

SOUTH EAST
COMMUNITY
LINKS

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC INCLUSION
MENTORING PROGRAM
REPORT
2022



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

South East Community Links acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands that we work on. We pay our respects to the Woi Wurrung and the Boon Wurrung language groups of the Kulin Nations. We pay respect to their cultures, their elders past, present and emerging, and to all other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We would like to thank the brave women who sought support to achieve their goals and the dedicated volunteers who stepped in to mentor participants.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Women's Economic Inclusion mentoring program was developed and delivered as part of the Victorian Government's Strategic Engagement Coordinator (SEC) program. The WEI program was designed to respond to economic challenges faced by Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women in Melbourne's south eastern metropolitan region.

Through community engagement and a co-design process, the program aimed to empower CALD women, promote diversity and enhance economic outcomes. The program involved conversations with CALD communities, identifying the persistent challenges of financial security and independence. The co-design approach involved women from diverse communities, resulting in the launch of the WEI Mentoring program with 40 volunteer mentors providing personalised support, strengths based coaching and life skills guidance.

The program addressed multiple barriers CALD women face, including language barriers, limited recognition of skills and qualifications, lack of local work experience, and nuanced cultural complexities. It aimed to increase confidence, skills, and knowledge by connecting mentees with training and education opportunities, employment connections, and improving English communication and job-seeking skills. The program emphasised building strong relationships, fostering inclusivity, and promoting social and economic participation.

The impact of the program was significant, with mentees reporting increased connections to opportunities, improved skills, and knowledge. Individualised mentoring helped mentees develop self-esteem and create personalised plans for their education and employment goals. Mentors also benefitted from the program, gaining awareness of barriers faced by culturally diverse individuals and building friendships. The co-design approach and community-led services effectively addressed the specific needs of marginalised CALD women, highlighting the demand for tailored mentoring and culturally responsive services.

Overall, the Women's Economic Inclusion mentoring program successfully empowered CALD women, fostered inclusivity, and enhanced economic outcomes. It created a supportive environment where women felt connected, valued, and motivated to achieve their goals in education and employment. The program's success demonstrated the importance of community co-design engagement and individualised strengths-based coaching to overcome the systemic and structural barriers that limit CALD women and communities from becoming more socially and economically independent.





BACKGROUND

South East Community Links (SECL) was established in 1970 with the vision that every person counts and every system is fair. We work alongside multicultural communities to offer real and meaningful solutions that are trusted, place-based, and people-centred.

For over 50 years, SECL has provided a range of services to the communities in the South-East Melbourne region.

SECL is guided by the core values of equity, inclusion, compassion, dignity, diversity, and choice.

We value and embrace the skills, perspectives, and experiences that culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities bring to our organisation and wider society.

Alongside communities, we also work with government agencies, and partner organisations to provide sustainable services that are culturally responsive, coordinated and effective in meeting the needs of clients. SECL always puts the community at the heart of our work and is dedicated to finding and closing the gaps that affect our communities.

SECL has a team of experienced staff who are dedicated to delivering high-quality services to the communities they serve alongside students and volunteers. We are committed to building strong and inclusive communities that are resilient and able to respond to the changing needs of clients and the community.

Spanning across multiple locations, our services include:

- emergency relief
- case work
- community programs and support
- youth and family services
- homelessness and housing support
- financial counselling
- employment support
- family violence prevention
- settlement services.

These services have continued to promote the social, economic, and cultural well-being of individuals, families, and communities, whilst fostering social cohesion and inclusion.

Our Vision: Every person counts, every system fair

Our Mission: Achieving better social and economic outcomes for people in our community

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2018, the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet funded 11 organisations across Victoria to deliver the Strategic Engagement Coordinator (SEC) program. In each organisation, a SEC was employed with the aim to strengthen settlement outcomes by using a community engagement approach to be more inclusive of CALD communities.

South East Community Links delivered the Women's Economic Inclusion (WEI) mentoring program in the south eastern Metropolitan region of Melbourne and worked with a diverse group of migrant and refugee communities to respond to the unique economic challenges of CALD women.

