

Markets, Migration & the Work of Care



The Temporary Sponsored Parent Visa, Migrant Grandparents and Transnational Family Life

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Myra Hamilton, Angela Kintominas and Deborah Brennan¹

In Australia, reliance on grandparents for childcare is widespread. But with more than 1 in 4 Australian residents born overseas, grandparent care is not always readily available.

Policy shifts have seen a tightening of visa pathways available for migrant grandparents. Permanent parent visas now involve a wait-time of 30+ years, unless a grandparent (or their sponsor) can afford a very expensive contributory parent visa. This has constrained many migrants' means of maintaining intergenerational relationships in close proximity, and increased reliance on short-term visitor visas for grandparents.

In this context, a new temporary sponsored parent visa (TSPV) has been proposed. The scheme, yet to be formally introduced, has been cast as a solution for relieving childcare deficits without "burdening" health and social security systems. Despite "minding of grandchildren" being an explicit objective of the proposed TSPV, the consequences for transnational families, grandparent childcare and Australia's active ageing policy agendas remain under-examined.

1. Working families and grandparent childcare in Australia

Grandparents are the most popular providers of childcare in Australia.² In 2017, 864,500 children were cared for by their grandparents in a typical week, far outstripping other forms of childcare like long day care or before and after school care.³ Grandparent childcare cuts across the socio-economic spectrum; it is popular with families from different cultural backgrounds, and in urban, regional and remote areas.⁴ Grandparent care is also highly gendered, being primarily provided by grandmothers.⁵

Seen as the "next best thing" to parental care, grandparent care provides many intrinsic benefits for grandchildren, families and communities. Grandparent childcare builds intergenerational relationships,⁶ supports mothers' workforce participation and fills gaps in the formal early childhood education and care system.⁷

Grandparent care also plays an important role in migrant family life. In 2017, almost 1 in 5 families with both parents born overseas, and almost 1 in 4 families with one parent born overseas, received care for their children from a grandparent in a typical week. These numbers are lower than the 1 in 3 families with both parents born in Australia,⁸ reflecting the less accessible nature of grandparents for migrant families.

Migrant grandparents often have different experiences of childcare provision than non-migrant grandparents. Research suggests that, for many migrant grandparents, childcare responsibilities are more central to their life goals.⁹ Migrant grandparents often place

greater importance on the passing of culture and language on to their grandchildren,¹⁰ whilst also experiencing differences in values and practices around childrearing compared to their adult children.¹¹ Migrant grandparents' contribution to childcare has the added role of supporting adult children to integrate into their country of destination.¹² In light of barriers to permanent migration, grandparent caregiving can sometimes involve sending young children to be with grandparents overseas, as well as "fly-in-fly-out" grandparents utilising multiple visitor visas.¹³

Australia's migration policies and visa categories directly shape the availability and character of grandparent childcare. They determine how long a family must wait before grandparents can migrate (and therefore how old a grandparent is when they arrive), the duration of their stay, how often they can visit, the cost of migration, and their access to health and social care. Policies also impact on the other activities that grandparents can participate in, such as paid work. Migration policies can therefore shape the nature of the grandparent care arrangement, the care relationship, and the dependence by grandparents on adult children, and their consequent risk of social isolation and precarity.¹⁴ These policy impacts are also likely to be highly gendered given that it is *grandmothers* that do most childcare work.

2. Australia's approach to migrant grandparents: tightening visa pathways

There are currently 2 main avenues through which overseas grandparents can visit their families in Australia: visitor visas;¹⁵ and permanent parent visas.¹⁶

During 2017-18, 31,268 sponsored family visitor visas were granted, up 5.5% from 2016-17.¹⁷ Within the permanent parent visa category there are 2 streams: ordinary parent visas (now described as "non-contributory" parent visas) and the much more expensive

"contributory" parent visas introduced by the Howard Government.¹⁸ Both these visa types require applicants to have an eligible sponsor, meet the "balance of family" test (that at least half of their children live permanently in Australia, or more live permanently in Australia than in any other country), and lodge an assurance of support (a legal commitment to repay any social security debts).

Non-contributory parent visas have an application charge of approximately \$6100 for the main applicant, and \$4085 for an additional spouse/partner. Due to high demand and a visa cap, new applicants face a waiting period of 30+ years before a decision is made.¹⁹ Contributory parent visas have a much higher visa application charge of approximately \$47,455, and an additional \$44,900 for a spouse/partner. These visas are not capped and currently have an approximately 2-year waiting period.²⁰

Contributory and non-contributory parent visas together constitute a very small and declining proportion (4%) of Australia's total permanent migration intake. Out of the 183,608 permanent visas granted in 2016-17, only 6128 were contributory and 1345 were non-contributory parent visas.²¹ As of 2013-14, nationals from China were the main recipients of parent visas (48.5%), followed by India, and the United Kingdom.²²

These small numbers reflect broader shifts in Australia's migration regime away from permanent migration and family reunion towards skilled and temporary migration.²³ In the late 1980s, the balance of family test and assurance of support requirements were first introduced.²⁴ From the 1990s, parent visas became subject to capping, and the Government successfully introduced the much more expensive contributory parent visa in 2003.²⁵ Since then, non-contributory parent visa places have continued to be reduced as contributory visas are favoured as offering "a

greater contribution towards the costs of parent migration”.²⁶

Tightening of parent migration has continued in recent years. In 2014, the Government repealed the non-contributory parent visa altogether, though this change was later reversed.²⁷ In 2016, the Productivity Commission recommended increasing the cost and decreasing the number of contributory parent visas, whilst making non-contributory visas available only on exceptional compassionate grounds.²⁸ In 2018, the Government introduced much higher income requirements for sponsors of migrant parents, though this too was reversed.²⁹ Most recently, a portion of permanent parent visa places were reallocated to retirement visa holders already in Australia.³⁰ It is in this context that a “more flexible temporary parent visa” has been proposed.³¹

3. The Temporary Sponsored Parent Visa Scheme

In the lead up to, and after winning, the federal election in 2016, the Coalition promised to introduce the TSPV, and a Discussion Paper calling for community input was released.³² The proposal sought to straddle the dual aims of providing parents with the “opportunity to visit children and grandchildren” while ensuring that “their stay does not have an undue cost impact”.³³ Community responses suggested cautious support, though some stakeholders expressed concern that aged parents may be subjected to an “ongoing ‘limbo’ of temporariness” with potentially troubling consequences if their health deteriorated.³⁴

In 2017, the Turnbull Government confirmed the new TSPV would be introduced in the 2017-18 Migration Programme, subject to the passage of the Migration Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Bill. The Bill remains before the Senate.³⁵ The TSPV has the explicit objective of facilitating “assistance with

mindings of grandchildren.”³⁶ Current information indicates that the TPSV will:

- not replace existing permanent parent visas, but sit alongside them;³⁷
- allow citizens and permanent residents to sponsor a maximum of 2 parents at a time for 3 (\$5,000) or 5 years (\$10,000) per visa, renewable up to 10 years;
- be capped at 15,000 places annually;³⁸
- require sponsors to meet household income and character requirements, and accept liability for any public health debt;
- require migrant parents to meet identity, health and character requirements, not have an outstanding public health debt, and hold private health insurance;
- not allow migrant parents to participate in paid work.³⁹

4. The TSPV, work, care, and transnational families

The proposed TPSV is likely to support some migrant parents (particularly mothers) to work and to assist migrant grandparents to build stronger relationships with their grandchildren during their early years. However, it also risks placing migrant grandparents in precarious circumstances, and compromising their capacity to enjoy financial security and care in later life.

Migrant mothers’ workforce participation

In Australia, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women have a significantly lower rate of workforce participation (47.3%) compared to CALD men (69.5%), and the female population more generally (59.2%).⁴⁰ This is significant given the Government’s *Towards 2025 Strategy* to boost women’s workforce participation as “an economic and social imperative”.⁴¹ Presently, children in families in which English is not the main language spoken at home have lower levels of participation in formal early childhood education and care services.⁴² Greater availability of grandparent support in migrant families could therefore help to boost the labour market participation

rates of migrant mothers.⁴³ At the same time, grandparent childcare is not the only solution: formal early childhood education and care services need to be better equipped to support migrant mothers' economic empowerment and social integration. More equal distribution of childcare tasks between migrant mothers and fathers may also improve migrant mothers' labour market participation.

Vulnerability and precarity among migrant grandparents

A key concern regarding a long-term but temporary parent visa is that it creates situations of "permanent temporariness" for this group of ageing migrants.⁴⁴ As Boucher, Mares and Sherrell argue, the TSPV has the potential to compromise the integration and inclusion of migrant grandparents through permanently excluding them from health and social security systems, and employment and political participation.⁴⁵

Australia has strong active and productive ageing policy agendas at the state and federal levels.⁴⁶ These agendas identify the importance of civic and social participation, access to community and health services, and opportunities to participate in paid work as integral to creating healthy individual futures and a socially and economically flourishing nation. However, under the proposed TSPV arrangements, migrant grandparents would have very limited access to community, social and health resources, effectively excluding them from these active ageing agendas. This has the potential to challenge migrant grandparents' capacity to age healthily both in Australia and when they return to their country of origin.

