

Submission  
No 4

**INQUIRY INTO MODERN SLAVERY RISKS FACED BY  
TEMPORARY MIGRANT WORKERS IN RURAL AND  
REGIONAL NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Soroptimist International Griffith Inc

**Date Received:** 13 December 2024

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Date

**SUBMISSION: NSW PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO MODERN SLAVERY RISKS FACED BY  
TEMPORARY MIGRANT WORKERS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL NSW**

(Much of the information in this submission reinforces findings in the recent report from the Office of the NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner “Be Our Guests: Addressing urgent modern slavery risks for temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales” September 2024. It was also presented by SI Griffith members to the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Professor Tomoya Obokata, on Sunday 17 November, when he visited Griffith).

SI Griffith has advocated for better conditions for temporary overseas workers (especially women) since 2018. (It is worth noting that at that time we worked with the Salvation Army’s “Freedom Partnership – End Modern Slavery” to hold a community forum. The AFP had told the Freedom Partnership that Griffith was one of centres in Australia that they needed to focus on in their work. The organiser from the Freedom Partnership had arranged for three speakers (local temporary workers) to speak of their experiences. None of them attended or spoke as they had been threatened by their employers).

Early this year, through our work with the Griffith Local Domestic Violence Committee (GLDVC) we were made aware of serious issues relating to women both still working in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme and those disengaged from the Scheme. The GLDVC, Soroptimists and the CWA of NSW Griffith all wrote to the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and the Minister for Foreign Affairs to voice our concerns about aspects of the PALM Scheme in general and the problems facing women in particular.

Later in the year Soroptimists were approached to set up a safe space on Friday and Saturday nights for women working in the PALM Scheme who were concerned for their safety at these times.

As a service organisation with limited funds there is not a lot we can do to help these women in practical ways. Organisations such as Linking Communities Network, the Salvation Army, the Griffith Community Centre and the Griffith Multicultural Centre are much better placed to give practical support but they are also stretched for funds and staff with existing local issues.

We don’t have lived experience and we are not involved in labour hire but we can bring to the attention of this inquiry the issues that have been raised with us. These issues are raised specifically in relation to the PALM Scheme. There are many other workers in this area who have come as asylum seekers and refugees. A significant number were granted permanent resident status this year but there are still a number on temporary visas. The risk of modern slavery in their cases is high, as it is for other temporary workers. The fact that New South Wales still does not require labour hire organisations to be licenced is a contributing factor that should be addressed.

In our letters to the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and the Minister for Foreign Affairs we outlined the following **ISSUES**:

- The rates of absconding and disengagement have risen significantly since the first Pacific labour scheme was introduced.  
There appear to be several reasons that workers leave their employer including sub-standard accommodation, poor working conditions, not enough work (reduced hours and/or low pay), employers not having the cultural awareness they should have to understand the needs of their workers and visa conditions.  
Some women workers have been subjected to violence by other workers.

From the above it would appear there is not enough on the ground checking in relation to working conditions and worker welfare. Workers are aware that if they leave their employer their visas will be voided and it is highly unlikely that they will ever be selected for the PALM Scheme again, yet they leave. This suggests the issues outlined above make life unbearable for them. As well, current visa conditions are reported as a contributing factor to absconding. PALM workers returning each season struggle to build a life in Australia. Pathways to permanency are limited and one perceived pathway is to abscond and seek asylum in Australia.

- Women workers who have disengaged from the PALM Scheme are particularly vulnerable. They have no work rights and no health cover. Some of these women fall pregnant.
- Women workers who are working under the PALM Scheme and who fall pregnant are not much better off. According to the PALM Scheme document “Know your rights and responsibilities: pregnancy and parenting in Australia” it states that even though workers have medical insurance as a requirement of their visas “most medical insurances in Australia do not cover the costs associated with pregnancy and birth related treatments (obstetrics) unless you have held insurance for more than 12 months?” (p.4)

In relation to all the above issues, once workers become disengaged they are extremely vulnerable and have to find work wherever they can. They are easy prey for labour hire organisations. Not all of them are trustworthy. They don't have to be licenced in NSW.

There is another issue not mentioned in our letters: the number of PALM workers who have died in Australia. Whilst some of these deaths are not work related, these men and women have been brought here to support our farmers and our economy. Families need to be informed quickly and supported.

**OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:** (We are aware that the PALM Scheme was to be remodelled during 2024 but are not sure if this has happened).

- Workers intending to sign up to the PALM Scheme should be given more information about the details in their visa and work agreements – especially in relation to the repercussions if they disengage from the Scheme/leave their designated employer. Unrealistic expectations must be addressed before they sign up. They also need to clearly understand that if they leave the PALM Scheme and apply for a Protection Visa it is almost certain that they will not get protection.
- Visa conditions should be changed so there is some portability in relation to employers if their grievances are substantiated.

- There should be more PALM Scheme welfare officers on the ground making visits to worksites and accommodation. These visits should be regular.
- If PALM Scheme workers have complaints it should be easy for them to contact a PALM Scheme official and have that complaint assessed and addressed quickly.
- Women workers are vulnerable and have experienced violence. Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable. As stated under ISSUES, women need to know that if they fall pregnant, even if they are still working, most medical insurances in Australia do not cover the costs associated with pregnancy and birth related treatments unless the insurance has been held for more than twelve months. It would appear that pregnant women have been sacked by their employers who then report that they have absconded. They then have no job and no medical cover at all. Then they either try to get employment without a work visa, leaving them open to slave-like conditions or they have to rely on local charities who are already stretched to the limit given the current cost of living crisis.
- Local councils and community support groups should be given information about PALM workers coming to their area. If they had this information it is possible that there could be more support for these workers.

Yours faithfully

Elizabeth Mead

Programme Convenor Soroptimist International on behalf of our 37 members

**SOROPTIMISTS INSPIRE ACTION AND CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO TRANSFORM THE LIVES OF WOMEN AND GIRLS THROUGH A GLOBAL NETWORK OF MEMBERS AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS**