the beginning, we've still got a long way to go. I mean that's just the honest answer really. [EMT, COUNCIL C]*

Another participant referred to the importance of aspiring to the spirit rather than the letter of the legislative requirements. A third participant spoke about this in terms of the measure of success:

*And what they deem to be successful will be very different to what we deem to be successful. Because success is not only quantitative data, which is favourable, it's to us as an organisation is going to be mainly based on qualitative stuff like are our people engaged? Are they happy? Do we have people that walk into the building and feel safe? These are not the questions that the commission is going to ask or measure for us. These are the things that we are interested in. So it's kind of a question, yeah, we are going to answer all the questions that we need to and give all the data that we need to but it's something that we will know that the commission won't know. Do you know what I mean? Because they just want the figures. The figures might show something but we might know something different. Does that make sense? [EMT, COUNCIL A]*

To the degree it was being given active consideration at all, these conversations revealed that the question of how to diversify the gender equality agenda was in its infancy.

### 2.2. Strategies and practices: Focusing on specific practices to diversify gender equality in the workforce

We move now to workforce participation, specifically, the recruitment and retention strategies we discussed to varying degrees with each council. We explored with each EMT focus group questions around whether there were any steps in place to consider how to be a more inclusive employer as part of the gender equality strategy.

#### Recruitment

There was already some commitment in place to seek diverse candidates for council positions, as the following statements capture.

*We want our [role title 4] to be representative of our community and to be able to communicate with them easily. So we have consciously been trying to recruit people from different backgrounds into our [team 2] and that's often a team where we get the staff in, we train them up and then they go to work in different departments across council. I've recently had a [role title 4] come up to [team 3] and she's a non-English speaking background and is doing a fabulous job and it was a promotion so career progression for her and she's just loving the diversity of her role. [EMT, COUNCIL A]*

*There is stuff being done in the recruitment space too with language as well, like the use of language and all across that space we've changed our language and bringing out the diversity inclusion policy, which [interviewee 4] brought up. We are really conscious of the change. [EMT, COUNCIL A]*

*I think there's a lot of people across council that do do that intentionally to try and get some diversity in the workplace and most units do have quite a diverse range of people working them anyway […] we're not as good with that as we are with the diversity thing because we actually live and breathe diversity much better than gender equality. [EMT, COUNCIL A]*

*There is stuff being done in the recruitment space too with language as well, like the use of language and all across that space we've changed our language and bringing out the diversity inclusion policy, which [interviewee 4] brought up. We are really conscious of the change. [EMT, COUNCIL A]*

*Maybe I'll make a brief comment around the recruitment piece […] I think we certainly have it high on the radar around diversity being prized and valued. I think that comes through pretty clearly in the way we present ourselves when we recruit in terms of our job ads and our recruitment processes. I think on top of that, in the last few years, I've seen a few changes in our recruitment processes on a couple of levels. One is to try and be a bit more creative about how to attract the attention of a more diverse candidate pool just through using different language. We've had our job ads, for example, assessed through a gender lens to [...] and have changed a whole bunch of words and phrases that may have previously not attracted women to apply and certainly in parts of our workforce where they are male-dominated sectors or roles. We've been really pushing hard and very intentionally to try and break down some of the barriers that otherwise would default to gendered roles. We're doing training with our hiring managers and our leaders across the organisation around unconscious bias and other things like that in recruitment processes. So, I think it feels to me to be quite well embedded through our recruitment team. It's the beginning of what I think is growing momentum in that space. [EMT, COUNCIL E]*

However, this area was more commonly recognised as being challenging, in part because recruitment itself has become difficult in the post-COVID lockdown phase of the pandemic.

*And recruitment for quite a while now because of the pandemic has been a struggle and it's difficult to attract people to certain roles. Well, a lot of roles. So the focus is interestingly been on filling those roles if I'm really honest, as opposed to well how do we diversify our candidate pools. [EMT, COUNCIL C]*

It was also recognised, across a number of council EMT focus groups, that there are barriers created by the whole process of recruitment (which, as indicated above, some councils were actively seeking to improve, or had improved).