To imbed a community engagement approach, the SEC conducted a consultation with communities and various service providers to gain insight into the needs and experiences of the community. The consultation identified that the economic empowerment of CALD women, particularly the ability to be financially secure and independent was a constant challenge.

The SEC engaged in a co-design approach to include service users in the program development through knowledge development, idea generation and concept development (Sanders & Stappers, 2008) to enhance the program and address the specific needs of the community. The co-design team was made up of women from African, Afghan and Burmese communities who all felt that having a one-on-one mentor and someone to support women navigate employment and education pathways would positively contribute to improved economic outcomes for culturally diverse women.

This method resulted in the launch of the WEI Mentoring program and the recruitment of 40 established community members to become volunteer mentors. All of the mentors underwent an induction which equipped them with the knowledge and skills to assist their mentees to engage with education and employment opportunities.

Many of these mentors were able to provide individual, cultural and settlement support through their lived experiences. Whilst having the ability to increase the skills, qualifications and the employability of their mentees by connecting them with training opportunities. This empowered mentees with the knowledge to make decisions and achieve their education and employment goals which achieved greater economic inclusion of our culturally diverse community.



SERVICE GAPS

Economic inclusion is one of the key drivers to social mobility, improving life satisfaction and financial independence.

Co-design group members identified and articulated multiple barriers that women from migrant and refugee backgrounds face when trying to participate in the employment market. These barriers include:

- Language barriers
- Limited recognition of pre-existing skills or qualifications
- Limited opportunities to gain local work experience
- Limited understanding of Australian workplace culture
- Limited opportunities to gain a driver's license
- Family and caring responsibilities
- Lower educational attainment prior to arriving in Australia
- Mental and physical health issues including experience of trauma
- Traditional cultural expectations of women as domestic caregivers
- Limited understanding of employment and education pathways.

> Why did we create this program?

According to Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2017), CALD women have a significantly lower rate of workforce participation compared to CALD men with 47.3% of women and 69.5% of men in the workforce (figure 1).

The percentage of people from CALD background participant workforce

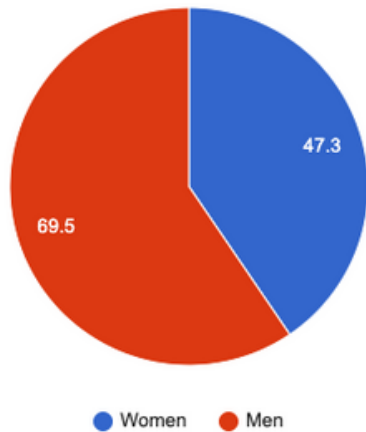


Figure 1 CALD workforce participation

Within the City of Greater Dandenong, employment rates for women born overseas are considerably lower than men from the same country of birth. For example, according to Workplace Gender Equality (2017), 52% of women from Afghanistan are unemployed, compared with 28.2% of men from Afghanistan (figure 2). Therefore, the program aimed to reduce this gap by providing mentors to support women navigate employment and education pathways.

The percentage of unemployment for people from Afghanistan

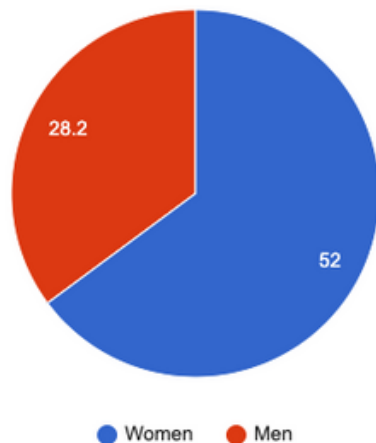


Figure 2 workforce participation: Afghan immigrants



According to Human Resources of the University of California (Davis, 2019), mentoring is mutually beneficial. It provides mentees with the chance to learn from an experienced worker who has attained the level of expertise they strive for, whilst allowing mentors to diversify their professional knowledge and skill sets. In addition to fostering an open, varied, and creative environment, the organisation can further develop and share the abundance of talent, skill, and knowledge of its employees through program coordination.

