Deakin Research Online

This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30000811

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright : 2005, Circa
5

Migrant Women Workers and their Families in Victoria
Two Social Surveys, 1975 and 2001

Renate Howe, Christina Cregan
and Patricia Grimshaw

Population growth and economic development in Australia have been strongly influenced by the large and diverse immigration program that followed World War Two. This chapter investigates the workplace and family experiences of immigrant women who came to Australia with little knowledge of the English language and who took up unskilled, waged work on their arrival. It examines the findings of two separate social surveys carried out in Victoria, the first conducted in 1975 and the second a quarter of a century later in 2001-2.\(^1\) We aim to compare and contrast the experience of the women in these samples, and to explore the effect of the unskilled, waged work undertaken by immigrant women on their home and family life, especially on the care of children.

In Australia, the post-war years were a time of prosperity, with unemployment around one per cent.\(^2\) Initially immigrants mainly came from Britain and Northern Europe and became secure in a world of economic growth, ‘Commonwealth preference’ and tariff protection. Government policies encouraged full-time male workforce participation and the maintenance of a family wage through a centralised industrial relations system. The dominant Australian suburban culture in the 1950s and 1960s held that mothers should stay at home as full-time carers, especially those mothers with children too young to attend school. At the end of the 1960s, however, at a time when women gained greater control over their reproduction, this context of growth provided the means by which their labour market status began to change. By the end of the
post-war years, the labour market participation rate of married women increased from a low base of three per cent in 1931 to thirty-one per cent in 1971. A significant proportion of those married women who made their way into the labour market were recent migrants. This labour market trend challenged social norms and inspired a public debate about the consequences of mothers' employment outside the home for their own well-being and that of their families.

In the 1970s, however, the years of continuing prosperity came to an end for Australia as economic 'shocks' made a heavy impact on a dependent economy. These had two major effects on the experience of migrant women as waged workers. First, the sources of immigration changed during the 1960s and 1970s. This was especially evident in Melbourne, the centre for Australia's manufacturing industry, as migrants, especially Greek, Italian and Yugoslav, settled in proximity to inner city factories. By the 1980s, South Vietnamese boat people and, with the easing of White Australia policies, migrants from other Asian and Middle Eastern countries settled in Melbourne.

In contrast to earlier immigrants, on arrival these groups had less knowledge of the English language and few contacts; professional skills often became defunct. In the quest for jobs, they were at the back of the queues. They reached a country firmly entrenched in social norms that embraced 'consumer capitalism', where family expenses, in particular in housing and private education markets, had come to rely on the wages of both parents.

Second, there were fewer labour market opportunities. From the 1960s, unemployment began to rise steadily in a country facing pressing problems. Twenty years on, the responses of government were in line with the deregulatory practices of New Zealand, Britain and the United States of America, and the structure of the Australian labour market changed accordingly. Manufacturing declined and there was a tendency towards a polarisation in the labour market, with the emergence of a highly-paid full-time sector, fuelling demand, alongside a part-time, casual and contract workforce. In this changed context, the influx of 'women returners' and recent migrants led to new consequences as they moved into the low-paid service sector and labour-intensive manufacturing (such as clothing, footwear, and food processing). There is evidence from the United Kingdom that, in a similar polarised situation, some young middle-class women, many educated to tertiary level, now fared better in the labour market than their post-war counterparts, but that many working-class women, especially those from ethnic minorities, fared worse.
In discussions of these labour market changes, the experience of migrant women with families has received little attention and we hope to provide important new evidence. We would argue that immigrant mothers working in the manufacturing industry have made an important contribution to the economic position of their families, to community building and settling in a new country, and to the development of Australia’s multicultural society.

The researchers in two surveys set out to examine the experiences of newly-arrived migrant women as they sought to survive and care for their families in this changing economic, political and social panorama. They were both concerned with manufacturing industry. The first survey took place in 1975 when migrant women continued to be recruited into the factories of the traditional labour-intensive industries that had emerged in the first industrial revolution and persist in the contemporary. The second survey took place after the 1980s and 1990s. This was the deregulatory era where Australian manufacturing was laid bare to foreign competition and factories were closed. In the clothing industry, where many immigrants were employed, the Button Plan of 1989 designed the survival of the Australian textile industry in a global world. Domestic clothing manufacturers were to specialise in strategies of quality production, rather than cost-minimisation. This policy opened the door for the proliferation of outwork – that is, people working in the home – to pursue the fashion side of the industry. Immediate responses to changing tastes would be crucial, less amenable to be carried out offshore, and production would be in batches that could be delivered to the home. The two studies, therefore, marked different stages in a period of rapid industrial and social change.

