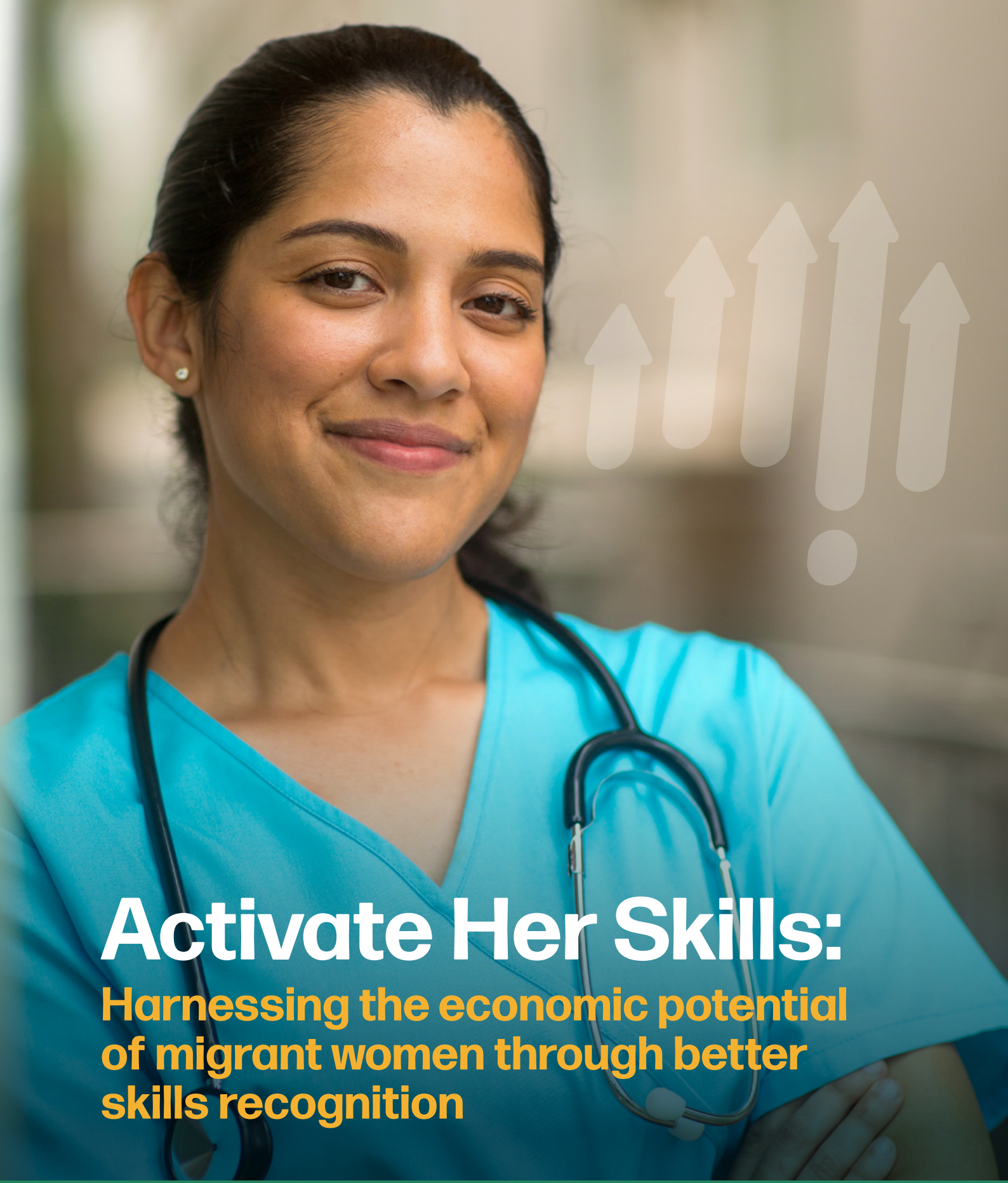

Activate Her Skills:

Harnessing the economic potential of migrant women through better skills recognition

Activate AUSTRALIA'S SKILLS

Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance

SSI

Acknowledgement of Country

SSI and the Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We remain committed to reconciliation and to working to realise Makarrata, a Yolngu word meaning the coming together after a struggle.

About this report

This report is part of the Activate Australia's Skills campaign – an alliance of more than 130 organisations calling for reform of Australia's system for recognising overseas-acquired skills and qualifications. The campaign is convened and led by Settlement Services International (SSI). Find out more at activateaustralia.org.au.

In collaboration with the Activate Australia's Skills Campaign, the Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance (AMWA) (led by the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia in partnership with SSI and Media Diversity Australia) conducted a national survey to capture the lived experiences of migrant and refugee women navigating Australia's system for recognising overseas skills and qualifications. This report is based on that survey, centring women's firsthand experiences of skills assessment, professional recognition, employment outcomes and the broader social and economic impacts of underutilising their skills.

SSI is a national non-profit organisation providing life-changing human and social services to a diverse Australia. AMWA is one of five National Women's Alliances funded by the Australian Government's Office for Women (OFW), with a mandate to elevate the voices, experiences and priorities of diverse and underrepresented women in national policy and reform processes.

Activate
AUSTRALIA'S
SKILLS

Foreword

This report was born from the stories we hear every day in our work at SSI and the Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance.

They are stories of resilience and tenacity – of the courage it takes to cross oceans, leave behind the familiar and begin again in a new country. They are stories of women who arrive in Australia with valuable qualifications, rich experience and a deep desire to contribute.

But too often, they become stories of frustrated potential and unrecognised dreams – and we all miss out as a result. By locking migrant women out of their professions, our country also loses their valuable contributions.

Highly skilled women find themselves locked out of the professions they trained for. Careers stall. Confidence erodes. Lives are placed in limbo.

Taken in isolation, these stories can appear arbitrary. One woman succeeds, another does not. One is fast-tracked, another waits years. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to why capable, hardworking women are sidelined.

It is only when these stories are brought together that the pattern becomes unmistakable.

The problem is not migrant women themselves. It is a system that is stacked against those at the intersection of gender and migration, who face compounding disadvantage. Australia's skills and qualifications recognition system is confusing, fragmented and bureaucratic at the best of times. For women navigating that system while also contending with gendered expectations, caring responsibilities, language barriers and interrupted career pathways, the challenges can become too great.

This report tells those stories.

It draws on first-person accounts from more than 60 migrant women, alongside economic modelling by Deloitte Access Economics and Precision Economics, to reveal the human and economic cost of a system that fails to recognise women's skills. The picture that emerges is stark: women who feel their qualifications are "worthless"; careers indefinitely on hold; professional identities slowly erased.

And yet, this is not an intractable problem.

The barriers identified in this report are systemic – which means they are also solvable. We can activate their skills and harness the economic potential of migrant women through four practical, common-sense reforms. These reforms would address gendered inequities in skills recognition while maintaining the high standards Australians rightly expect.

The fact is, when migrant women are able to work in their professions, everyone benefits. Women earn higher incomes. Families are more secure. Employers fill critical skills gaps. Communities gain the services they urgently need.

This is neither a marginal issue nor a niche reform agenda. It goes to the heart of who we are as a country and whether we truly value fairness, opportunity and contribution.

These women have already shown extraordinary courage in building a life in Australia. The least we can do is ensure the skills recognition system is fairer, faster and more affordable for migrant women.

Violet Roumeliotis
CEO of SSI

Malini Raj
Executive Director of the Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance

Key findings

- **There are more than 340,000 migrant and refugee women in Australia who are highly skilled and ready to contribute**, but who currently work below their level of skill and qualification.

- **Skills recognition systems too often delay, devalue or derail their ability to work at their full potential.** In a period of critical workforce shortages, this is a major missed opportunity for women, employers and the national economy.

- **Skill underutilisation is widespread and disproportionately affects migrant women.** Almost half of permanent migrants already here in Australia work below their level of skill and qualification, with migrant women 20 per cent more likely to be underutilised than migrant men[1]. Migrant women also face higher unemployment and lower workforce participation than both migrant men and Australian-born women – despite being, on average, better educated.[2,3]

- **These outcomes reflect structural barriers; they are not a reflection of the capability or motivation of migrant women.** Excessive fees, lack of information, inflexible, slow and opaque processes and lack of due process systematically block highly skilled women from getting their overseas skills and qualifications recognised to work at their level of expertise.

- **A gender lens shows these barriers are not experienced evenly.** Skills recognition processes often assume an "unencumbered worker" – someone who is financially secure, available for long and inflexible assessments and able to retrain full-time. This model does not match the lived realities of many migrant and refugee women, particularly those balancing care responsibilities, insecure work and visa-related barriers.

- **Migrant women are more likely to be secondary applicants on skilled visas (62 per cent of applicants), meaning they receive less targeted support** to have their skills recognised and utilised, compared to primary applicants who are more likely to be men.[4]

- **When migrant women can work in their professions, everyone benefits.** By working in their areas of expertise, migrant women earn higher incomes, strengthen family wellbeing and participation and fill critical skill shortages. This improves services and reduces waiting lists for the whole community. It's a win for women, a win for employers and a win for the community.

A national survey of 64 migrant women reveals the double disadvantage they face. Migrant and refugee women face multiple and compounding disadvantages in navigating the process to get their overseas skills recognised and gain employment.

- Lengthy, inflexible skills recognition processes impose a "time tax on talent". Women reported months or years of waiting with little clarity on timelines, outcomes or next steps.
- Lengthy, inflexible recognition processes disproportionately disadvantage women by competing directly with unpaid care work, penalising interrupted career pathways and privileging those who can wait months or years without income.
- Excessive assessment fees operate as a form of gendered economic exclusion. Over half of respondents (56 per cent) identified cost as a key barrier. Multi-stage assessments, licensing fees, English tests and bridging courses can cost tens of thousands of dollars, often alongside visa costs, childcare and housing pressures — forcing many women to abandon recognition pathways.
- Many migrant women are pushed into low-skilled work by default. Only 41 per cent of respondents reported their current role was highly related to their overseas qualifications, while almost one-third were working in a field not related to their profession or experience. Women with qualifications in engineering, psychology, health, business and IT reported working as disability support workers, cleaners, childcare workers and kitchen hands.
- Employment outcomes reflect recognition roadblocks, not choice. Nearly one-third of respondents expressed a strong preference to return to work aligned with their qualifications.
- The impacts go beyond employment. Women described feeling their qualifications were "worthless", their careers "on hold" and their professional identities "erased". Prolonged de-skilling was linked to anxiety, loss of confidence, financial stress and strain on family wellbeing. Some respondents linked de-skilling and financial dependency to heightened vulnerability, including domestic and financial abuse — highlighting skills recognition as a gender equity and safety issue, not only a workforce issue.

To unlock these benefits, Australia must address gendered barriers to overseas skills recognition. The Activate Australia's Skills campaign, supported by more than 130 organisations, is proposing four practical solutions to this:

- Establish one national governance system for all overseas skills qualifications recognition, including a Commissioner to provide independent oversight, improve transparency and continually improve the system by addressing gendered barriers.
- Create an integrated system that links skills recognition for migration purposes with licensing and accreditation for employment purposes and supports both primary and secondary applicants into work matching their skills.
- Reduce key barriers by providing financial support for migrant women to overcome cost barriers and create an online skills recognition portal to reduce confusion.
- Set up employment hubs or career gateways with skills recognition navigators to provide tailored, practical guidance and help migrant women move through the recognition process and into relevant work.[5]

Activate Her Skills:
Harnessing the economic potential of migrant women

The Situation

Australia is wasting the skills of migrant women

Migrant women in Australia:

341,550
work below their level of skill and qualification

20%
more likely to have their skills underutilised than migrant men

31%
lower wages than Australian-born women with similar qualifications

62%
of secondary applicants for a skilled visa, meaning they receive less support

The Problem

Australia's skills recognition system undermines women

National survey of migrant women

- n=64 migrant and refugee women surveyed
- **90%** speak a language other than English at home
- **77% aged 31–54**, in their prime working years
- **Top qualifications:** Health and allied health, psychology, engineering, IT and education

What migrant women told us...
Top barriers to getting overseas skills recognised

High fees:
56% said cost was a major barrier

Confusing pathways:
27% said unclear requirements were a major barrier

Long delays:
59% said time was a key barrier

Rigid processes:
37% said excessive paperwork was a major barrier

These barriers disproportionately affect migrant women

In her words... How the broken skills recognition system affects migrant women

"The system broke my confidence"

"It took five years to align with my credentials"

"The costs were so astronomical"

"The problem wasn't my skills, it was the system"

The Solution

Make skills recognition faster, fairer and more affordable for migrant women

1. National oversight to address gendered barriers
2. More seamless process from migration to employment
3. Financial support and clearer information for migrant women
4. Recognition of navigators to guide migrant women through the process

Everyone wins if we activate the skills of migrant women

Activate AUSTRALIA'S SKILLS

Australia's Red Tape Trap:

How an expert nurse got lost in the labyrinth

Apolinario's story highlights how skills recognition processes in other countries are more efficient and effective than those in Australia.

Apolinario* began her professional journey in the Philippines, where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Nursing and specialised in emergency and intensive care. She went on to pursue opportunities abroad, working in Saudi Arabia as an emergency room nurse in a university-affiliated hospital in Kuwait, both in a cosmetic surgery clinic and an emergency department, and later in a hospital in Ireland. Seeking safety due to threats stemming from domestic violence and property disputes in her region of Mindanao, and wanting to remain close to the Philippines, Apolinario then moved to Australia.

Apolinario's experience with skills recognition was significantly smoother in the Middle East and Ireland than it was in Australia. She described the skills recognition process in the Middle East as "very seamless, efficient and reliable", noting that embassies coordinated directly with the Philippine government through her Philippine Recommendation Certification and Red Ribbon verification, which ensured the authenticity of her documents. Importantly, recognition of her qualifications was integrated with the visa process. In her words: "The skills recognition was embedded in the visa processes. They were not two separate processes like they are in Australia."

In contrast, Apolinario's experience of skills recognition in Australia was fragmented, opaque and expensive. She described receiving very little structured support, relying on connections with a Filipino mentor to help her navigate Australia's confusing skills recognition system. Previously available bridging programs – which could have allowed Apolinario to work under supervision while completing the lengthy recognition process – had been removed. As a result, Apolinario had to work as a cleaner, despite her years of nursing experience.

At the end of the process the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) recognised Apolinario's Bachelor of Nursing qualification and classified her as an Internationally Qualified Nurse B. However, employers still required Australian clinical experience before offering registered nurse positions.

Apolinario described her expertise as being hollowed out by years of inaction. She said the absence of bridging programmes and affordable pathways to registration had become a significant professional setback. Delays and long gaps between steps in the recognition process have caught her in a vicious cycle, forcing a qualified nurse like herself to continue working as a cleaner.

In her words: "By the time I finally get all the papers sorted, months have passed … then employers say, 'We need local experience' – it's a cycle, it never ends. Waiting is mentally draining … you lose confidence in yourself and every month that passes, your skills feel like they are rusting."

> "The system is too fragmented … It's costly … There's a time lag … Your qualifications and your experience are being wasted along the way."

**Pseudonym used*

Introduction:
Migrant and refugee women, skills recognition and Australia's productivity challenge

Migrant and refugee women bring a wealth of skills, qualifications and professional experience to Australia. They arrive as engineers, teachers, nurses, psychologists, dentists, lawyers, academics and business professionals. Many are multilingual, globally experienced and highly motivated to contribute to Australia's economy and communities.

Yet for too many, the fragmented, opaque, costly and slow process to get their skills and qualifications recognised in Australia creates insurmountable barriers to meaningful employment at their skill level. These challenges have persisted for decades, contributing to widespread underutilisation of talent at a time when Australia faces acute and persistent skill shortages and stagnant productivity.

Despite high levels of education, migrant and refugee women experience consistently poorer labour market outcomes than Australian-born women. Right now, there are 341,550 qualified migrant women in Australia who are working below their skill level. Women in Australia from low and middle-income countries are more likely to hold graduate and postgraduate qualifications, yet they face lower employment rates, higher underemployment and a far greater mismatch between their skills and the roles they secure.[6] These disparities are evident even in highly skilled professions. For example, according to 2018 data, female engineers born overseas face unemployment rates of 11 per cent in Victoria and 10 per cent in New South Wales – up to three times higher than their Australian-born peers – despite 76 per cent of female engineers in Australia being overseas-born. The issue is not workforce supply, but access to opportunity.[7]

Importantly, these gaps persist even when education levels are held constant, reinforcing that the problem is not capability, but how overseas qualifications and experience are recognised and valued. Women frequently describe long periods of waiting between each step of the skills recognition process – waiting for document verification, waiting for assessments, waiting for employer responses – resulting in skill loss, reduced confidence and preventable professional stagnation. Even when women succeed in having their qualifications formally recognised, the absence of clear pathways, the removal of bridging programs, and employer demands for 'local experience' exacerbate that cycle of delay, uncertainty and professional stagnation. Research shows local work experience benefits Australian-born women significantly more than skilled migrant women, with overseas qualifications often "unrecognised and less valued" regardless of actual competence.[8]

The economic and social cost of this underutilisation is substantial. When migrant women work in their professions, they contribute more tax, rely less on income support, fill critical workforce shortages and strengthen the economic

stability of their families. They participate more fully in civic and community life. By contrast, the concentration of highly skilled migrant women in low-paid or unrelated roles represents a significant misallocation of human capital. Lifting the workforce participation of migrant and refugee women to match that of Australian-born women would add billions of dollars to the national economy and deliver a meaningful productivity boost. A central barrier to realising this gain is Australia's costly and confusing skills recognition system which has significant gendered impacts.

The 'recognition roadblocks' migrant and refugee women face to have their skills recognised are systemic and severe. Recognition processes that appear 'gender-neutral' are in fact the opposite, with excessive fees, lengthy processes and system complexity having a disproportionate impact on migrant women.

In collaboration with the Activate Australia's Skills Campaign, the Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance conducted a national survey to capture the lived experiences of migrant and refugee women navigating Australia's system for recognising overseas skills and qualifications. This report is based on that survey, centring women's firsthand experiences of skills assessment, professional recognition, employment outcomes and the broader social and economic impacts of underutilising their skills.

By capturing the lived experience of women navigating this dysfunctional system, we see not only the impacts on Australia's labour market but also how it affects migrant women's financial security, health and wellbeing, safety and stability.

The evidence is clear: wholesale reform of the skills recognition system is needed not only to address workforce needs, but to unlock the economic potential of migrant and refugee women.

Centring women in these reforms is essential to ensuring that the skills recognition system is gender-responsive, effective, fair and delivers meaningful results for Australia as a whole.

Doubly disadvantaged:

Migrant women, the gender pay gap and skills recognition

Migrant women suffer double disadvantage in their weekly pay packets compared to the rest of Australia's working population.

While women in Australia generally earn between 11 and 18 per cent less than men,[9] migrant women experience a significantly wider gap. On average the combined effects of gender and migrant disadvantage mean they earn 30 per cent less than comparable Australian-born workers. [10]

According to the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia, the wage gap migrant women experience is paradoxically widest for those best equipped to lead: female migrants with a postgraduate degree earn about 31 per cent less than Australian-born women with similar education levels. [11]

Data from Jobs and Skills Australia confirms a persistent "wage shortfall" for migrant women, and one that specifically punishes those with the highest qualifications.[12] It also found that pay gaps widen over time for women from culturally and racially diverse backgrounds.

Reforming overseas skills and qualifications recognition to make the process faster, fairer and more affordable would enable more migrant women to work at their skill level, increase their earning potential and help to close the pay gap.

Recognition Roadblocks: Navigating the gendered impacts of a broken skills recognition system

Migrant women face systemic barriers, or "recognition roadblocks", to getting their overseas skills and qualifications recognised to continue their careers in Australia. The barriers outlined in this report are not isolated or incidental.

They reflect how a costly and confusing skills recognition system can have deeply gendered impacts, disproportionately affecting migrant and refugee women who are often unable to absorb the excessive fees and face lengthy wait times, in addition to confusing and unfair processes that are characteristic of the current system. Migrant women face multiple, compounding disadvantage when it comes to skills recognition. When recognition processes collide with caring responsibilities and cost pressures, women are often the ones who carry the heaviest burden.