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"From this experience, I have gained exposure in working with diverse populations which has really assisted me to develop a culturally safe working mentality. I have also developed my leadership skills and ability to work independently. Most importantly, this experience has assisted me to make a positive impact in someone's life, which makes me feel happy."

- SECL WEI Mentor

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PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

The Women's Economic Inclusion mentoring program aimed to empower women from CALD backgrounds by increasing their confidence, skills, and knowledge while promoting diversity and inclusion. The program worked on building strong relationships and enhancing social and economic participation. This created a more inclusive culture where everyone felt valued and supported.

The five main program goals are to:

1. Enable mentees to connect with training and education opportunities
2. Empower mentees to connect with employment opportunities
3. Improve mentees English communication skills
4. Improve job-seeking skills such as resume and cover letter writing, interview skills, job search skills and job application processes
5. Ensure a holistic approach to addressing mentees' needs.

Mentees develop their self-esteem, skills and knowledge of employment and education. They create an individualised plan for achieving their study and work goals while getting relative and direct experiences in their career choices. The WEI mentoring program helps clients feel more connected to their work and community. Mentees who feel supported and valued by their mentors are more likely to be motivated to stay on target and work hard to attain their future goals. Not only that, but also build connections with employers and recruitment agencies in identified areas of work for a long-term and stable work life.



This program was designed to be mutually beneficial for both mentees and mentors. The program provides an opportunity for mentors to learn about other cultures, reduce any negative stereotypes they may hold and give back to the community. Benefits to mentors include:

1. Develop greater awareness of the multiple barriers and challenges faced by newly arrived migrants and refugees
2. Build friendships with mentees they may otherwise not have a chance to interact with
3. Gain fulfillment in providing support to individuals who can benefit from their skills, knowledge and experience
4. Learn about community services and organisations that play a key role in maintaining a healthy society.



"It helped me gain confidence to talk to people now, whereas I used to be so scared to see and talk to people."

-SECL WEI Mentee



PROCESS MAP

Community engagement



The engagement of community members was critical to understand the needs and interests of participants in order to provide them with holistic support. The community were engaged by utilising SECLs existing relationships with community associations, clients, and external networks.



Capacity and skill building

The need to prepare and support CALD women when entering into employment or education was key to ensuring a successful outcome. The mentees were supported by their mentors to build their confidence around applying for work or study; develop their understanding of Australian workplace culture; feel empowered to draw upon their existing skills and support to navigate the Australian employment and education systems.



Service Partnerships



Building partnerships with local service providers was an important step to understanding the service system and how CALD women could be supported by other agencies. SECL partnered with learn locals, registered training organisations, jobs and skills centres and local libraries to ensure local resources were being accessed by participants and support for them was maximised.