First, we consider in this chapter the findings of the 1975 survey of post-war female migrant factory workers and include some life stories of working mothers. Second, we present the preliminary findings of the second survey of 2001–2, the inquiry into the conditions of outworkers in the clothing industry at the start of the new century. Finally, we identify the work and family issues and reflect on long-running debates among feminists about responses to the exploitation of mothers’ industrial work, which began in the anti-sweating movement of the end of the nineteenth century.

Migrant women waged workers in 1975

The first study, ‘But I Wouldn’t Want my Wife to Work Here’: A Study of Migrant Women in Melbourne Industry, was undertaken by the Centre
for Urban Research and Action (CURA), located in inner-city Melbourne. CURA financed this large study by means of a grant that was awarded to recognise International Women’s Year. Trained migrant interviewers surveyed seven hundred women working in thirty-five factories. As part of the project, there were also in-depth interviews with union leaders and employers. The migrant women worked mostly in Melbourne’s inner and northern suburban clothing, footwear, electrical appliance and food producing factories. In the same year that CURA commenced the survey, a report inquiring into the Australian manufacturing industry noted that, although women comprised a quarter of the Australian manufacturing workforce, and in some sectors made up eight out of ten workers, ‘little attention is paid to their special needs, particularly of the two thirds who are married’. \(^{11}\) A later study found that one-third of Australian married women were working (most having entered the workforce since 1954) and that there was an increased participation by mothers under thirty-five years. \(^{12}\) Neither the Jackson Report nor the Richmond study looked at this workforce participation by younger married women in terms of ethnicity or the impact on families.

The CURA study was therefore significant in throwing light on this latter group, a large proportion of whom were recent migrants and the first large cohort of married women with pre-school children to enter the Australian industrial workforce. They were ill-prepared for their new situation. Most women were from Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia and had not previously worked in manufacturing industry; many had migrated for arranged marriages to men already settled in Australia. They worked because the low wages of their husbands (who often worked in the same factories) were insufficient for family survival. In response to questions about reasons for working, eighty-two per cent of the women said they worked for economic survival to supplement family income. As one woman wrote on her survey form, ‘I only work because of the money—we need it’. Ironically, although these women worked for family survival they were widely criticised for ‘choosing’ to work and neglecting their families. There was little recognition in the Australian community of the difficulties these women faced establishing families in a new country.

The migrant workers who participated in the CURA study were young women, one-third being between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four years. Of the sample, 86.2 per cent were married and most had between one and three children. With hindsight a limitation of the CURA study was its focus on the women’s working conditions and needs rather than on the impact of their work on family and community life.
However, their responses to some survey questions related to child care and reasons for working throw light on their lives as working mothers. Their reasons for working were to establish the family, buy a home and provide opportunities for their children. As one woman wrote bluntly on her survey form, she worked to ensure that her children would not need to work in these ‘shit’ factories.

In order to find out more about the impact on children and families of migrant women’s work, follow-up interviews to the CURA study have been conducted as part of a larger study of the history of working mothers. While the overall extent of social mobility measured by housing and education for this generation of migrants and their children is impressive, the interviews undertaken twenty-five years or so later suggest there were considerable emotional costs for working mothers and their families. The South American migrant Yolanda Esposito, who had worked in factories while looking after three school-age children, was proud that two of the three had completed university degrees. The eldest child had experienced severe problems in coping with the change, however: ‘the migration, very hard problems and that was a more difficult time for us, sad time’. Other women interviewed also referred to children (often the eldest child) not able to cope with cultural differences and a disrupted family life.