To illustrate how these barriers operate, this report is structured to follow the migration and career journeys of migrant women based on a national survey – examining challenges at the pre-arrival (visa application) stage, the onshore (post-arrival) stage and the downstream impacts that unfold over time. While presented sequentially for clarity, these barriers do not operate in isolation. They accumulate. Delays before arrival shape settlement choices. Onshore recognition hurdles affect workforce entry and earning trajectories. Over time, skill underutilisation affects the mental health, self-esteem, financial security and vulnerability of migrant and refugee women. Their experiences show the importance of reforming skills recognition as not only an economic imperative but as a gender equity issue.

Pre-arrival recognition roadblocks

When examining the gendered impacts of Australia's skills recognition system, it is crucial to understand that the barriers begin prior to entering Australia. Systems that appear neutral in design frequently produce gendered outcomes in practice, particularly for women on 'secondary' visas, women with caring responsibilities and women from non-English speaking backgrounds. These factors form the foundation for patterns of exclusion, by predominantly valuing the skills of men over women through the structural design of the migration program.

The gendered impact of the migration system

> **In her words:**
> "His skills seemed to matter more than mine"

The treatment of secondary applicants within Australia's skilled migration program creates structural barriers for migrant women from the very beginning of their migration journey. Secondary applicants – typically spouses, dependants or family members of the primary applicant – are disproportionately women. Female permanent migrants comprise 62 per cent of secondary applicants in the skilled via stream, compared with 35 per cent of primary applicants.[13]

Because the visa application process centres on the skills and experience of the primary applicant, the qualifications and professional histories of secondary applicants are not independently assessed or actively considered. As a result, their expertise is often invisible within the migration framework and minimal structured support is provided to help them transition into appropriate employment. Work rights for secondary visa holders also depend heavily on the subclass of the primary applicant's visa, meaning many women face restricted or delayed access to the labour market from the outset.

Research shows secondary visa holders experience higher unemployment rates and tend to take longer to secure employment. This delay often channels women into underemployment or lower-paid, feminised sectors of the economy unrelated to their qualifications. Overseas-born women face higher unemployment and lower labour force participation than their male counterparts across all permanent migration streams, which shows there are structural barriers to their workforce participation.[14]

Consistent with these findings, a recent Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) report examining wage outcomes between Australian-born and migrant professionals found highly educated migrant women experienced the poorest wage outcomes relative to Australian-born women with comparable qualifications.[15] The report also found bachelor or diploma-qualified migrant women were more likely to work in lower-paid industries, identifying that a high proportion of them enter Australia as secondary applicants with minimal support.

From the first formal interaction with Australia's migration program, many women encounter a system shaped by assumptions of a male primary breadwinner. This structural design places women at a disadvantage before they arrive, creating an uphill battle to have their skills recognised and fully utilised in the Australian labour market.

The cost of rigidity: Navigating complex and costly recognition processes from a domestic violence shelter

Rabia's story highlights how rigid recognition processes can compound hardship for migrant women rebuilding their lives after domestic violence.

Rabia Aftab arrived in Australia in late 2020 after completing a Master of Psychology and an Advanced Diploma in clinical psychology and working as a clinical psychologist in Pakistan. When she married and moved to Australia, she hoped for greater professional freedom and gender equality.

"I was very hopeful and optimistic," she said. "I thought I would go to a place where finally I wouldn't have any barrier to study further or work as a professional … and I was honestly over the moon."

Soon after arriving, however, her circumstances changed dramatically. Her husband became abusive and prevented her from working or even attending English classes. The violence escalated, police became involved, and Rabia left the relationship, spending six and a half months in a domestic violence shelter. Because her visa was dependent on her husband, she was not eligible for Centrelink support.

With only small emergency payments from shelter staff, Rabia began searching for work while trying to navigate Australia's fragmented and confusing skills recognition and licensing systems on her own. She identified that she needed certification from the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA), but to even apply for assessment she needed to pay $1,500 – and at that time she had only $100.

It took 15 months of farm work, cleaning, dishwashing and other physically demanding jobs to save up for the fee. Much of this work was underpaid and sometimes exploitative.

Rabia described the recognition process as rigid, policy-driven and impersonal, with little room for flexibility. There was no opportunity to consider the challenges she faced as a survivor of domestic violence, including visa dependency, financial hardship and difficulty obtaining documents from overseas.

She said: "It just felt like I was talking to a computer … it was a very non-human language … you're not talking to a person."

She was refused additional time to address documentation issues and received no response when she later requested a refund due to hardship. At the same time, she incurred further costs including criminal history checks and English language testing.

The experience had a serious impact on her mental health. "After that I was in hospital struggling with my suicidal ideation," she later said.

Eventually, Rabia pursued an alternative pathway through the Australian Psychological Society to obtain recognition for university entry. One university agreed to credit part of her previous study, requiring her to repeat several core subjects at her own expense. Ironically, soon after completing them, the Australian Psychological Society confirmed that her six years of undergraduate study were already equivalent to Australian standards.

Despite these barriers, Rabia remained determined to rebuild her career. She began volunteering as a caseworker and was later offered paid employment. She is now completing a master's degree in counselling, though she continues to reflect with deep disappointment on how the skills recognition system repeatedly failed to support her or accommodate her circumstances.

The gendered impact of the information vacuum

> **In her words:**
> "I had no idea what to do"

Many migrant women report that the absence of clear, centralised information makes it difficult to understand licensing requirements, leading to significant delays in returning to their professions. They receive little or no clear information about whether their occupation requires formal skills recognition or professional licensing in Australia. Pre-arrival information is often fragmented, technical and focused on visa eligibility rather than employment pathways. As a result, many women arrive in Australia believing they are work-ready, only to discover additional assessments, registrations, English tests, supervised practice or bridging courses are needed before they can legally practise in their field.

For those who complete a skills assessment as part of a skilled visa application, confusion is common. Many reasonably assume the assessment undertaken for migration purposes also satisfies the requirements to work in their profession once they arrive in Australia. In most cases, they are not clearly informed that migration assessments and professional licensing are separate processes with different standards, fees and timelines. The gap often becomes apparent only when they apply for jobs and are told they cannot practise without further registration. By then, families may have relocated, financial commitments may have been made and time pressures may be mounting.

This lack of clarity has gendered consequences. Women balancing caring responsibilities may have less time to investigate recognition pathways given there is no single source of information in Australia on where and how to get skills recognised and which professions require licensing. When recognition requirements emerge unexpectedly, migrant women are often forced to choose between low-paid survival work and lengthy, costly pathways back into their profession. The longer the delay, the greater the risk of de-skilling and permanent occupational diversion.

A pathway without guidance: Nelly's journey through Australia's medical licensing system

Costly exams, limited guidance and ticking time clocks hold back doctors from providing healthcare.

Nelly's* story is one of courage, heartbreak and perseverance. Her journey began in Ukraine, where she completed her medical studies and was professionally licensed. She then undertook a second licensing exam in Nigeria where she practiced for three years. Due to severe economic instability and safety concerns, including militant uprisings and kidnapping of medical professionals, Nelly had to leave Nigeria.

Before arriving, Nelly researched the pathways to practise medicine and believed Australia could offer a fresh start.