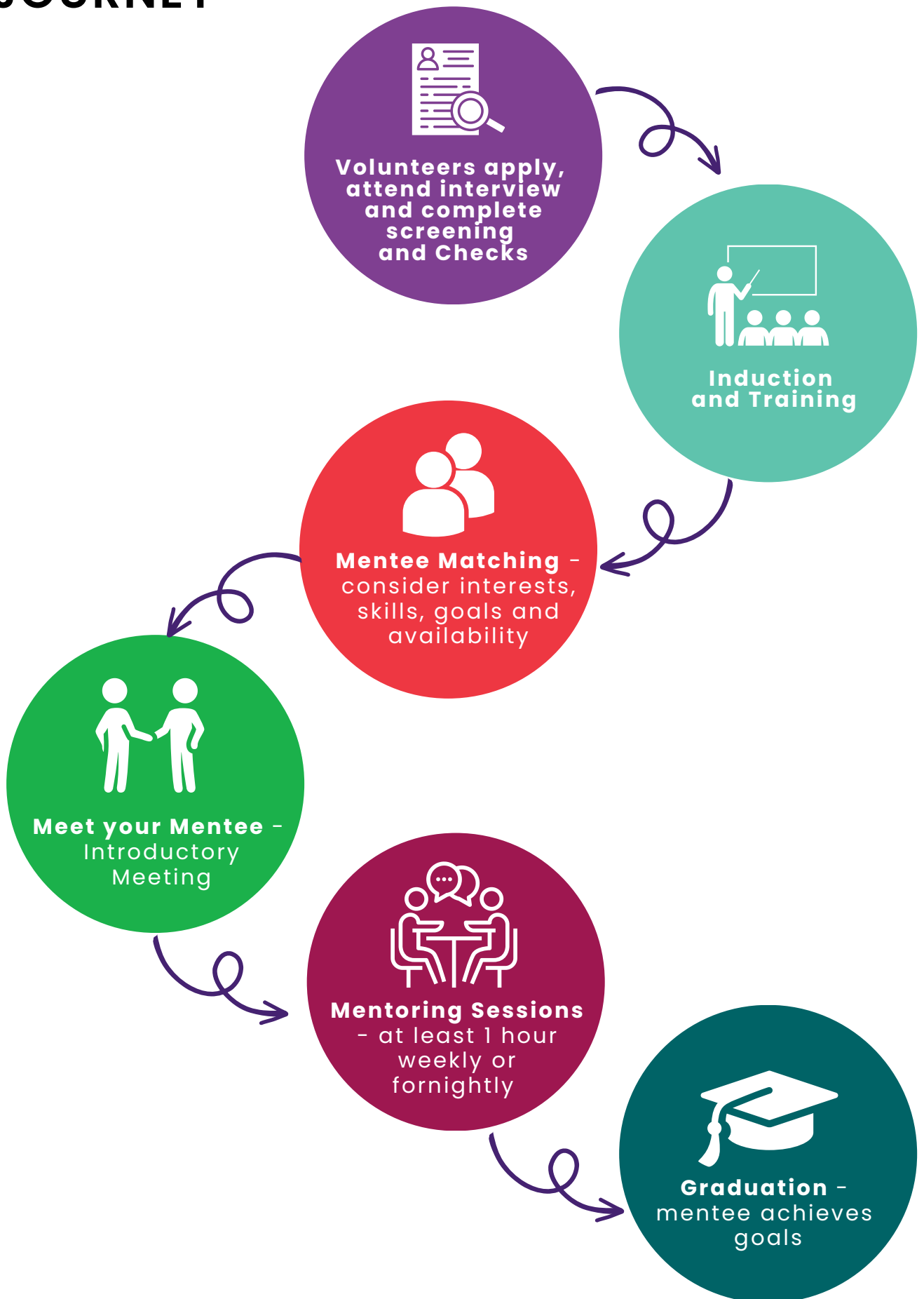


Employment and Education Outcomes

The program was successful through engaging each participant with tailored employment or education opportunities and support. While the pandemic had significant negative impact on the economy and business, our strong partnerships with businesses, services and community enabled the success of the program even during the most challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic.



THE MENTORING JOURNEY



WOMEN'S ECONOMIC INCLUSION OUTCOMES

JULY 2021/22



30



Women engaged
6+months mentoring
support



63%

Of mentees achieved
3 or more of their
objectives



540+
HOURS
INVESTED

EMPLOYMENT



50%

Of mentees obtained employment

Types of jobs gained



Healthcare
Worker



Sales
Assistant



Teachers
Aid



Amazon
Packer



Tax Collection
Officer

80% **Increased job
readiness skills**

Including: resume writing, interview skills,
cover letter writing, job searching and
gaining knowledge of the application
process.



*"This program had been very helpful for
me. I had some issues regarding job
search, my resume and finding jobs. With
the help of my mentor I was able to
understand problem solving, making
resume, and updating it and how to
search for jobs."*

-SECL WEI Mentee





"The Women's Mentoring program has helped me improve my confidence with English and looking for work. My mentor has always listened and supported me with my concerns and worries. I am so happy that I have joined this program."
-SECL WEI Mentee



TRAINING AND EDUCATION

This program connected women with external education and training to gain qualifications and confidence.