*I think some of the barriers of government across the board is around that way we advertise with position descriptions, selection criteria. It's pretty daunting when you look at it. So I think it does turn people off because if I don't have that I'm not going to get the job. So they don't even put in an application and even with an application, you know got to write the selection criteria, that's like a two-page essay […] so that's obviously an opportunity for us when we go out and do some recruitment that we're actually looking at both our gender and our cultural diversity, at that as well. [EMT, COUNCIL B]*

Some participants, reflecting on the absence of significant effort or commitment to diversifying the workforce, saw this as an opportunity to reach out to communities.

*So I think we do need to think about how we pitch ourselves, certainly culturally a lot of different groups are not even aware of the role of local government … [EMT, COUNCIL C]*

*One of the things we were talking about was reaching out to some of the leaders in our CALD communities about the benefits of working at council and maybe them putting out to their connections and the like about the opportunities are there and using some of the leadership in those CALD communities effectively to reach out into that space because they have better connections into their communities than perhaps we do. And so that was certainly something that we spoke about. We're also looking at reaching out to universities and the like around getting more graduates and whether that means from culturally diverse communities or not, that would certainly be a benefit, but that's another thing that we're looking at. So that was probably the two things that we were thinking about as ideas as to how we could hopefully improve some of the cultural diversity. [EMT, COUNCIL A]*

One council EMT thought that, as the recruitment process was open to all, proactive consideration of who might apply and/or the need to diversify the workforce was unnecessary.

*My opinion is when we recruit personally, I never look at names. When we look at resumes or CVs, you're only looking at the qualification and what experience they carry. I don't think gender plays any part, to be honest [in appointments to new positions]. [EMT, COUNCIL D]*

On the whole, however, this was not how EMT participants reflected on strategies and practices related to recruitment. They tended to recognise where things were limited and how they might be improved.

#### Retention and promotion pathways

As we explored council strategies, it was crucial for us to inquire not only about recruitment but about retention and pathways to promotion in their gender equality strategy, particularly in the context of developing specific approaches for migrant and refugee women. The findings from women employees highlighted some critical issues around pathways to promotion in the workplace. Overall, we found a lot of emphasis placed on flexibility options (part-time and/or flexible hours) being ideal for women – and a key driver for the high proportion of women in each of the councils. But the lack of attention to retention proved to be a key challenge.

*How do we retain a diverse workforce? I think one of the things is [...] That, for me, is it's a cultural question. If we are a culturally safe place, then people will feel that they are welcome, and they've got a voice and that they belong. So, the more visibility on issues that affect that, I think that goes in enormous directions. We have a female CEO, so on the gender perspective, I could imagine females looking at this organisation were saying, ‘Wow’. All the way to the CEO role, there's a career path for a woman in that organisation. Great. So, it's visible. [EMT, COUNCIL E]*

A crucial intersecting issue was the question of who is in leadership, and what are the pathways to promotion. This was discussed by a few participants. Generally, however, the focus was on men being in higher-level roles.

*[We do] not have gender equality across the departments and even in this one. So we've got a director that's male with [multiple] managers, all male that sit below him. So all the senior leaders in my area are male. So there's no diversity across that senior leadership area. So I guess for me it's about trying to work out well what are the barriers? I know some of the obvious ones, but it's like how do we improve then as an organisation when we go out for say recruitment or trying to hit the right groups And then how do we support our existing female staff at a say a coordinator level to be able to get the skills they need to become a manager when those roles become available. [EMT, COUNCIL C]*

*Our councillor group is majority female, but running through into executive, that's about, what would that be? That's 50/50. It's not hard, there's six of us. But running through into management team where that gets a little bit more disproportionate doesn't it, [interviewee 2]? As far as predominantly, not predominantly, but I'd say it was about three-quarters male there. [EMT, COUNCIL F]*

