



New Change

Submission to the Federal Parliament Joint Standing Committee on Migration:

Inquiry into Migrant Settlement Outcomes

### **About New Change**

New Change is an initiative driven by young South Sudanese women aged 15-22 years old in Melbourne's western suburbs, who aim to empower, motivate and educate young women to achieve self-confidence and embrace their individuality.

The group has previously tackled topics of importance to the African community, including sexual health and respectful relationships, through program support and local events.

In 2016, New Change purpose was to build public awareness of the stories of the South Sudanese community in Melbourne, a community who have been portrayed negatively in recent media, leaving many struggling with their cultural identity, feeling misunderstood and judged.

As a response, the young women of New Change developed their advocacy by creating art for social change through the creation of 'Breaking News', a spoken word poetry music video.

Breaking News - <https://youtu.be/hcEoIucI3tg>

Dear Joint Standing Committee on Migration,

My name is Achol Kirr and I am writing to you on the behalf of members of New Change.

I am a 20-year-old Australian of South Sudanese heritage living in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne. I am currently in my second year of studying Psychology at Victoria University and am involved in many community programs.

New Change thought it was important to share our collective migration and settlement experiences to give a personalised glimpse into our lives in Australia.

Many New Change participants arrived in Australia when we were 7-8 years old, coming as refugees, previously living in camps in Egypt or Kenya with our family members. Some of us were born in Sudan but left when we were 2-3 years old due to the war.

Australia is very different from Egypt and Kenya and many of us arrived in this country with minimal English language skills. Often the schools in Egypt or Kenya were part of the refugee camp and not proper schools which meant we were behind educationally before coming to Australia.

When we arrived in Australia, life was completely different. Some of us started in mainstream schools but many of us were sent to English Language School for a year. English language school was important for us but was not long enough to prepare us to enter mainstream schools. After our year at English Language school many of us were immediately transitioned into mainstream primary school, which was difficult because there were still gaps in our English language skills. Compared to other students our age, many of us were behind and found it difficult to catch up. Unlike other students we couldn't go ask our parents for help with homework. Many of our parents did not have the opportunity to attend school in Sudan and our parents had limited understanding of English. Often, we would translate for our parents in school interviews whilst we ourselves were still learning the language!

In high school our problems with the education system continued. At our school the majority of South Sudanese students were placed into English as a Second Language (ESL) classes alongside other South Sudanese students because the school believed we were not ready to do the same work as the other students. Whilst some of us needed extra English language support not all of us did. It was assumed that because you are Sudanese you will need help.

Unfortunately, ESL classes for many of us became a social class where we hang out with our friends and chatted to each other. The teachers didn't teach well and rather than helping us improve our English we felt isolated and not good enough from our fellow class mates. These classes also promoted a form of segregation. For example, many students have only Sudanese friendship groups and often students of Sudanese heritage are monitored during lunch time. At our school there was a rule that Australians of South Sudanese heritage could not be in group of more than 3 people at school. This rule was imposed by teachers who believed groups of South Sudanese students looked threatening to other students. It is never a good feeling to feel different and to be made to feel less capable than other people. These negative perceptions about our cultural

group have an impact on the confidence and wellbeing of young people of South Sudanese background.

We have noticed that employment is a big issue within our community. Due to difficulties at school, career advisors suggest we undertake certificates or diplomas in child care, aged care or warehousing. There is also the issue of discrimination many in our community have faced when recruiters or employers see a Sudanese name. We have a community of young people who were told we can achieve anything in Australia but unfortunately our rate of unemployment is much higher than many other communities in Australia.

We want to work and we want to give back to Australia but we are not given the opportunity to do so. With any group, regardless of your nationality or how you arrived in Australia, if there are no jobs and people are restless, crime increases. This is not a South Sudanese specific problem.

We, South Sudanese young women of New Change want our fellow Australian citizens to understand that we are people just like you, not simply poor people from who come from a war-torn country. We are humans and proud citizens of Australia.

After the outbreak of crimes being committed by young people who called themselves as the 'Apex Gang', we are motivated to reconstruct our identity and let our fellow Australian citizens know that not all South Sudanese Australian people are bad.

One member of New Change said after the Mumba event she was walking with her friends and a person slowed down in their car and told her she was part of APEX to go back where she came from. The action of a small percentage of young men in our community is having a negative impact on our everyday lives. I, like the majority of the New Change participants have at times felt 'misunderstood' and 'judged' by the wider community because of the stigma of APEX.

We strongly condemn the actions of the individuals committing these crimes. We think the way they are acting is not appropriate and hope it will end soon. But we must remember APEX is not an organised group and APEX is not a South Sudanese group. It is a group of young 15-16 year old boys.

Through New Change we decided to challenge the negative stereotypes about South Sudanese people and tell our story from a young women's perspective. We decided to fight with our words! We all joined New Change because we want to empower, motivate and educate young Africans to achieve self-confidence and embrace their individuality.

It is important to understand our journey and stories before making decisions that impact our whole community. For many of us from refugee communities, our parents have had difficult lives. They have escaped war; seen family members killed and have had to deal with the trauma of losing their babies through famine and difficult circumstances in refugee camps.

A lot of our parents married very early and our mums have children in their teens. We have big families with some people having 7-8 siblings. It would be hard for any mum to control 8 children! I say mum because often many fathers are not present in the lives of South Sudanese children. Either they died during the war or families have been separated. If our parents are not raising children they are working in entry level jobs to

support us and family members back home. Additionally, many people have undiagnosed mental health issues as a consequence from the war.

Despite all the negative stories about South Sudanese people in the media, there are some really important truths we want to convey. We are adjusting to life in Australia and we engage in cultural and civic activities that strengthen this country's multicultural foundation. Through the support of community development programs in local council we are achieving positive settlement outcomes.

All members of New Change are currently studying at University and we regularly volunteer in the community. We are working or actively looking for jobs and we want to support the young people in our community who are currently struggling with these challenges.

Rather than push negative stories we need to empower young people and build their confidence and let them know they are as deserving as any other person living in this country to be Australian.

In the following section we outline some recommendations we have developed as a group. We thank you for this opportunity.

Kind regards,

New Change

### **Key recommendations**

1. Through specialist agencies, offer professional development to teachers working with students with complex needs; particularly those needs arising from refugee and asylum seeker experiences.
2. Improve resourcing of English as an Second Language (ESL) programs, including increased budgets for ESL resources and specialist ESL teachers. We also call for a thorough understanding of student's academic ability to be sought by schools.
3. Formalise partnerships between schools and community organisations to provide parents with a better understanding of their role in education and link them with capacity building information and opportunities.
4. Increase funding to community organisations and services to provide culturally specific support groups similar to New Change.
5. Develop intergenerational support programs for parents and young people from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
6. Support formal programs that enable English as Second Language (ESL) learners to develop their oral language skills. Embed 1:1 English language mentoring opportunities into the ESL curriculum.
7. Increase migrant settlement services funding to service people for a longer period of time.