

Perspective:

Migrant women's health in migrant women's hands

In 2018 the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health celebrated 40 years since its founding in 1978. The organisation's Executive Director, Adele Murdolo, has worked at the centre for almost two decades. She shared with us some of the changes and challenges the organisation has faced since its inception.

The Multicultural Centre for Women's Health (MCWH) started out as a small factory-visiting program that delivered in-language contraception information to migrant women factory workers in the late 1970s. A team of bilingual peer educators were trained in women's contraceptive options, including the newly available contraceptive pill. They then made regular visits to factories around Melbourne to speak with migrant women in their preferred languages about reproductive control.

Called Action for Family Planning until the early 1980s, the program was born of feminist, trade union and migrant activism. The program's aim – to restore to migrant women the knowledge and awareness they needed to take control of their reproduction – was a hallmark of the women's movement in the 1970s. The method, delivering multilingual, peer education in factories, brought together migrant, feminist and union concerns, networks and techniques.

MCWH's essence has stayed constant since the peer educators' first factory visits took place 40 odd years ago. But much has changed in response to the dynamic external environment. Industry has changed – local manufacturing has diminished and new industries have grown. Migrant communities continue to make up the majority of the factory workforce in Victoria, but many migrant women also clean, care and serve. MCWH still delivers outreach and bilingual peer education, but in addition to factories, the settings now extend into aged care and hospitality, and visits include English language centres, community groups and prisons.

Victorian demographics have also rapidly changed. Women born overseas in a primarily non-English speaking country now number over 880,000, a number that has doubled over the last 10 years. Countries of birth, cultural identities and languages have diversified. The growth in temporary visas over the years has added complexity to the settlement experience and has increased migrant women's precarity and dependence – on their spouses, their families and their



employers. Citizenship is harder to attain, which adversely impacts on migrant women's capacity for social, political and civic participation.

MCWH programs have responded to these changes by covering a broader range of health and wellbeing issues. Programs now address the spectrum of reproductive and sexual health issues, mental health, occupational health and safety, as well as the all-important issue of gender equity. Migrant women experience gendered discrimination – which intersects with race, religious, and other forms of discrimination – in many settings, including education, health, welfare and employment. Fighting for gender equality for migrant women is a must.

Gender-based violence has a huge impact on migrant women's lives, limiting their movements, diminishing their financial capability and reducing their control over their own lives. At the same time, research has shown that migrant women do not have equal access to the family violence service system. They tend to access the system at a later point, and are less likely to receive a service that addresses their needs once they have entered it. MCWH works with migrant communities, service providers and policy makers to build capacity for

earlier access to the service system, and for primary prevention. The application of feminist intersectional approaches to policy and programming is an important aspect of MCWH's capacity-building work.

MCWH has responded over the years to the changes in the social and political landscape by tailoring its programs accordingly, adapting the focus and forms of its advocacy, conducting and sharing new research, and continuing to speak with migrant women about their lives and the strategies they use to address the challenges they face. Migrant women, of course, are the experts about their own lives and their voices remain at the centre of the organisation as MCWH is run by migrant women for migrant women.

Governments, policy makers and service providers have so much to learn from migrant women. That learning can only take place if those who design and implement policy and service systems are empowered to listen and act accordingly. MCWH started four decades ago on the basis of activism and advocacy and it continues to act as an important mechanism for listening, learning about migrant women's lives, and acting on their advice. ■