The lack of access to paid work (limiting independent income), as well as limited health and social rights under the TSPV is also likely to result in many migrant grandparents' financial dependence on adult children. This has the potential to heighten their vulnerability

to physical, emotional and financial abuse. Although most adult children sponsors will be motivated by good intentions, family relationships can include imbalances of power and resources and can break down.⁴⁷ Where a grandparent is reliant on their sponsor (for their visa, health care, income, food and/or housing) this renders them vulnerable, especially if relationships deteriorate.⁴⁸

Lack of access to paid work, health and social rights are also likely to result in lower personal incomes and savings among migrant grandparents leading to greater poverty in older age. These risks are likely to be highly gendered given that grandmothers – who shoulder the majority of grandparent care – also have longer life expectancies and lower incomes earlier in life.⁴⁹

Caregiving in transnational families

Children's best interests and their right to development under the *Convention of the Rights of the Child*, ratified by Australia in 1990, encompasses the right to preserve family relations and enjoy culture, religion and language.⁵⁰ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has confirmed that the "preservation of family relationships" encompasses the ties of the child in the wider sense, including with grandparents.⁵¹

A TSPV could help improve Australian children's ties with grandparents through the opportunity for migrant grandparents to spend long periods building relationships with their grandchildren during their early years. For many families this would improve the accessibility, affordability and flexibility of childcare, and offer a superior option to relying upon short-term visitor visas, waiting many years for a non-contributory parent visa, or paying large sums for contributory parent visas, potentially causing considerable financial hardship.

At the same time, the long-term temporary nature of the visa has the potential to disrupt

intergenerational relationships and obligations in the provision of care. If grandparents can spend a maximum of 10 years in Australia with no pathway to permanency, proximal care arrangements and relationships will come to an abrupt end. This could have negative impacts on children and grandparents who have developed strong bonds.⁵²

The long-term temporary nature of the visa also has the potential to disrupt the reciprocal nature of family caregiving relationships. Returning home as their own care needs are increasing has the potential to cause migrant grandparents and their families financial and emotional hardship. Their adult children, should they choose to remain in Australia, will be limited in the care they are able to provide for their ageing parents. Many grandparents will have weakened social and familial networks in their home country after being away for so long, further limiting the potential sources of informal care as they age.

After living in Australia for 10 years whilst unable to engage in paid work and therefore unlikely to have savings, grandparents – especially grandmothers – are likely to have depleted financial resources to draw on to fund their use of formal aged care services. It is foreseeable that adult children and grandchildren in Australia will invest financial resources, such as through frequent travel and increased remittances, to support ageing parents once they return home.

5. Conclusion

Grandparent care is valuable and productive work that makes significant contributions to Australian society. It is likely that the TSPV, if introduced, would be extremely popular with migrant communities, especially given the prohibitive cost and wait times of the present permanent parent visa arrangements. Although there is great scope for the TSPV to improve access by migrant families to grandparent care, grandparents' lack of access to

employment rights and the capacity to earn an income from work is likely to undermine their financial independence in the present and future. It is likely to foster a situation in which many migrant grandparents using TPSVs will be financially dependent on their sponsors, and their financial resources in later life will be significantly depleted.

Reflecting Australia's ageing agendas, migrant grandparents need to be supported and valued in these important roles, enabled to combine their care responsibilities with other activities and to participate in Australia's social and economic life. Allowing them to earn an independent income from paid work would make an important contribution here.

Whilst care arrangements under the TPSV are long enough to build strong familial bonds they remain time-limited, to the possible detriment of ongoing care relationships. Policies could be introduced to support families sustain their relationships after grandparents return home, such as prioritising these grandparents for regular visitor visas or granting their adult children longer leave periods to respond to the needs of their ageing parents abroad. It is also important that a TSPV does not replace, or in practice, substantially eclipse permanent parent visas, which provide optimum conditions for secure, reciprocal care relationships over the long-term and the best opportunity for grandparents to flourish and actively contribute to Australian society. Permanent parent visa pathways can themselves be improved by increasing quotas and introducing a lottery system to reduce waiting times, providing more certainty for families.⁵³

Hence, policies which seek to promote "minding of grandchildren", like the TSPV, must acknowledge the importance of the contribution of grandparent care, provide opportunities for grandparents to participate widely in social and economic life, and recognise the reciprocal nature of family caregiving relationships.

References

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