Yet the reality was far harsher than she imagined. On arrival, Nelly had to sit the Australian Medical Council examinations in order to obtain registration with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA), which would allow her to practise as a doctor in Australia. She described the process as extremely difficult and isolating, with little guidance or transparency about the exam content, which she said had not kept pace with contemporary medical practice.

The costs were substantial, with textbooks and study materials costing more than $200 and exam fees starting at $2,500 and increasing each year. Nelly and many other overseas-trained doctors struggled to find credible tutors or reliable sources of guidance. Some even fell victim to scams from individuals falsely claiming to provide tutoring support.

Despite passing the first stage of the exam, candidates were required to secure employment with a hospital in order to complete supervised practice, a requirement for AHPRA registration. Yet many hospitals had few places and were reluctant to employ unregistered overseas-trained doctors, creating a significant barrier. Additionally, if five years elapse during the process, candidates must return to their home country and practise there for a year before reapplying, which can be dangerous and distressing for those who left due to conflict or insecurity.

After doing so, they must restart the costly registration process. This cycle can break spirits and keep professional aspirations out of reach.

Nelly believes the system could be improved through better access to qualified tutors and clear, up-to-date information on official websites. She also suggested that the bodies responsible for examinations, licensing and employment pathways should coordinate more closely and provide a clear, standardised credentialing pathway for overseas-trained doctors – ideally in a single document or online portal. Nelly also suggested that dedicated support staff should be available to help candidates navigate the process.

**Pseudonym used*

Onshore recognition roadblocks

Once migrant women arrive in Australia, the process to get their overseas skills and qualifications recognised is time-consuming, expensive, inconsistent and opaque. There is little or no oversight of the many bodies and associations that hold the keys to professional licences. Importantly, these barriers are not experienced in isolation. They interact with broader settlement pressures, unpaid care work, childcare access and other factors to make it doubly difficult for migrant and refugee women to continue their careers. As a result, highly skilled migrant and refugee women are frequently pushed into survival employment unrelated to their expertise or excluded from the workforce altogether.

The gendered impact of excessive recognition fees

The financial cost of skills recognition remains one of the most prohibitive barriers for migrant women, especially for those on dependent visas with limited financial independence. Pathways to professional registration frequently involve multi-stage assessments, licensing fees, English language tests and bridging courses that together may amount to tens of thousands of dollars. Cost barriers were among the most frequently cited challenges, with over half of survey respondents (56 per cent) identifying financial cost as a key barrier to having their skills recognised.

After meeting these initial costs required by professional accreditation bodies, many women reported facing additional gendered costs to pursue skills recognition. Women are disproportionately responsible for unpaid care, a burden that is often greater for migrant women who arrive on secondary visas. As a result, they are more likely to rely on paid childcare that is not subsidised due to their visa status while pursuing recognition processes – an expense male migrants are less likely to incur.

These costs are further compounded for women in regional and outer-metropolitan areas, who must travel significant distances to attend assessments, examinations and bridging courses. In some cases, professional exams are not available in multiple locations, requiring applicants to travel interstate to complete assessments due to inflexible, rigid requirements. For many, the combination of accreditation fees, visa expenses, childcare, travel, rent and lost income makes skills recognition financially unattainable.

> "The costs were so astronomical I had to give up getting my degree recognised for years."

> "Childcare, rent and study together were impossible – I took the first full-time job I could just to survive."

> "Balancing visa rules, childcare and retraining meant I had no choice but to abandon my profession."

Cost breakdown by profession:

- **Skilled trades:** Licensing and skills recognition process can cost more than $9,000 and take up to 18 months[16]
- **General Practitioners:** Can cost up to $51,000 to be registered and gain skills recognition[17]
- **Dentistry:** Cost of registration is approximately $8,000[18]
- **Teaching:** Skills assessment with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership costs $1,154, appeal processes $904, Skilled Employment Statement $255, and English proficiency tests $300–400 per attempt[19]

Recognition delayed, care denied: Abisha's story and the mental health workforce gap

Abisha's experience illustrates how complex and expensive registration pathways can keep qualified migrant psychologists from helping address Australia's growing mental health workforce shortages.

Abisha moved to Australia from India in 2022 with a clear dream: to continue her career as a registered psychologist and contribute to improving mental health outcomes in her new community. In India, she had completed both a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and a Master of Psychology.

However, a complex, confusing and costly accreditation system confronted Abisha when she arrived in Australia. The process to become a registered psychologist through the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) required multiple stages of assessment, extensive documentation and thousands of dollars in fees. This was daunting, especially because she was a recent migrant with limited financial support and no clear guidance on navigating the process.

Determined to build a stable life and maintain her connection to her profession, Abisha decided to take a more immediate and affordable path. She began working in various unrelated roles, including administrative and support jobs, before transitioning to become a therapist and counsellor. While this work was meaningful, it was not the career she wanted. She explained that she chose this route because it was "quicker" and allowed her to "save money for [her] future AHPRA registration".

Three years later, Abisha is now revisiting her original goal. With stronger finances and greater familiarity with Australia's systems, she has started the formal process of applying for registration through AHPRA. One of the biggest challenges she faces is obtaining and verifying the necessary academic documents from India, which has been time-consuming and expensive. The costs of assessment, registration and additional bridging requirements remain a major barrier, but Abisha is determined to persevere.

"I've come too far to give up now," she said. "Becoming a registered psychologist in Australia isn't just about my career – it's about fulfilling the purpose I set out for when I left home."

There are 5,040 migrant psychologists who are working below their skill level in Australia who could help reduce wait times for Australians seeking mental health support if they were able to work in the professions they trained for.

The gendered impact of the recognition waiting game

> **In her words:**
> "It took five years to align with my credentials"

Slow and complex recognition processes impose what survey participants described as a "time tax on talent". For many migrant and refugee women, the pathway to professional registration stretches across months or years, with multiple assessments, shifting requirements and limited clarity about timelines or outcomes.

This "waiting game" is not neutral. Time carries a disproportionate cost for women, particularly those in their prime working and caring years. Extended delays often coincide with caring responsibilities, dependent visa conditions and limited financial reserves. Faced with mounting household expenses and visa-related pressures, many women accept lower-paid "survival jobs" unrelated to their qualifications – not as a career choice, but as a financial necessity. Over time, this diversion becomes structural. Skilled women are funnelled into insecure, feminised sectors such as disability support, childcare and cleaning, where progression pathways are limited and pay is lower. What begins as a temporary measure frequently becomes long-term occupational displacement, reinforcing gender pay gaps and undermining lifetime earnings, superannuation accumulation and economic independence.

The survey data underscores the scale of the issue. Fifty-nine per cent of respondents indicated the time-consuming process was a major barrier to skills recognition. Many described waiting months or years with little communication about progress or next steps. One respondent explained that it took five years to properly align her role with her credentials, while "less experienced but locally born colleagues were instantly employed and elevated to leadership roles".