50%

Of mentees were involved in training and education opportunities.

Mentees gained certificates in:

- hairdressing
- food handling
- technology development
- bicultural admin
- english communication



ENGLISH AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

67%

Of mentees improved their english according to their mentors

50%

Of mentees recieved further support through referrals to other services.



It has been wonderful to meet a woman from a different cultural background to my own and work towards achieving her vocational goals. I am also enjoying learning more about educational and employment services available to unemployed migrant women and giving support in a very practical way in the job search process."

-SECL WEI Mentor



SERVICES INCLUDED:

- English classes
- Youth services
- Community wellbeing
- Financial counselling
- Southern Migrant Refugee Centre
- Driving lessons,
- Computer classes
- Local library
- Wellsprings for women
- Legal aid
- Family violence support



FINDINGS

Based on our evaluation, we found that:

- 50% of mentees felt strongly connected to training and education opportunities
- 67% of mentees felt connected to employment opportunities
- 67% of mentees reported improvements in their English communication skills
- 80% of mentees reported improvements in their job-seeking skills, including resume writing, cover letter writing, interview skills, job search strategies, and the application process
- 50% of mentees reported that they also felt connected to other support services that could benefit them

LEARNINGS

- A co-design approach was effective in developing a community-led service targeting the specific needs of marginalized CALD women. It helped to build a strong partnership between the service and its users which established a deeper level of trust.
- There is a significant lack of support and resources available for CALD individuals particularly those on bridging visas.
- Current employment support services hold unrealistic expectations of CALD jobseekers and is not inclusive of CALD members needs.
- It is important to engage the community and build relationships to provide culturally responsive services.
- There is a high demand for individualised mentoring which provides tailored support and mentors who have a deeper understanding of the disadvantages and barriers faced by CALD women and communities.
- Culturally appropriate mentoring programs are effective in strengthening social and economic outcomes for CALD women.

According to the feedback shared by mentors, there were numerous benefits of the WEI mentoring program they found positive; including:

- Networking opportunities with other mentors, volunteers and practitioners
- Group mentoring sessions
- Training and development opportunities
- Sharing experiences and learning from others
- Meeting other like-minded people

Overall, the evaluation indicates that participants were most enthusiastic about the opportunity to share their experiences with others.



MARIE'S MENTORING PATHWAY TO EMPLOYMENT



* Not her real name or photo

OVERVIEW

Marie* came to Australia in 2017 from Liberia and despite being a business owner in her home country, she has been unable to secure employment in Melbourne. Marie's visa status also meant she could not access government payments or support through a job service provider. Marie was referred to participate in a focus group session as part of the co-design process of developing SECL's Women's Mentoring program. During this time, Marie discovered this would be a great opportunity for herself so signed up as a mentee. Marie was motivated to find employment so she could become more independent and not have to rely on other family members for financial support. She expressed feeling embarrassed because she had to rely on her children and she wanted to be able to provide for her grandchildren and support family overseas.

CLIENT SITUATION

Marie had already taken initial steps towards her goal of getting a job, including undertaking a course in disability support, however, she still wasn't getting the job interviews. Marie was also navigating the complexities of getting her NDIS worker screening check completed. She was becoming disillusioned and started to experience self doubt. SECL promptly matched Marie with a mentor who had a number of years of experience in the aged care industry and also shared a lived experience of migration to Australia.

OUTCOMES



Employment and Financial stability

Our mentor developed an employment goal plan with Marie and began meeting with her regularly to support her to develop a strong resume, tailored cover letter examples and coached her with interview technique and skills. Marie applied for several jobs during the mentoring program and with the support of the mentor, she was successful in securing part-time work as a Disability Support Worker at two different organisations. This employment provided Marie with enough income to support herself and her family in Liberia.