*Across the sector in the local government, the high proportionate of the employees are say females. However, the roles higher levels directors or manager roles for the females were very, very low. [EMT, COUNCIL F]*

*Where we currently have a gap is if you look at our leadership group […] we don't have a lot of diversity at that sort of leadership level as much as what we would probably like. So at the next level from a gender perspective, I think we've got a few vacant positions, but before we had those vacant positions, about 70% of that next level were male. [EMT, COUNCIL B]*

There was far less discussion around retention strategies; however, echoing the experience of women employees in this research, there was some recognition that the positive aspects of flexible work and part-time work, can also limit women’s advancement.

*I think the only thing I think there is a little bit of disparity across the organisation around people returning into leadership roles and being able to work part-time, in some teams that seems to be really well supported but then I have heard from other teams where people have been told, ‘No, you have to work full-time or you have to step down.’ So how that's playing out, I'm not sure and doesn't seem to be consistent across the organisation. [EMT, COUNCIL D]*

*There's one [woman] I do know that hasn't done it [applied for promotion] in the past because of their […] carer responsibilities. They work four days a week at the moment, and they feel like if they take the next level, they can't keep doing four days a week, they have to do five and that just simply doesn't work for their family life and their work-life balance. [EMT, COUNCIL A]*

This excerpt speaks to the tendency to frame this as an issue around women’s confidence and worry, but really it is an insight into an organisation that is not actively telling staff that leadership can be undertaken in a flexible way. Another participant noted that women needed specific encouragement to apply for jobs and to build confidence.

*I think it's also just giving women the encouragement to apply for these jobs and getting the confidence and the belief that they can do it because we've got some really, really good female leaders and some of them are untapped because they just haven't applied. They've stayed at a certain level, and I think it's just about encouraging them and developing the skills and giving them the opportunities to step up and knowing that there is flexible support and there is guidance and whatever else it is that they need. [EMT, COUNCIL A]*

Notable in these discussions is the absence of any reflection on the structural barriers different women may experience. Nor is there real insight into the specific challenges women in this study detailed in their experiences as migrant and refugee women seeking career advancement. This gives us a glimpse into the current state of the development of an overarching agenda for advancing workplace equality among the councils included in this study.

#### Safety, discrimination and silence

A number of discussions focused on workplace safety. This issue was asked about in relation to who may complete an internal survey and who is inclined to share information, but it was also consistently raised in relation to the Victorian Auditor General’s Office report (2020) [VAGO report] findings on sexual harassment in the workplace, which is seen as an exemplar of the need to do more. It was generally recognised in discussions that a gap exists between organisational ambition or commitment, and the experiences of the workforce. Participants who raised the VAGO report with us often did so to point to issues such as the lack of awareness of what is being experienced by employees across the workforce. They also noted their awareness that existing reporting or support mechanisms in place were not meeting the needs of those experiencing sexual harassment. These observations were arguably often just a reflection on challenges that any large organisation might face, particularly those not racially or culturally diverse. They highlighted that existing systems to support employees may not function ideally, because they are not safe for those who identify as a minority in a workplace.

*The initial statistics [re sexual harassment in the workplace] were, as we've said, confronting, but actually one of the most depressing parts of that was the belief among many of those people that said they'd experienced that there was no point in reporting it.*

*And that to me showed a lack of leadership as far as our ability to be able to create safe environment for people to feel comfortable reporting it and that there would be a consequence once it was reported, that there would be some action. [EMT, COUNCIL F]*

One participant [*EMT, COUNCIL A*] pointed to the importance of contextualising data. They suggested that an absence of reports of sexual harassment to an internal mechanism indicated issues with trust in the organisation rather than an actual lack of sexual harassment in the workplace. Such recognition of the importance of contextualising and interrogating how success and implementation are monitored and assessed was articulated by only a handful of participants.