There is little to no recognition or responsiveness to how caring responsibilities or financial and mobility constraints hinder applicants' ability to comply with both lengthy waiting processes and time-sensitive exams and applications. The skills recognition process relies on the model of an 'unencumbered worker' who has no such obligations or constraints, nothing that would prevent them from travelling, paying for additional assessment measures and taking time away from the home.

In addition, 37 per cent of respondents cited excessive paperwork and administrative complexity as key obstacles. Participants described processes that were lengthy and often arbitrary or disconnected from current competence.

Examples included:

- **Qualifications rejected** because they were more than five or 10 years old, despite ongoing professional experience
- **Requirements to produce payslips** or employer records that were no longer available
- **Demands for original hard-copy documents** even where certified digital verification systems were available
- **Requirements to travel across states to sit an exam**, which was only provided in that one city in Australia

These requirements compound delays and disproportionately burden women managing care responsibilities or limited mobility. Several respondents described losing multiple years of career progression solely due to administrative delays, not skills gaps. For women balancing caregiving, visa time limits or age-related career thresholds, prolonged assessment timeframes function as an irreversible career penalty rather than a temporary inconvenience. The result is cumulative disadvantage: each year spent waiting reduces career momentum, professional confidence and long-term earning potential.

Finally, the process for recognising overseas skills and qualifications in Australia is characterised by a lack of transparency, consistency and accountability, which becomes particularly pronounced when seeking recourse after assessing bodies do not award formal recognition. Assessment criteria can be unclear, decision-making opaque and outcomes highly variable across assessing bodies, with limited explanation provided when recognition is denied.

The limited scope for appeals or review leaves many applicants with little to no recourse, forcing many to repeat training unnecessarily, often at significant cost, or abandon their professions altogether. This systemic lack of accountability entrenches underemployment and de-skilling, further hindering the ability of migrant and refugee women to operate in the Australian workforce at a level that matches their skills and experience.

> "They asked for documents from my home country by post, even though verification was available online."

> I was required to score higher English levels than native speakers entering the same profession.

> It took five years to align with my credentials, while less experienced colleagues were promoted immediately.

> By the time I finally get all the papers sorted, months have passed ...There's a time lag ... Your qualifications and your experience are being wasted along the way.

Timeframes by occupation:

- **General Practitioner:** The skills recognition and licensing process can take nine months to 2.5 years to be able to practise in Australia.[20]
- **Psychology:** Typically require between six months and two years to obtain full accreditation to practice in Australia, reflecting the time needed for AHPRA/Psychology Board of Australia assessment, supervised practice, and completion of the National Psychology Exam. [21]
- **Electrician:** To become fully licensed in Australia, it typically takes six to 18 months, largely because regulators require at least 12 months of supervised electrical work before a full licence can be issued. [22]
- **Teaching:** Usually takes between three and 12 months to become eligible to teach in Australia, including up to 10 weeks for national qualification assessment by AITSL and additional time for state teacher registration processing. [23,24]

Eleven years on hold: Anam's long road back to pharmacy

Complex and inaccessible skills recognition pathways can prevent qualified migrant pharmacists from practising for years.

When Anam migrated from Pakistan to Australia, with a Doctor of Pharmacy she earned in Peshawar, she was excited to utilise her skills and build a life for herself and her family. However, for over a decade, her passion for pharmacy and the skills she brought with her, sat idle – delayed by systemic barriers in Australia's overseas skills recognition system.

Despite holding a pharmacy degree and years of experience, Anam was unable to practice in Australia for almost 11 years. Like many professional migrant women, she was ineligible for study allowances, childcare subsidies and other supports available to citizens, making it nearly impossible to meet re-registration requirements or gain local experience. She worked in several jobs she was overqualified for – such as cleaning and administration – to make ends meet.

In July of 2024, Anam succeeded in requalifying and now works as a pharmacist in regional Australia. However, she says the process of obtaining documents from Pakistan and navigating complex recognition pathways caused immense stress and financial strain. No one told her which recognition body to approach and when she knew where to go, there was always another step to take. Her experience highlights the urgent need for a fairer, faster and more affordable overseas skills recognition system, ensuring that skilled migrants, particularly women, can work to their potential.

There are currently 2,560 overseas-trained pharmacists in Australia working below their skill level.

The gendered impact of unfair processes

> **In her words:**
> "I had no choice but to abandon my profession"

In the absence of national oversight, assessing authorities and licensing bodies operate independently, each setting their own fees, documentation standards and processing timeframes. Requirements vary widely across professions and jurisdictions and decision-making processes are often opaque. For applicants, there is little transparency about how evidence is weighed, why particular qualifications are rejected or what would satisfy the criteria on a subsequent application.

Crucially, there is no independent, external avenue of appeal for many recognition decisions. If an applicant believes an error has been made or that her experience has not been properly considered, she is often required to pay an additional fee to the same body that issued the original decision to request a review. This process is unfair and lacks due process. There is limited procedural fairness. Without independent oversight or independent review mechanisms, accountability is weakened and power remains concentrated within the assessing authority.

These structural gaps have gendered consequences. Migrant and refugee women are more likely to face financial constraints, particularly if they arrive as secondary visa holders or shoulder primary caring responsibilities. The requirement to pay repeated assessment and review fees can be prohibitive, effectively closing off the possibility of challenge. For women already navigating insecure work, part-time employment or financial dependency, the risk of investing further money with uncertain outcomes can deter them from pursuing skills recognition.

The absence of transparent review pathways also heightens emotional strain. Migrant women survey respondents described feeling powerless, dismissed or unheard when applications were rejected without clear explanation. When processes lack independent scrutiny, it becomes harder to distinguish between legitimate regulatory standards and inconsistent or overly rigid decision-making. As one respondent reflected, "I had no choice but to abandon my profession."

Without accessible, independent oversight, recognition systems risk entrenching inequality rather than safeguarding standards. Establishing clear review rights, transparent criteria and external accountability would not lower professional standards – it would strengthen trust in the system and ensure that migrant women are assessed fairly, consistently and with due process. Without gender-responsive design and implementation, skilled migrant women will continue to be disadvantaged by the skills recognition process.

Consuelo's dream deferred: The personal cost of being unrecognised

Confusing and inconsistent skills recognition processes can prevent qualified migrant teachers from returning to the classroom in Australia.

Consuelo is a qualified teacher with seven years' professional experience teaching in primary and high schools in Chile. For her, teaching was more than a job – it was her vocation and professional identity. She migrated to Australia hopeful she could continue her career in what she believed to be a more advanced and inclusive education system.

However, in Australia Consuelo encountered significant and unexpected barriers to returning to the classroom. Despite her qualifications and extensive experience, she has been unable to have her degree recognised and, as a result, cannot teach in Australia. She now works as an early childhood educator – a role well below her level of qualification and experience, which does not reflect her skills, professional standing or long-term aspirations.