Advocacy and Support

In addition to the employment support, SECL advocated to the NDIS provider for Marie's worker check to be prioritised as she had been waiting for several months. This led to Marie receiving the check in time to start her new job. SECL also helped her complete an application for the Extreme Hardship Grant while she was unemployed to ease some of the financial stress. Marie was successful in receiving the one off payment to assist with living costs during the pandemic.



Increased Independence and Confidence

Over 19 weeks and 38 hours of regular meetings with her mentor, Marie felt more confident about herself and her skills. She was supported to improve her digital literacy which expanded her knowledge of the diverse range of on-line supports and training available. She no longer had to rely upon her son financially and with employment secured, she could focus on her other personal goals.

Challenges

- Unsuccessful job applications
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of motivation
- Financial insecurity
- Limited digital literacy

Outcomes

- Successfully employed
- Increased confidence
- Financially stable
- Increased digital literacy
- Enhanced wellbeing and inclusion



"Thanks so much to your team for your efforts and patience. Today I am now more self-confident. I hope this program continues for others to benefit like me."

Marie, SECL Mentee



INTERNSHIPS

A WAY FORWARD FOR FATIMA



* Not her real name or photo

Challenges

- Lack of direct experience in her area of studies
- Lack of mentoring opportunities that would allow her to get experience in the community/health sector
- Limited connections and networks

Outcomes

- Sector experience through SECL's internship program
- Increased confidence, self esteem, skills and knowledge that enabled Fatima to start her career in the community/ health sector
- Direct workplace experience
- Enhanced social and economic participation
- Volunteer opportunity at SECL that helped secure her new role with Good Shepherd



"Maybe I would still be working at Baby Bunting if it wasn't for the internship."

Fatima, SECL Intern

OVERVIEW

South East Community Links has proudly developed a paid internship program to provide women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds an opportunity to gain that initial workplace experience which is often required to find employment in Australia. Research highlights the low rates of CALD women engaging in employment and education within the Greater Dandenong region. Statistics show that only 55% of females aged 20-64 years are in paid employment compared to 75% of males in Greater Dandenong (ABS 2016). Our consultations with CALD women supported the broader research and provided stories of the barriers to employment they face which included a lack of local experience, little to no social capital and a lack of employment references.

Through SECL's internship program we have employed 6 women who had a history of no paid employment in Australia. Nearing their internship closure, SECL supported them with job search skills, resume feedback and references which resulted in five of the six interns successfully obtaining paid ongoing employment. To illustrate the impact of this internship we will share the journey of Fatima, one of our 2020 interns.

INTERN CIRCUMSTANCES

Fatima* had completed a degree in health promotion in late 2018, however found it difficult to secure employment in the sector. She had applied for over 20 jobs in the months following the completion of her studies. Often, she was met with responses that stated she did not have enough experience for the role. She actively engaged in employment support programs at local community organisations to get assistance in finding work however, she was unsuccessful.

Fatima then heard about SECL's internship program through Women's Health in the South East where she was volunteering. After applying, she was successfully recruited for the role and began working two days per week.

During her employment Fatima described that she learned essential soft skills such as teamwork, collaboration, time-management skills and communication skill development that increased her confidence in liaising with culturally diverse staff working across a range of disciplines. The internship role provided Fatima with opportunities to meet staff from other agencies, expand her networks and engage in community project development including co-design work which was new for her. Throughout her internship with SECL she built strong relationships with colleagues and for the first time ever experienced being part of a work team and having 'another family'. Fatima's skills, passion and motivation to learn and support her community was strongly recognised and when her internship finished, she was recruited as a co-design member on SECL's family violence prevention program and was a critical team member contributing to the development of a culturally appropriate and adapted Change the Story multilingual video in Hazaragi and Dari. With increased confidence, knowledge and workplace experience, not long after her work on SECL's Safer and Stronger Communities Pilot, Fatima secured a permanent part-time role at Good Shepherd as a family violence program support worker. We hear she is enjoying her role immensely.



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