These stories show that migrant women worked hard, very hard; they were not used to factory work and few enjoyed their jobs. The long-term occupational impacts of hard physical work, especially hand and back problems were evident in the interviews, with many recalling terrible accidents in dilapidated small factories: ‘I found many old machinery, many of them bad accidents’. Anne Sgro, who was involved in interviews for the CURA study, observed that despite the hard work, mother/workers ‘didn’t talk about it in terms of being a huge sacrifice, but just as that struggle of having little kids, with latch keys, basically who let themselves in after school and working long, long hours and that was what they did to get ahead’. Children were also matter of fact about the experience of being latch-key children, recognising their mothers ‘were trying to supplement the family income as best they could’.

In the CURA study, twenty-five per cent of the women’s children were under five years, twenty-four per cent were aged six to ten years and twenty-two per cent were between eleven and fifteen years. Many pre-school children had inadequate care and although the preferred childcare option of mothers was for care by relatives or friends, there were few extended families in the early phase of migration. School age children were usually on their own before and after school. When Yolanda Esposito
was working night shift her children had to get their own breakfast and prepare lunches: ‘I leave the food for them and they take care of themselves correctly because I teach them how to do things, not to go onto the street, not to let people into the house’. Children often struggled with the poor quality of facilities and teaching at many of Melbourne’s inner city schools in that period as well as with language difficulties and cultural conflicts.18

Sixteen per cent of children in the CURA study were cared for by husbands as many parents worked back to back shifts, inevitably a strain on family life. Other women paid carers or neighbours. One woman worked a shift from 5 pm to 2.30 am., came home, laid out food for her family’s breakfast and lunches and then went to bed. When a neighbour on the morning shift dropped off her child to be cared for, she would take the child back to bed with her. A Yugoslavian migrant, Vera Kent, and her husband began work at a textile factory the day after their arrival in Melbourne, finding child care for their son with a needy mother.19 Such arrangements were necessary as there was little child care available in Melbourne in this period. Only one per cent of children of the mothers in the CURA survey sent their children to kindergarten and only seven per cent used childcare centres. ‘Australian’ pre-school kindergartens that emphasised child education and development and opened only for brief morning or afternoon sessions were part of another world. At this time the kindergartens made no attempt to relate either culturally or practically to the needs of Melbourne’s ethnically diverse families.

The CURA study revealed that working mothers were supportive of unions, although alienated by language and culture and unable to participate because of time constraints. However, the interviews with union leaders revealed the cultural distance between the women and a male Anglo-Saxon leadership, and also a resistance at this time by unionists to identify childcare provision as an industrial issue. Vera Kent is appreciative of the initiative of the Meat Workers’ Union which employed her as a Migrant Liaison Officer especially for Yugoslav women, but notes it was some years before Linda Rubenstein, an organiser with the union, was asked to initiate work-based child care.20

The CURA report noted that the women felt strongly about child care with many writing extra comments on their survey forms. Seventy-three per cent of women with children said that they would use child care at work if provided, as they could see their children during the day and it would be convenient in terms of travel. They also felt they would have more control over the type of care provided; one woman wanted a work-
based childcare centre to be run by people 'like myself who speak the language and understand what we want'.

The preference for factory based child care turned out to be the most controversial recommendation of the CURA report. It was widely criticised by the women's movement and childcare activists who advocated community controlled child care. Anne Sgro felt 'rigid' when she recalled the opposition in the 1970s to the work-based childcare option. She recalls that Community Child Care in Melbourne and the Office of Child Care set up by the Whitlam government were vehemently opposed to work-based child care: 'they had a mind-set, a political mind-set that work-related child care was potentially dangerous in that women would put up with bad working conditions to maintain a childcare place at the factory'. In Sgro's view they had 'an unrealistic community idea of happy neighbourhoods' — it was 'very patronising stuff'. Through the International Federation of Italian Immigrant Workers and Their Families (FILEF) which cooperated with the CURA study, a women's group was formed which successfully established a childcare centre at the Commonwealth Clothing Factory.21

The participation of mothers in the paid workforce challenged patriarchal family decision-making. Back-to-back shifts resulted in changed gender roles between husband and wife with consequent relationship tensions. The CURA report noted tensions between parents over these changed roles, given the traditional strength of patriarchal families in immigrant cultures, and found that most women handed over their pay packets to their husbands. Vera Kent recalls the reluctance of married women to challenge cultural gender traditions as the most frustrating aspect of her work with migrant workers, especially the tradition of handing over pay packets to husbands.22 With hindsight, Yolanda Esposito reflected that women were aware of the significance of International Women's Year and that 'changed many, many unfair situations with the woman here, especially with the work ... also in the family between husband and wife'. While both parents working encouraged interdependent families it also created tensions. School age children were often responsible for housework and cooking and were important as the translators and communicators between the family and the outside world, but parents often felt humiliated in their reliance on children's superior English language skills while the children resented their domestic workload.23

