

How the Order of Australia Award has Acknowledged the Services of Multicultural Australia

By Mainul Haque OAM

Order of Australia Association, ACT Branch Breakfast Lecture
12 March 2025

Introduction

Good morning, everyone. It is truly an honor to stand before you today as a fellow member of the Order of Australia Association and as a proud recipient of the Order of Australia Medal.

Let me start by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people on whose land we are meeting today. I pay my respect to the elders, past and present and emerging. I reaffirm this is a first nations land, always was and always will be.

As someone who has had the privilege of living, studying, and working across diverse cultures in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Canada, and now in this beautiful nation of Australia, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative journey of multiculturalism over the past fifty years.

Today, I would like to explore:

- how the Order of Australia Award has recognised the invaluable contributions of multicultural Australians and
- how the award underscore the significance of celebrating our tapestry of diversity within our national narrative.

Australia's Multicultural Success Story

Over the last 50 years, Australia has transformed into a mosaic of cultures, languages, and traditions.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, almost half of all Australians were either born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas.

This highlights that multiculturalism is not merely a policy but a lived experience that enriches our communities in profound ways—socially, economically, and culturally.

Imagine traversing the neighborhoods like Parramatta in Sydney, where the aromas of Ethiopian coffee meld with the spices of Indian cuisine, and the lively sounds of Vietnamese music fill the streets.

Here, Indigenous cultures seamlessly intertwine with those brought by new migrants, creating dynamic communities characterised by innovation, empathy, and an extraordinary exchange of ideas and traditions.

Contribution of Multicultural Australians

The contributions of multicultural Australians span various fields: healthcare, education, business, academia, and the arts, to name just a few.

Step into any hospital in our country, and you are likely to be greeted by a friendly smile from a Nepali, Indian, or Filipino nurse, or treated by an immigrant doctor from Bangladesh or India.

During crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, professionals from these backgrounds have not just played critical roles but have spearheaded groundbreaking research and innovations.

Prominent figures have been recognised for their extraordinary contributions, including:

- Dr. Tim Soutphommasane, a tireless advocate for multiculturalism and social cohesion.
- Dr. Marcia Langton, an Indigenous scholar championing cultural awareness.
- Yasmin Abdel-Magied, a Sudanese-Australian author and activist, known for amplifying diverse voices.
- Professor Veena Sahajwalla, whose innovative work in sustainability has garnered international acclaim.
- Dr. Charlie Teo AM, celebrated for his contributions to medicine.
- Professor Tom Calma AO, a prominent advocate for human rights.

From our local Canberra community, we can proudly highlight individuals like:

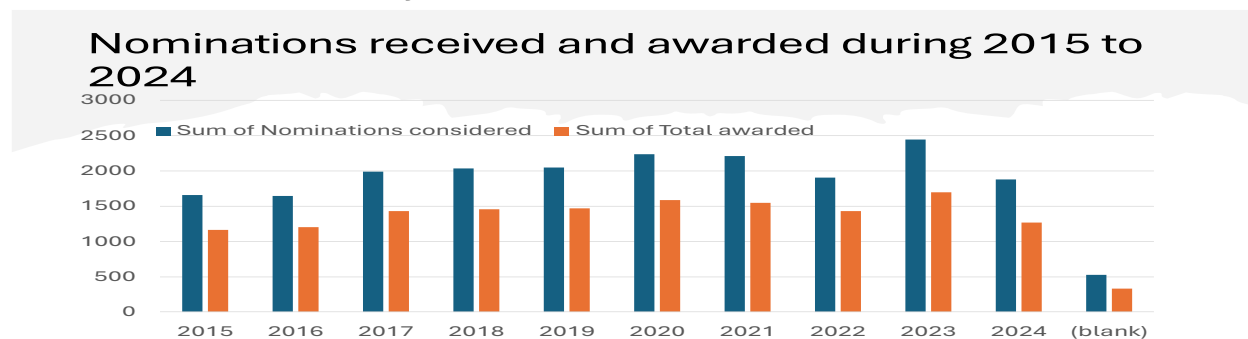
- Ebenezer Banful OAM, the 2024 ACT Senior Australian of the Year.
- Professor Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, recognised for service to gender equality.
- Hashim Abdul Rahman, who has enriched our Malaysian and broader multicultural communities.
- Dean Sahu Khan, a champion for interfaith dialogue.
- And many others.

The Order of Australia and Multicultural Recognition

The Governor-General's office receives approximately 2,000 nominations annually, with around 1,400 being approved—a 70% approval rate.

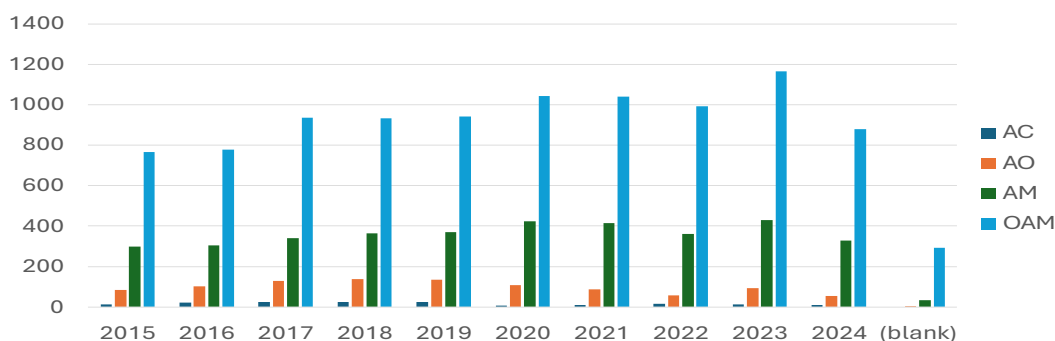
Over the past decade, from 2015 to 2024, more than 20,500 nominations were submitted, resulting in nearly 14,500 awards

conferred across diverse backgrounds—a powerful testament to the contributions made by our varied communities.



However, while the Order of Australia Medal (OAM) remains the most frequently awarded category, recognising often-overlooked community contributions, we must confront a stark reality: multicultural Australians remain underrepresented in the totality of nominations and awards.

Order of Australia Awards by category, 2015-2024



Multicultural Australia lags behind

As of the latest census data, we are around 26 million Australians with over 30% of us identifying as multicultural, reflecting the Australia’s commitment to diversity and inclusivity.

However, this diversity does not reflect in the order categories.

Total nominations and awards by category, 2015-2024

Year	Total nominations	Total awarded	AC	AO	AM	OAM
Australia	19480	13893	168	980	3590	9153
Multiculture	524	333	0	3	33	292
Multiculture as % of Australia	3%	2%	0%	0%	1%	3%

Let's take a closer look. Slide 4 summarises the nominations and awards given over the past ten years, from 2015 to 2024.

Over the last ten years, approximately 524 nominations were made from the multicultural community, resulting in just 333 awards.

This represents 3% of total nominations and just 2% of awards—a troubling underrepresentation that calls for urgent reflection on our recognition processes.

Moreover, there's a glaring absence of multicultural recipients in higher honors such as the Companion or Officer categories.

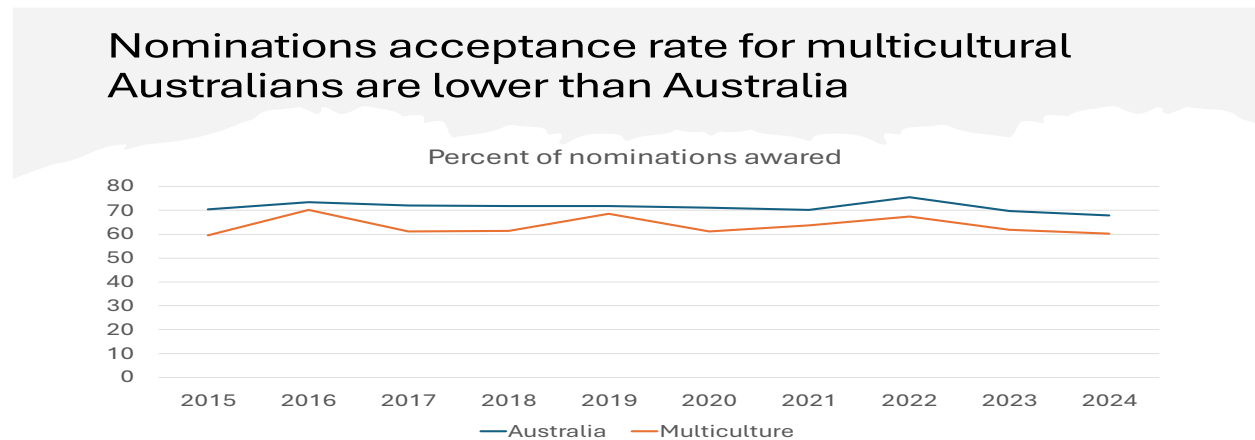
It's not only reflects inequity in acknowledgment but also calls for deeper reflection on how we celebrate remarkable achievements of Australians from all backgrounds.

Challenges in Recognition

Ladies and gentlemen, let me acknowledge it loudly and clearly that there has been substantial progress in recognition of multicultural contributions through the Order of Australia, but certain disparities persist.

The approval rates for multicultural Australians consistently lag behind their broader Australian counterparts.

For instance, nearly 70% nominations were conferred in 2024 to all Australians, only 60% were approved for people from multicultural background.