Consuelo described the skills recognition process as confusing, opaque and very inconsistent. As she sought guidance, she was referred to multiple individuals and organisations claiming to offer support, yet each provided conflicting advice. One told her that despite already holding a bachelor's degree, she would need to complete an Australian diploma. Another said the subjects she studied overseas could not be recognised as equivalent to a bachelor's degree in Australia. Most alarmingly, a third organisation charged her $1,100 simply to view her academic documents, without offering any clear pathway forward.

The personal cost has been significant. Years of study and professional experience have been discounted and her career dream has stalled. Consuelo says she feels "hopeless" and "discouraged", with every attempt to move forward met by another barrier. The repeated setbacks have eroded her confidence and sense of professional worth. "I work just as hard as anyone else and I wish my efforts were acknowledged. It often feels like I have to work even harder than Australian citizens," she says.

Beyond the financial and career impacts, Consuelo speaks of the loss of identity that comes with being unable to practise the profession she trained for and loves. What she expected to be a fresh start has instead become a prolonged period of uncertainty and frustration.

There are 20,590 migrant teachers in Australia like Consuelo who could be reducing class sizes and educating the next generation if the skills recognition system was fit-for-purpose.

Survey respondents consistently described the emotional toll of prolonged uncertainty and rejection:

> "The process caused anxiety and loss of confidence."

> "The system broke my confidence – not because I lacked skills, but because I wasn't allowed to use them."

> "The process caused identity issues, anxiety and loss of confidence – the problem wasn't my skills, it was the system."

Downstream impacts of recognition roadblocks

The toll on migrant women: Confidence, agency and economic security

Behind the statistics and system failures outlined in this report are highly qualified women whose professional lives have been stalled, diverted, or dismantled by Australia's skills recognition system. Engineers, teachers, nurses, psychologists and dentists described working in roles far below their training, delaying workforce participation for years, or abandoning their professions altogether — not because of a lack of skill, but because recognition pathways were financially and administratively out of reach.

These impacts are most acutely felt by women in their prime working and caring years. In our national survey, 77 per cent of respondents were aged 31–54: a cohort with substantial professional experience, high workforce potential and often concurrent care responsibilities. Delayed or denied recognition during this life stage can have significant and lasting impacts on lifetime earnings, career progression and retirement savings.

Respondents described erosion of professional identity, declining confidence, mental health strain and increased financial dependency due to skills recognition barriers. Where women hold dependent visas, stalled careers can heighten vulnerability. Several respondents explicitly linked recognition delays and financial insecurity to increased exposure to financial and domestic abuse. Skills recognition, therefore, emerges not only as an economic issue, but as a gender equity and safety issue, with direct implications for women's autonomy, wellbeing and long-term security.

The impact on Australia: Losing migrant women's talent to other countries

> **In her words:**
> "My former colleagues went to other countries"

Another consequence of Australia's fragmented and inefficient skills recognition system is that prospective migrant women choose to build their careers elsewhere, where they can more seamlessly practice their professions in countries such as Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom. In an increasingly competitive global labour market, highly skilled professionals compare destinations based not only on wages and lifestyle, but on how quickly and affordably they can practise in their field and continue their careers.

As other countries streamline recognition pathways — making processes faster, clearer and less costly — Australia risks falling behind. Recent reforms to fast-track skills recognition in Sweden, to make skills recognition processes more efficient and fairer in Canada and to provide personalised recognition support for migrant women in Germany demonstrate how governments are actively positioning themselves to attract global talent.

By contrast, opaque, prolonged expensive processes deter applicants and create reputational risk. If skilled migrant women perceive that their qualifications will be sidelined or their careers stalled, they are more likely to choose countries with more efficient supportive systems. This represents a direct loss of human capital to competitor nations. Migrant women reflected on how their colleagues in the same professions were able to practise much more quickly in Canada, for example, over Australia. Without meaningful reform, Australia will continue to forgo highly qualified professionals to more responsive labour markets.

Recommendations for gender-responsive reform

Making overseas skills qualifications recognition faster, fairer and more affordable would enable more migrant women to fully use their skills — delivering benefits for businesses, communities, the broader economy and, of course, migrant women themselves.

Based on an analysis of reforms that have worked effectively in comparable countries such as Germany and Canada, it is recommended the Australian Government implement four practical solutions to address the gendered barriers of the skills recognition system while maintaining high professional standards. Together, these reforms would modernise Australia's skills recognition system, unlock underutilised talent and ensure that migrant and refugee women can contribute fully to the nation's workforce and productivity goals:

1. **Establish one national governance system for all skills qualifications recognition licensing bodies to continually improve the system and address gendered barriers.**

2. **Create an integrated system that better links skills recognition for migration and employment purposes and supports both primary and secondary applicants into work matching their skills.**

3. **Reduce structural barriers by providing targeted financial support for migrant women to overcome cost barriers and creating an online skills recognition portal to provide step-by-step guidance and reduce confusion.**

4. **Set up employment hubs or career gateways with skills recognition navigators to provide tailored, practical guidance to help migrant women move through the recognition process and into relevant, skilled employment.**

Recommendation 1: Establish national oversight to address gendered barriers

Currently, no single body is responsible for governing or monitoring the full skills recognition and professional licensing ecosystem.

This has led to duplication, inconsistent standards, high costs, long delays and opaque processes. This has produced uneven and often unfair outcomes, especially for migrant and refugee women. To address this, it is recommended the Australian Government establish national governance to oversee skills and qualifications recognition and ensure due process, accountability, fairness and consistency. This would include appointing an independent ombudsman or commissioner with statutory powers and resources to:

- collect, analyse and publish system-wide data on assessment timelines, costs, and sex-disaggregated recognition rates;
- monitor and report on systemic risks, inconsistencies and emerging issues, including barriers specifically facing migrant and refugee women;
- hold assessing authorities accountable for meeting government-mandated recognition standards and timeframes;
- review assessment and recognition decisions for reasonableness and fairness; and
- ensure transparency and accountability in the overall conduct and operations of skills recognition and professional licensing bodies.

The barriers in Australia's skills recognition system — excessive fees, opaque processes, inconsistent standards, and confusing information — are not confined to any one sector. They are endemic across the system, which is why a system-wide solution like this is needed. By putting in place the right governance, incentives and accountability mechanisms, we can create a system that continually improves itself and addresses current and emerging barriers facing migrant and refugee women.

Recommendation 2: Integrated support for both primary and secondary applicants

Currently, skills and qualifications assessments for migration purposes are separate from those required for employment and professional licensing.

This disconnect creates confusion, duplication and delays. Skilled migration settings also tend to concentrate information, support and recognition pathways around primary visa applicants (who are predominantly men) while secondary applicants (predominantly women) receive far less structured support. This is despite the fact the secondary applicants can be just as, or more, qualified as primary applicants. When systems are designed around a single "primary breadwinner" model, highly skilled migrant women are more likely to be overlooked, under-supported and underutilised.