There was a positive public response to the CURA study and concern at the working conditions it exposed. The report was given extensive newspaper coverage in Melbourne and a national ABC television documentary was made. There were demands for regulation of working
conditions through state legislation and a concern among unions to be more aware of the changed nature of the workforce they represented.

These protected and under-capitalised industries in which migrant women worked were the first to go as the Australian economy felt the cold winds of globalisation. In undertaking the follow up interviews it was clear that hardly any of the factories have survived and that most of the work done by women in the CURA study is now done in the home or 'off shore' in Asian countries.

Migrant women workers in 2000–2001

A quarter of a century after the 1975 CURA survey, a study of a group of immigrant women workers, mainly from Vietnam, produced some remarkably similar findings to the 1975 CURA study and also to an earlier study on outworkers in the clothing industry.24

Over the summer of 2000–2001, 119 female outworkers from Melbourne and regional towns in Victoria were interviewed. They were contacted through the free English classes offered by the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA). Of the total number of women interviewed, 114 were Vietnamese boat people, all of whom had fled from circumstances of political repression. The interviews took place in Vietnamese in the workers’ own homes, without the presence of another adult. They were conducted by a team of Vietnamese outworkers, who had been intensively trained in interview techniques.

The ages of the workers ranged from seventeen to sixty-four years, with an average of thirty-nine. The age group with the largest number of workers was fifty. Many were from comfortable, middle-class homes in the former South Vietnam. The majority had completed secondary education and nearly a sixth were graduates. All of them came to Australia from 1979 onwards, some arriving each year, the last in 1999. These were the survivors from groups of refugees who had left their home country in the middle of the night in small boats. Some journeys to Australia had been filled with horror, with events of piracy, rape and murder. Many of the women had spent some time in the transit refugee camps of South East Asia. Even though several of them had held much higher status jobs in Vietnam, such as teaching, they were delighted to live in Australia: ‘Here I have freedom . . . and I am not afraid of the government’.

They had become outworkers because they could not find any other jobs in Australia mainly because they did not speak English. Only about ten per cent said they were fluent, while around a half said they were poor.
They had found the work mainly through fellow Vietnamese immigrants (seventy per cent). A typical explanation was:

> When I arrived in Australia, I stayed with some relatives. They lent me enough money for a sewing machine. That cost about $3,000. It took me over a year to pay that back. You’re caught, you see [snaps hands together]. Just like that. You’ve invested so much, you have to stay in the trade to make it worthwhile. It’s a trap. Then for some work you need specialist machines, so you may buy one or two more. That gives you a better chance of getting regular work. But that means more debt.

The average woman in this sample had spent seven and a half years in outwork, though a few had done this work for more than fifteen years. This was their living, although only about a tenth said they wanted to be an outworker all their lives.

Most of the women (seventy per cent) were married and all to someone of the same ethnic background. The majority did outwork together with their husband. Ten of the women were solo-parents. Over sixty per cent of the sample had children and most of these were pre-schoolers or children who were still attending school. In only twelve cases did the household have any other money than that provided by the immediate family. These were low-income families. With one exception, household income ranged from $140 per week to $900. The largest number of families (seventeen) was in the $500 a week group. Unsurprisingly, almost all the outworkers said the family could not manage without their wages. Most of the women wanted to do work for pay outside the home but they could not find jobs. Lack of child care did not feature as an important response. There was, however, a distinct minority (twenty per cent), who wanted to look after their children mainly unencumbered by paid work.