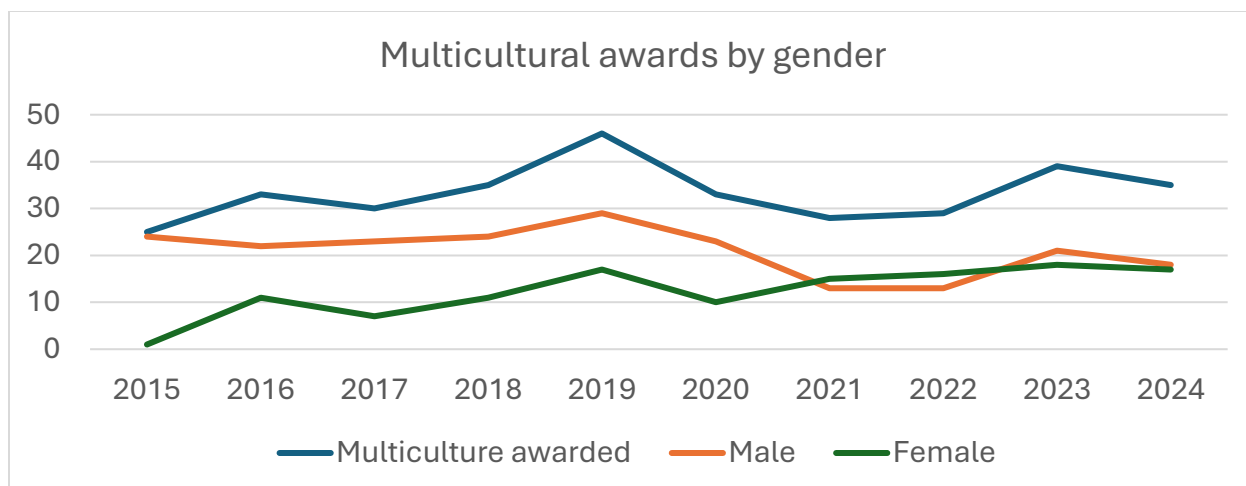
This discrepancy underscores systemic issues that demands our immediate attention.

As members of the Order of Australia Association, we have a crucial role to play in bridging this divide and ensuring that the vibrant contributions from all communities and all Australians are duly celebrated.

Male and Female Divide in Multicultural Awards

Another pressing issue I want to highlight is the gender imbalance within the multicultural awards category.

The persistent underrepresentation of women is alarming—especially considering the critical roles they fulfill within our communities.



To redress this imbalance, we must actively encourage nominations for women, engage in outreach initiatives to empower female candidates, and promote their visibility through storytelling and advocacy.

By doing this, we can help to alleviate the gender gap in recognition and ensure every deserving voice is honored.

Call for Increased Representation

As we move forward, it is imperative that we enhance the nomination and recognition processes to celebrate and recognise every voice in our community.

This can involve targeted outreach to raise awareness of the nomination process, particularly among underrepresented groups and women.

Let us act collectively to ensure that all contributions are accorded their rightful value.

Personal Reflection

As an OAM recipient for my services to the multicultural community in Canberra, I feel deeply connected to this mission.

My journey has been profoundly shaped by the insights and experiences gained from the diverse communities with whom I have engaged across continents.

These connections have inspired my advocacy for cultural understanding, cross-cultural collaboration, and assisting new migrants in navigating life in our vibrant community.

The recognition I received is not merely a personal achievement, but rather a testament to the collective contributions and resilience of multicultural Australia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Order of Australia Award serves as a vital acknowledgment of the exceptional contributions made by our multicultural community. Yet, the data reveals ongoing challenges:

1. lagging approval rates for multicultural Australians,
2. absence of multicultural Australians in higher award categories, and
3. a pressing disparity in nominations for women.

Ladies and gentlemen, as award recipients, we find ourselves in a unique position of influence and responsibility.

We have the opportunity to bridge the divides and ensure that the rich tapestry of contributions from every community and all Australians is recognised and celebrated.

Together, we can actively engage with diverse groups, fostering dialogue and understanding that highlights the strengths of our multicultural society.

We can champion initiatives that honor the achievements of individuals from all walks of life, amplifying their voices and stories.

I urge each of you—highly successful, and exceptionally talented Australians with unique experiences, skills, and networks—to actively encourage and support nominations from underrepresented groups.

Our local and national boards can implement outreach programs and provide tailored support for potential nominees.

By partnering with multicultural organisations, we can uncover and celebrate remarkable contributions within our diverse communities.

Together, we can work towards a more equitable recognition system—one that honors the rich tapestry of cultures, genders, and experiences that make our nation great.

Let us leave here today not just with awareness, but with a resolute commitment to take action.

Thank you for your attention, and let us commit to championing the diversity that enriches our society. Thank you.