Established and early career researchers, policy makers and members of non-government organisation met at UNSW in March 2016 for an interdisciplinary workshop on gender, migration and care in Australia, New Zealand and Canada funded by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. Generous sponsorship from the University of Toronto enabled five leading international scholars to participate. The workshop was preceded by a half day meeting at which PhD students and early career researchers discussed their research with leading Australian and visiting scholars. Workshop participants were drawn from social policy, sociology, political economy, law and demography. The workshop was convened by Deborah Brennan (UNSW), Sara Charlesworth (RMIT) and Elizabeth Hill (University of Sydney).

The ethical, political and industrial issues surrounding care migration were the focus of the workshop. Across the OECD, governments are adopting new policies towards the provision of aged care, child care and care for people with disabilities. There is a growing preference for individualised, often home-based provision supported by measures such as personalised budgets and consumer-directed care. In many rich countries, the demand for care workers is being met by migrants from poorer parts of the world. This trend is the subject of extensive scholarship in Europe and North America, but has received little attention in Australia or New Zealand perhaps because migration policy in these countries provides few opportunities for non-professional care workers to migrate in their own right. In light of predicted shortages of care labour, pressures for change are emerging in both countries.

Unions have expressed caution about seeing migrants as a solution to workforce shortages; they emphasise the importance of attracting and retaining local workers by raising pay, improving training and career paths and encouraging family-friendly work environments. Unions have worked to ensure that temporary overseas workers receive the same pay and conditions as local workers, reducing the incentives for employers to seek to recruit a migrant workforce. However, as the Productivity Commission has shown in a series of reports into aged care, disability and child care, the demand for care workers in coming decades is likely to exceed the capacity of the local workforce. Moreover, as Australia’s population ages, there is a growing demand for care workers who speak community languages.

The international researchers who participated in the workshop included Professors Ito Peng (University of Toronto), Sonya Michel (University of Maryland), Monica Boyd (University of Toronto) and Rianne Mahon (Balsillie School of International Relations). All of these scholars, together with Deborah Brennan and Sara Charlesworth, are Principal Investigators on a large international project on migration and care funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities and Research Council.

Prof Brennan (UNSW) and Prof Ito Peng (University of Toronto) opened the workshop by outlining scholarly and political debates about the recruitment of migrant careworkers.
Prof Brennan noted that interest in care migration is relatively recent in Australia and New Zealand and, correspondingly, there is a relative dearth of research on this topic. Deb used the occasion to launch a new ARC Discovery project Markets, Migration and the Work of Care (DP160100175) which she will lead, together with her Sara Charlesworth and Elizabeth Hill. Prof Ito Peng provided an overview of the international project on Gender, Migration and Care mentioned above.

Presenters in the first full paper session, ‘Reshaping Care and Migration in Australia’, examined Australian policies towards informal (unpaid) care, paid care, and migration. Emeritus Professor Bettina Cass (UNSW) and Dr Myra Hamilton (UNSW) provided an overview of trends in unpaid care provision in Australia, outlining policies that support informal/unpaid carers care for older people and people with a disability. They also discussed trends in the provision of unpaid care, showing that most of this work continues to be undertaken by women, with profound implications for their participation in paid work. Prof Gabrielle Meagher (Macquarie University), then outlined the changing policy landscape of paid care provision. Gabrielle highlighted the increasing proportion of both older people and young children participating in formal, paid care services and discussed the impact of marketisation and commercialisation on the provision of care. In the third paper of this session Prof Peter McDonald (ANU) outlined recent shifts in migration policy trends relevant to the provision of care. Peter presented data showing that migrants account for a significant proportion of growth in employment in care occupations between 2006 and 2011. This trend is particularly strong in respect of personal care workers, i.e. those whose work is low paid and often deemed to be low skilled. Many of the migrant workers occupying these positions have skills and qualifications that exceed the requirements of the job.

In paper session II, 'International Context', presenters examined aspects of international migration and care policy. Prof Rianne Mahon (University of Waterloo) discussed the role of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in seeking to improve working conditions and protections for migrant care workers, especially through the Domestic Workers Convention. Dr Elizabeth Hill (University of Sydney) discussed aspects of inequality in Asia Pacific countries, showing how these factors contribute to the ‘push’ toward migration. The prevalence of low-paid informal work in many of these countries means that workers do not have access to basic rights and protections, with women being the most affected. In the final paper of this session, Prof Sonya Michel (University of Maryland) discussed the experiences of children left behind when migrant women move to more developed countries to seek employment. Children are often cared for by other female family members, such as aunts and grandparents, intensifying both gendered and intergenerational inequalities.

In the closing session of Day 1, five panellists addressed the question ‘Should Australia Recruit Migrant Care Workers?’ In a brief but riveting presentation, Prof Judy McGregor (Auckland University of Technology), a former New Zealand Human Rights Commissioner, spoke of her experiences working ‘undercover’ in aged care sector in New Zealand. Prof McGregor’s report has led to positive changes for care workers in New Zealand though she was keen to emphasise the agency and activism of care workers themselves, rather than her own work, in bringing about change. Jo Schofield (United Voice) presented a perspective from the main union representing care workers in Australia, outlining arguments for and against increasing the migrant intake. Jeff Wright from HammondCare
(one of the major residential aged care providers in Australia) presented a case for increasing the recruitment of migrant care workers, provided that appropriate training and supports are provided. Lina Cabaero-Ponnambalam from Asian Women at Work described the commitment and generosity of low-paid migrant workers in Sydney. Her presentation included a rousing rendition of the feminist anthem ‘I am Woman’. Finally, Dr Joanna Howe (University of Adelaide) provided an overview of the employment regulation and migration settings impacting the recruitment of migrant care workers. Dr Howe made the case for a designated low-skilled visa as a way to better protect the working conditions of migrant women working in the care sector in Australia.

Day 2 commenced with papers around the theme of ‘Migrants as Care Workers and Care Recipients’. Prof Monica Boyd (University of Toronto) illustrated the significance of migration policy in the delivery of child care in Canada. She showed that migrants earn less than locally born workers, confirming concerns about lower pay and working conditions for women from migrant and ethnically diverse backgrounds. Gulnara Abbasova, from the Federation of Ethnic Community Councils of Australia, turned the attention of workshop participants to the perspective of care users, emphasising the need for culturally appropriate care services for Australia’s ageing migrant population. Gulnara presented data showing that impact of changing source countries of migration. Most older migrant cohorts came from Europe, especially southern Europe, while a majority of current working age migrants are from Asia. These trends have major implications for care service needs into the future. Associate Professor Deb King and Dr. Linda Isherwood (Flinders University) presented findings from their research on migrants working in aged care. They illustrated how the backgrounds of overseas born workers in aged care have shifted over the past decade. The proportion of aged care workers from non-English speaking backgrounds (Asia in particular) doubled between 2007 and 2012. These workers are more likely to be on temporary visas.

In the final Session, panellists offered a range of views on ‘Optimum Policy Settings for Australia’ with respect to care migration. Helen McDevitt (Department of Social Services) and Dr Caroline Alcorso (National Disability Services) focused on aged care and disability care, sharing lessons from their experience about the extent to which there is a need to recruit migrants to work in aged and disability care. The final two presentations focused on childcare. Dr Elizabeth Adamson (UNSW) noted that childcare policy and migration policy have rarely been considered in relation to one another in Australia, but recent changes signal a shift toward greater intersection, with possible implications for both care users and providers. Dr Laurie Berg (UTS) focused on the work of au pairs (many of whom are in Australia in Working Holiday Maker visas). Dr. Berg’s presentation illustrated the growing significance (and lack of acknowledgment) of this growing group of workers.

Prof Ito Peng and Prof Sara Charlesworth closed the workshop by reflecting on the breadth and depth of knowledge shared, and discussing strategies for dissemination and networking among researchers and sector stakeholders.

The workshop generated a number of positive outcomes including the formation of a Markets, Migration and Care Network, a Markets, Migration and Care Bulletin and discussions about potential research collaborations. A number of outputs are planned including a special issue and book chapters. A follow up workshop will be held in New Zealand in 2017.