The payment system for the outwork was piece-rate: they were paid for what they produced, usually with a time limit. When they were asked about earnings for the garment they were currently sewing, the figure ranged from twenty cents to $5.35, with one outlier of $9.50. The largest group of women (fifteen) was paid fifty cents. The garments took between three and ninety minutes to sew. The average rate of pay for this sample was $3.60 per hour. The highest rate was $10, while several women earned less than a dollar. Their weekly earnings were irregular, but overall they earned between $60 and $500 per week, the largest group (twenty-three) earning $300. In almost all cases, the wages were used only for essential
expenses. The majority of the women were not offered regular work, and their wages were not paid on time; they received no paid holidays or sick pay. Nearly half had experience of unpaid wages. One woman commented: ‘If you want to be an outworker you can find a job easily. But that doesn’t mean you’ll get paid (laughs)’. They relied on their wages. They really wanted to work in secure jobs, to be respectable members of the community. When asked what they would do if they lost their job, a typical reply was: ‘I would have to go on the dole. I don’t like that way. The people in the social office look at me like prison officers’. Several of the sample had experience of time in re-education camps, so this was not a trite comment.

Outwork consumed their lives. They worked at weekends and in school holidays. The hours a day spent on sewing ranged between three and nineteen. The largest group (twenty-five) worked twelve hours; the second largest (twenty-two) were in the fourteen and fifteen hour bands. Over sixty per cent spent seven days per week sewing, with a further quarter of the sample working six days. The sewing machines were mainly kept in the garage or the bedroom so their domestic routines were easily fitted in around their work. A typical day-in-the-life was:

I work at night and during the day. I work about fourteen to nineteen hours a day. Each day I wake up at 5 am, do exercise and have a shower till 6 am. Then I sew till 12 pm and then I have lunch. And then I continue sewing until about 5 pm. And then I cook and eat dinner until about 6.30 pm and then I sew until 11 pm.

They suffered physical and emotional consequences. A characteristic comment was: ‘Sometimes I get back pain and also sore dry eyes and my leg is like dying and my finger feels as if it doesn’t belong to me anymore, too painful’. Several of the women reported depression and ‘bad days’. One remarked: ‘If I had to describe my work life it would be an endless struggle to make ends meet’. They were very isolated: ‘I know what the weather is like because I always watch it on TV everyday, I watch the world outside from the window all the time’.

In about seventy per cent of households, other family members helped them out with their work and the women felt a burden of guilt. One of them explained:

Working at home has affected my children. When they get home from school, they do homework, eat dinner then help my husband
and I for two hours each day. On the weekends they help me sew all day. I feel sorry for my children because they can't go out and be with their friends.

A child commented:

After I come home from school my parents give me time to do my homework. After I finish my homework I help my parents from four hours to six hours of work, I basically do some of the sewing and help my parents pack up.

Other children reported: 'There was one time when I sewed my fingers together. It really scared me from coming back to work'; ‘I've had an experience when the side of my arm was sewn and got caught in the sewing machine and I had to have specialists come to get me out'.

The work was irregular and the rush jobs were accommodated by the adaptability of family routines. When work was available, everything had to be put aside to get it done on time: ‘When there is a rush job my husband and my two children stay up all night to do the work. At times my husband and I have stayed up for two nights. We are afraid that if we don’t complete the work we will have to pay for the clothes’. The children articulated the same story:

When there’s a rush job, I spend more time helping my parents and sometimes . . . I stay up really late to help them finish. Sometimes until one or two in the morning. At other times I go on all night. I can’t go out with my friends.

I’m the eldest sister in the family and so it is my responsibility to take over the position as a mum when my mother is not present.

Although only a few women claimed to like the work, most of the sample had no ambitions for themselves. One woman remarked that: ‘In a perfect world I would become a nurse’. But they just accepted their lot. A typical attitude underlies the following statement: ‘In Vietnam I was a teacher. Now I just hope that I have regular work so my family will be happy and healthy’. Although most preferred employment in a factory, they accepted that such work was no longer available, and so they just wanted regular outwork, ranging from twenty to fifty-two hours a week. Two groups
emerged again. One was prepared to work very long hours. The other wanted part-time work to fit around family duties.

Their ambitions were confined to their children: ‘I have accepted that my own life is dead and with no future. My only hope is for my children to be happy and successful’. The children were well aware of the sacrifice. These are typical responses: ‘I’ve heard my parents being threatened’; ‘my only fear is that I can’t make it into higher education’; ‘I see myself graduating from some really awesome course in Uni and when I go out to work I will earn lots of money and my parents will never have to work again’.