A better approach would be to treat the journey from visa to employment as a single, streamlined process with greater coordination between migration assessments, licensing authorities and employers. Regardless of whether people apply as a primary or secondary visa holder, people with in-demand qualifications should be supported, valued and recognised. Importantly, support must extend equally to primary and secondary visa holders. Skilled professionals should be recognised and supported based on their qualifications and workforce need — not their visa status within a family unit. A gender-aware approach would help prevent the systematic sidelining of migrant women's skills and enable Australia to capture the full economic and social return on its skilled migration program.

While requirements for migration may differ from those for employment, these differences must be communicated clearly and upfront so that recognition pathways are clear for migrants from the outset. An integrated approach is needed that links skills recognition for migration with professional accreditation for employment, clearly communicates timelines and expectations and ensures both primary and secondary applicants are actively supported into roles that match their expertise.

Recommendation 3: Targeted financial support and guidance for migrant women

High fees and the absence of clear, accessible information disproportionately affect migrant and refugee women navigating the skills recognition system.

First, the cost of recognition can be prohibitively high, creating a structural barrier that disproportionately excludes women from regulated professions. Fees to assess overseas-acquired skills and qualifications frequently run into thousands of dollars. For example, the 2023 Kruk Review found it can cost up to $51,000 for an overseas-trained general practitioner to complete the recognition process. For many migrant women – particularly those in part-time or insecure work or those balancing unpaid care – such upfront costs are often unattainable.

Previously, the Australian Government provided an Assessment Subsidy for Overseas Trained Professionals (ASDOT), which played a critical role in supporting financially disadvantaged people with skills recognition fees. This scheme was abolished in 2015 and there is currently no national subsidy or loan scheme to help offset costs. It is recommended the government reintroduce financial assistance to ensure disadvantaged individuals are not excluded from working in their profession due to financial barriers and it is recommended this program include a specific stream for migrant women.

Second, the absence of a single, authoritative information source on skills recognition creates gendered risks and unequal outcomes. Many women navigate recognition processes alongside caring responsibilities, making clarity and timelines particularly critical. Fragmented, English-only information on skills recognition increases confusion, delays and vulnerability to exploitation – including by unqualified intermediaries charging excessive fees for unnecessary services.

To address this gap, it is recommended the Australian Government establish a national, multilingual online portal (a genuine "one-stop shop") providing clear, step-by-step guidance on whether recognition is required for a given profession, which authority is responsible, expected costs and timeframes, appeal pathways and links to employment services. Germany's multilingual "Recognition in Germany" portal demonstrates the impact of this approach: within four years of its launch, applications for foreign skills recognition more than doubled, driven by improved clarity and accessibility.

Recommendation 4: Personalised recognition advice for migrant women

There is currently no national service dedicated to helping overseas-trained workers navigate skills and qualifications recognition or connect them with jobs that match their expertise.

Existing employment services are primarily designed to address unemployment, not underemployment or skills mismatch. They rarely provide specialist support for navigating recognition processes in regulated professions. This gap disproportionately affects migrant and refugee women, who are more likely to enter part-time, casual or care-based work while attempting to navigate complex recognition systems alongside unpaid caring responsibilities.

Without targeted support, many highly qualified women remain stuck in roles well below their skill level, not because of a lack of capability, but because they lack clear pathways, professional networks and tailored guidance. This reinforces gender pay gaps, delays career progression and reduces long-term financial security.

It is recommended the Australian Government establish specialist, place-based employment hubs or "career gateways" in areas with high migrant populations to help overseas-trained professionals move into work aligned with their qualifications. These hubs should embed a strong gender-responsive approach, recognising women may require flexible appointment times, childcare-aware service delivery and support that accounts for visa dependency or career interruptions.

The hubs would include dedicated skills recognition "navigators" who would provide personalised, end-to-end guidance through assessment and licensing processes, alongside co-located wrap-around employment services. Importantly, eligibility should extend beyond the unemployed to include professionals who are underemployed or working outside their field – a cohort in which migrant women are overrepresented.

A comparable model operates successfully in Germany, where recognition advice centres function across all 16 states, including several with an exclusive focus on supporting migrant women. These centres provide tailored counselling on qualifications recognition, guidance on bridging pathways and access to mentoring and coaching. Embedding a similar gender-responsive model in Australia would help ensure skills recognition translates into real workforce participation, not prolonged underutilisation.

Complementary measures

While not directly related to overseas skills and qualifications recognition, complementary initiatives would help maximise employment outcomes for refugee and migrant women by addressing intersecting issues such as employment services design, care infrastructure, income support settings, language access and employer practices. Such complementary policy settings would help ensure that once migrant and refugee women have their qualifications recognised through a faster, fairer and more affordable system, they are then able to translate recognition into meaningful and sustained employment.

To maximise employment outcomes, the following complementary measures are recommended to the Australian Government:

- **Provide specialised, culturally responsive employment services tailored to refugee and migrant women**, consistent with the findings of the 2023 Parliamentary Inquiry *Rebuilding the Employment Services System*.
- **Ensure accessible and affordable childcare nationally, particularly in areas with high concentrations of migrant families, complemented by the extension of childcare subsidies** to all visa categories, including secondary visa holders.
- **Waive the Newly-Arrived Resident Waiting Period to access social security** (currently set at four years), which can push newly arrived families into immediate low-skill employment for financial survival, rather than allowing skilled women the time to pursue recognition pathways aligned with their qualifications.
- **Provide enhanced, profession-specific English language support**, including workplace-based language programs, so migrant women are not forced to choose between paid work and language development.
- **Incentivise employers to offer paid placements, structured internships and supervised practice opportunities for migrant women**, enabling them to gain Australian workplace experience, meet licensing requirements and build professional networks.

Together, these complementary measures would create the enabling conditions for skills recognition reform to deliver its full impact. They would help ensure that the skills of migrant and refugee women are not only formally recognised, but genuinely included in Australia's workforce.

Conclusion

Australia's skills recognition system continues to hold back migrant and refugee women through processes that are costly, opaque, fragmented and insufficiently responsive to gendered realities. Highly qualified women are excluded from work commensurate with their skills and experience – not because they lack capability, but because structural barriers embedded within the system act as gatekeepers to opportunity. This is not a skills gap; it is a recognition gap.

The intersection of expensive, complex and slow recognition processes with gendered care responsibilities, financial (in)security and work history result in a double disadvantage for migrant women. The national survey conducted by the Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance demonstrates that skills recognition is not a neutral process. When systems are designed without a gender lens, they entrench inequality rather than alleviate it.

In the context of Australia's acute and persistent skills shortages, the underutilisation of migrant women's skills represents a significant missed opportunity that can no longer be ignored. Comparable countries like Germany and Canada have shown that system-wide reform is not only achievable, but urgent to mobilise existing talent.

Unlocking migrant women's skills would strengthen workforce participation, ease shortages in critical sectors and generate significant economic and social returns. The policy pathway is clear. The evidence is compelling. What is required now is coordinated national action to build a skills recognition system that is accountable, efficient and genuinely inclusive – one that is fit for purpose and fit for the women whose expertise Australia has already invited.

In the words of one survey respondent:

> "The question is not whether migrant women are capable – it's whether the system will let us contribute."

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