Some participants expressed attitudes that spoke to wanting to know about discrimination and challenges at work.

*So, I think there's a cultural element in that for me as well that says actually, if you're uncomfortable in this organisation, it's okay to talk about that. Our culture in this organisation, I will say we genuinely care about each other. So, if you're uncomfortable here, I want to know that. Not because I want to measure a statistic about it, but actually, I want to know if you don't feel like this place brings out your best or you don't feel like you belong here or you don't feel equal here. We want to know that. [EMT, COUNCIL E]*

However, there was less reflection on power dynamics, the impact of reporting, and the consequences of speaking about racism or sexual harassment. One participant did speak about the need to recognise the difference between saying you are open to hearing from people and creating a safe space.

*I'm aware, for example, of our members of our organisation who are neurodiverse. I've heard feedback from some of our people who are neurodiverse who say, ‘Actually, it doesn't feel very safe sometimes in our organisation if you're neurodiverse.’ So, it's great feedback for us to hear and then to dive into that is complex, to understand why and in what circumstances, and what is it that we do that makes that a difficult or an unsafe place, and what can we do about that? But quite frankly, people who feel that may not be willing to put their hand up and say, ‘I'm in that category, and I feel unsafe.’ [EMT, COUNCIL E]*

Only a small number of the EMT participants had had any experiences of racism or discrimination. They described these to the research team as something that people tended to share only with trusted colleagues.

*There is definitely a subtle sometimes […] perception. But again, it’s person to person whom you’re working with. So some people have that subtle unbias that they work with, and now it’s a very hard thing to explain […] But a lot of the people do come and talk, and sometimes because I'm myself from a migrant background, people might find it more easier to relate to me and talk to me, so I do hear it all the time, [interviewer 1], to be honest. There's plenty. [EMT, COUNCIL D]*

*It's a very open-ended thing, to be honest, because sometimes it's just a comment someone does not take nicely, and they might just want to go and talk to someone. I've had a couple of people who are from [religion 1] background, for example. And just sometimes the way it came across for them during [religious period] on how they didn't expect that, because they're into that frame of mind where people can have a perception against a [religion 1] community, for example. And they do tend to get drawn down emotionally. Then they want to leave the […] It happens all the time, everywhere. I don't know how much detail you want to include, but it's definitely existing. [EMT, COUNCIL D]*

This discussion brought to light the critical importance of placing significant focus on workplace experiences. This is especially true alongside the perspectives of women who identify barriers and organisational practices that can effectively limit their longevity or career options within councils.

## Section Three: Intersectionality and the meaning of diversity and inclusion

Study participants across both groups used the term *intersectionality* in different ways to mean different things. This raises a critical issue in the pursuit of an agenda focused on diversity. The term is used often as a proxy for diverse populations; it is not used as a measure to consider how power operates, within and through various institutions and systems, to disempower people in often complex ways based on factors of their identity. Such factors may be inherent, such as race or disability, or they may be determined by a system (such as working unlawfully without a visa). We argue that the use of *intersectionality* as a proxy for *difference* runs many risks. It dilutes the examination of power and misunderstands the need to carefully reflect on how systems and institutions, including the workplace, can commit to being inclusive. It can also make it incredibly difficult for marginalised people to be recruited and/or promoted, as we have detailed. The women employee participants reflected on this subject, which we present below.

### 3.1. Women’s perspectives on intersectional gender equality policies

Women’s perspectives on intersectional gender equality policies During discussions, we observed that many participants were unaware of the existence of a GEAP in their council. While many of them were positive towards having an action plan, the prevailing sentiment was that little significant action was being taken despite the existence of many policies and procedures in place. One participant pointed out that making legislation on gender inequality can work as a driving force to see more actions and without legislation, it is difficult to see progressive actions and changes. She noted as below:

*In my opinion, sometimes having that piece of legislation is like, ‘We have to do this’, so that demands more accountability from senior leaders, counsellors, CEOs and directors, compared to if it was only an in-house initiative. [...] Again, it comes back to the point that legislation is required as a driving force. [MIXED GROUP\_ACROSS COUNCILS]*

A couple of participants expressed scepticism about local council efforts to adopt an intersectional lens. For example, one woman said that she sees the gender equality policy and practice **as ‘a battle between their own kind, [white] male and female’** [*FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL A*]. Therefore, the migrant and refugee women’s experiences are less visible in workplace settings. This sentiment was echoed by some interviewees. For example, one participant emphasised that while gender is an important aspect of diversity, it should not be the only focus**.**

***I think the bottom line is that there is no gender equality when it comes to migrant women. We are the most discriminated group.*** *We are not only discriminated against [by] locals but we are discriminated amongst ourselves as well. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL D].*

Another participant noted the importance of including intersectional data to ensure that diversity is accurately represented and not limited to gender alone.

*Gender is probably the most obvious difference regarding diversity. However, it's not the only one. I mean, we come from different backgrounds and different religions. We also have people with disabilities, and people from different linguistic backgrounds who are not necessarily included in diversity. I think [for] most people, when they are speaking about diversity, it is more based on gender rather than all the other stuff that is also part of that diversity, and I think it's very important to make sure to include those data. [FOCUS GROUP, COUNCIL C]*

This is evidence that current intersectional data collected by local councils do not provide a full explanation of the intersection of gender inequality and migrant and refugee women’s experiences.

Furthermore, one participant pointed out that no resulting policies have been designed to understand the specific experiences of the migrant and refugee women cohort, and that there needs to be more effort put into understanding what intersectionality truly means for marginalised groups in the workplace.

*I feel there needs to be a lot of work done in that space to really get the truest sense of what intersectionality is. Honestly, no. We don’t have anything like a policy. We’ve got a diversity and inclusion policy, but nothing that says specifically about that intersectionality angle. Again, big piece of work, and still we’ve got a road to get there. [MIXED GROUP\_ACROSS COUNCILS]*

While women generally acknowledge that progress is being made, participants overall emphasised the need for workplace policies and practices that focus more on the intersection of gender and minority status to address further marginalisation in the workplace. This requires 'intersectionality' to be thoroughly understood and integrated into policies and practices, rather than becoming a mere buzzword.

### 3.2. Observations on the use of the term ‘intersectionality’

While this was the view of employees, the broader observation we made was that generally the use of the term intersectionality was not a recognition of power and inequality that can be attributed to understanding hierarchical power relations and various aspects of marginalisation and inequity, but more generally a shorthand term for marginalised population groups. This is evident in the way that some EMT participants spoke about intersectional data and people:

*We have a round table that has membership from disability services and some of those other intersectional groups, education, etc. [EMT, COUNCIL D]*

*I think some of the early work that those two team members are doing is probably largely focused around gender. I think some of their next round of sophistication of data collection will dive more deeply into intersectional attributes. We've historically been pretty good at capturing gender data but not intersectional data. [EMT, COUNCIL E]*

While it is entirely possible to examine data via an intersectional lens, the allocation of intersectional attributes raises some concerns about the meaning and intention of this work, and, as we’ve outlined above, the potential impact. Critically, intersectionality is not a term that is connected to attributes, and yet this is how it has been used. There is a need to consider carefully why there is a move away from ‘diversity’ towards the term ‘intersectionality’, and the implications of this shift. ‘Intersectionality’ is a term that suggests there is an understanding of how people’s positionality, defined from their subjective perspective around how they identify (for example in relation to gender, or sexuality, or as migrant women), and external perspectives and judgements surrounding identity intersect and impact their experience of work and community life. Based on our Phase One analysis where this terminology was used, and the analysis of how councils are working to proactively create a diverse and inclusive workforce from the perspective of migrant and refugee women employees, we can identify that this work is at a very early stage. As this quote highlights, there’s no clear difference in terms of the meaning of intersectionality and diversity:

*For us it's looking at that intersectionality lens that we can hopefully absorb it in and then look at the diversity but I think we've got a long way to go. [EMT, COUNCIL C]*

*And as I say there's the bigger debate around the equity equality issues as well and as I said Intersectionality, but I think if it wasn't for the fact that I've taken a personal interest in these issues, I wouldn't know that our organisation was working on it. [EMT, COUNCIL A]*

In listening to EMT discussions abound these issues, we found that diversity and intersectionality were used interchangeably. This may seem a minor point, but it is worth reflecting on terminology, meaning and intent at this critical juncture. These findings point to the absence of significant engagement with diversity, in terms of considering what that really means to embrace and prioritise the creation of a workplace that is inclusive and proactively engages in a safe way with the experiences of people who may be a minority. We consider this usage of the language of intersectionality as potentially adding a rhetorical commitment absent of meaningful engagement.

# Conclusion and next steps

This report offers important and unique empirical data on an issue that is only beginning to be considered: the intersections of migrant and refugee women employees’ experiences in Victoria’s local councils. The study prioritises the experiences and perspectives of local council employees from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Given the significance of local governments as employers and/or service providers for all Victorians, the research team hopes that this report will inform future workplace gender audits, ensuring they are conducted to a high standard by addressing the complex gender inequalities in local councils as workplaces.

Victoria’s local councils have made significant progress in gender equality, including establishing GEAPs in 2021; they have also seen an increased number of women in leadership. A desire exists among the EMT participants for greater inclusion of people from diverse backgrounds and for opportunities to know and learn about the experiences of the migrant and refugee women cohort within organisations. Yet the percentages of staff members who came from diverse backgrounds were still low, and they do not reflect how diverse we are as a state. There was a clear dissonance between organisational systems, policies, and the experiences of migrant and refugee women. It was observed across all councils, whether in more or less diverse LGAs.

Missing from planning and implementation is a genuine consideration of what intersectionality means and how it manifests within specific contexts – for example, as power dynamics between the employer and a minority group within an organisation. While the migrant and refugee women cohort may be recognised and valued by councils as an important asset, they have not yet been acknowledged as equal decision-makers or key players within them. They may be seen, but they are not heard. A key opportunity is to abandon such terminology as *intersectionality* and consider the pursuit of diversity and inclusion more carefully, as led by those with lived experience and significant expertise to offer the organisation.

This is one of the few state-wide studies conducted to date. Its findings, focusing on the importance of migrant and refugee women’s experience of working in local governments, are particularly relevant. Larger-scale projects tailored to understand the experiences of this specific cohort across different defined entities may be beneficial to further contextualise the in-depth experiences of migrant and refugee women working in different public sectors.

We clearly need more studies like this and a much greater commitment to understanding the needs of different minority groups in the public sector. We must also provide a culturally safe work environment. This can only be achieved by increasing our direct engagement with this specific cohort and acknowledging that not all women’s experiences are the same.

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1. Furthermore, 24.8% of the total population reported that they speak a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We note that the Commission provides a number of resources and guidelines around intersectionality and gender equality. Our work is not focused on these resources, we would just note that identifying individuals as having ‘intersectional attributes’ is potentially limiting and this was reflected in the ways this terminology was operationalised by participants in this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is based on census data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The term ‘1.5 generation’ refers to a specific subset of first-generation migrants. It pertains to individuals who migrated to a different country before or during their early teens, generally ranging from 6 to 12 years old. Their journeys and experience may differ from those who migrated as adults (first-generation migrants) or were born in the host country to parents born overseas (second-generation migrants). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to the CGEPS Baseline Report (2022b), which is based on the 2020–2021 workplace gender audit data, local councils have a median base salary pay gap of 2% or AUD 1,500. While this is relatively low compared to other public sectors, it is still worth noting. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)