The responses to this survey were also very mixed. In November 2000, the report to the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union in Melbourne was followed by a general press release. It featured in a Channel Nine special programme and was reported widely in the national press. The *Australian* and the *Herald Sun* newspapers published highly critical (and uninformed) opinion columns from a right-wing group, the Institute of Public Affairs. In December 2001, there was a short documentary on the Channel Seven *Today-Tonight* programme and, in January 2002, the researcher was invited to the State Department of Workplace Relations and Small Businesses to give advice on possible legislation. She also presented her findings to the Family and Community Development Committee — a Joint Investigatory Committee of the Victorian Parliament — and to the Productivity Commission. The report was a small part of a long, collective campaign that had been conducted for many years. Legislation was passed in November 2003 that recognised outworkers as employees, not private contractors, and therefore protected by industrial legislation.

Conclusions

The findings from these surveys can be usefully compared, contrasted and placed within a broader historical framework. In both studies, migrant women with few language skills found work in the lowest echelons of the labour market with little support available for their family responsibilities. In 1975, the work available was largely labour-intensive factory work. By 2000, such work was less available and textile outworking was the alternative. Many of the women in the 2000 survey would have preferred factory work. In both surveys, the women's wages were low but were essential to family life. They had no choice about whether to work or what kind of occupation to take, no time to gain training or education.
Most of these mothers considered themselves to be the primary carer in the household, and freedom to enter the workforce meant ‘freedom’ to take on an extra job. In general, the aspirations they held related to their children, not to themselves. Their coping mechanisms for a lifetime of hard, alienating low-paid work lay in their identification as ‘mothers’ and in the follow-up interviews there was pride in the achievements of their children and grandchildren.

This underlines the extent to which in terms of wages and conditions, the women in the 1975 study were better off than those in the 2000 sample. The 1975 factory workers were employees and they and their husbands were protected by the centralised industrial relations system. They had access to work outside the home. At the time of the second survey in 2000, outworkers lay outside the terms of labour legislation. Their wages were lower than contemporary factory workers. They were not protected by the law when they were cheated. Indeed, the hopes of many of them were to gain work in a factory, which they considered to be a much better job. Their labour was ‘sweated’ because their wages were so low; the only way to reach the minimum financial norms of society was to work long hours. These hours were so long, they are often greeted with incredulity. This proved to be a barrier to changing the law.

The labour market of the twenty-first century allows women the ‘flexibility’ to work round the clock for very low wages, in their own home, at their own expense, while juggling waged work and domestic duties. It would appear that little has changed for homeworkers since the 1890s anti-sweating campaigns, and that protected factory work advocated in that period did have some advantages for working women if it were available. However, while post-war educational and career opportunities may have benefited some middle-class women, the lot of the most vulnerable women in the labour market remains, at best, unchanged.

With regard to family life, it is difficult to come to firm conclusions. Both groups of women had a strong commitment to work and to family. They juggled their lives between these different priorities. They needed to work long hours to provide for their families, yet some were distressed that they could not fulfil the demands of full-time motherhood. In general, as newly arrived migrants, each group viewed childcare arrangements within the perspective of their own particular culture. The 1975 factory workers wanted factory-based care. This viewpoint was mirrored in the 2000 study. Unlike factory workers, outworkers had no space of their own: there were no boundaries between waged work life and domestic life. But a sizeable group preferred to do waged work in the home because
they could be with their children. Few of the outworkers had considered problems of child care, if they gained jobs outside the home. The general view expressed was that the children would be looked after within the Vietnamese community, presumably by grandparents and siblings. It is not possible to compare the guilt felt by women who work away from home, compared with that of women who work in the home but have little time to spare for children and enlist them in their tasks. The issue of child care remains unresolved in a society where personal, legal and social norms continue to hold women to be the primary carer for children.\textsuperscript{26}

Thus, over thirty years on, mothers in the manufacturing industry are confronted by the same issues. Exploitation in the workforce of recently arrived migrant women continues despite improved health and welfare systems, occupational health and industrial legislation including equal pay legislation. While such legislation has had an impact on conditions of factory work, implementation has been less effective in small factories and for outworkers. As we have noted, the recent recognition of home workers as industrial workers rather than private contractors in Victorian legislation is a major breakthrough, but Annie Delaney, a former organiser for the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union, has observed that the legislation’s effectiveness will depend on implementation.\textsuperscript{27}

The fundamental issue of the impact on families, including the need for appropriate child care, is still unresolved and is a major focus of other chapters in this book. Anne Sgro pointed to the irony that many of the migrant women who participated in the CURA study are now baby-sitting their grandchildren because of limited availability and affordability of child care for working daughters and daughters-in-law.\textsuperscript{28} Annie Delaney observed that where children were involved in outwork ‘there was a big impact on their childhood experience and also on the family’.\textsuperscript{29} The follow up interviews suggest that this could also be the case, especially for older children in the family, for some of those involved in the CURA study.

These two studies underline the complex response of the women’s movement to exploited women’s labour dating back to the anti-sweating movement of the 1890s. While the CURA report recommendation on factory-based child care provoked division among women’s groups and policy makers, there has been no public response from major women’s organisations to the report on Vietnamese women’s home work, not even around the issue of child labour. Race, ethnicity and class divide migrant working women from mainstream women’s organisations who believe that waged work emancipates married women from economic dependence on their husbands and social isolation in the home. Among
trade union women, outworkers are regarded with suspicion as potentially undermining working conditions: 'they’re the outsiders, the enemy' (Annie Delaney) sacrificing their families to earn extra money.

Research into migrant working women is very time consuming, requiring access to both home and workplace and the use of interpreters who have similar socio-cultural backgrounds. However, we would argue that studies that examine mothers as workers, confronting the pressures on migrant working women and their families, are of crucial importance in today’s diverse and globally mobile workforce. These studies are an opportunity for migrant women and their families to have a voice, albeit a filtered voice, in policy debates on working mothers, the role of the family unit in relation to the labour market, and the specific issues that work/life balance means for working-class women.

Notes

We wish to thank our colleague Ellen Warne for her assistance with this chapter, and acknowledge Ellen’s and Shurlee Swain’s involvement in the wider, ARC funded project on which the earlier part is based. We thank our interviewees, including Annie Delaney, Yolanda Esposito, Anne Sgro and Vera Kent, and the many other anonymous women, for generously giving time to help our understanding of the issues.


2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat. No. 6203.

3 Katie Richmond, Women in the Workforce (Melbourne: La Trobe University Sociology Papers No 2, 1973).

4 Richmond, Women in the Workforce.

5 Unemployment rose steadily from the 1960s from about 1 per cent to about 8 per cent in the mid-1990s (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat. No. 6203).


9 These industries were particularly vulnerable to foreign competition from the low-
Migrant Women Workers

wage South East Asian countries if employers could move production off-shore. During the 1970s, deregulatory policies that facilitated such moves were only partial. Job loss had followed these first attempts so there was some replacement of tariff walls in the mid seventies. B. Ellem, ‘Outwork and Unionism in the Australian Clothing Industry’, in *The Other Side of Flexibility: Unions and Marginal Workers in Australia*, eds M. Bray and V. Taylor (Sydney: ACIRRT Monograph, No. 3, 1991), 93–113.


12 Richmond, ‘Women in the Workforce’.


14 Interview by R. Howe and E. Warne with Yolanda Esposito, Melbourne, June 2003.

15 Interview by R. Howe and E. Warne with Yolanda Esposito, Melbourne, June 2003.

16 Interview by R. Howe, P. Grimshaw and E. Warne with Anne Sgro, 29 February 2003.


19 Interview by R. Howe and E. Warne with Yolanda Esposito, Melbourne, June 2003; and interview by R. Howe and E. Warne with Vera Kent, Melbourne, March 2004.

20 Interview by R. Howe and E. Warne with Vera Kent, Melbourne, March 2004.

21 Interview by P. Grimshaw, R. Howe and E. Warne with Anne Sgro, 29 February 2003. The childcare centre is now named after Anne Sgro.


25 A university department helped Christina Cregan draw up letters in response, and encouraged the editors to publish them.


28 Interview by P. Grimshaw, R. Howe and E. Warne with Anne Sgro, 29 February 2003.

29 Interview by R. Howe and P. Grimshaw with Annie Delaney, Melbourne, October 2002.