



Surviving War But Still At Risk: The Health Needs of Refugee Women and Girls at Risk in Regional Australia

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Overview of Research



The Centre for Refugee Research, UNSW, is in the final year of a three year Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage funded project “Refugee Women at Risk: Protection and Integration in Australia’ exploring the settlement experiences of refugee women and girls at risk in urban and regional NSW and QLD.

This project aims to identify potential risks for resettling refugee women and their families and to develop appropriate responses to support them in their successful settlement. A significant outcome of this research has been the drafting of the first stage of a risk assessment and response tool for use with refugee women during settlement.

The research builds on extensive work undertaken by the Centre for Refugee Research with refugee women and their families overseas in countries of displacement and asylum and in resettlement.



Who are refugee women at risk?

“They kill your husband and after that you are suffering...They kill women in their own way.”
(Resettled refugee woman sharing her experiences of rape)

Each year Australia accepts up to 780 refugee women and their families through the Visa 204 Woman at Risk program. This program was developed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the late 80's to identify those refugee women and their families most at risk and in need of urgent resettlement to countries such as Australia.

Australia is one of only three countries in the world to have a focus on women at risk within their humanitarian program. Although Australia has a strong commitment to the resettlement of women at risk, research has shown that many refugee women and girls who enter on other visa categories have survived similar experiences.

For the purposes of this research the term 'women at risk' is used to refer to women and girls who have a shared pre arrival experience of systematised human rights abuses including rape and other forms of gender related violence.



Risks for Women and Girls from Refugee Backgrounds

“Everyday we are at risk...this is Australia it is not heaven”

(Resettled refugee woman speaking about ongoing risks for women in Australia)

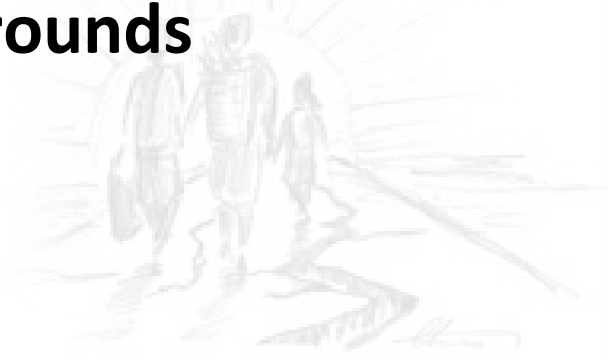
Research findings have shown that the following groups are potentially at risk of ongoing violence, human rights abuses, and failure to achieve successful settlement for themselves and their families.

Women and girls who are:

- Single, pregnant and without family or community support
- With a child or children conceived from rape
- In a forced marriage, or being coerced into a forced marriage in Australia
- Experiencing rejection or victimization by host or own community in Australia
- Isolated from their own or host communities
- Experiencing increased vulnerability due to separation from family members, including the need to send remittances back to camps/urban areas



Risks for Women and Girls from Refugee Backgrounds



- Living in situations of family and domestic violence
- Suffering difficulties in day to day functioning and challenges to overall wellbeing due to the impact of severe psychological trauma - including depression, thoughts of self harm and suicide
- Afflicted by the physical health affects of conflict and displacement in particular reproductive health complications
- Experiencing racism or other forms of discrimination including religious persecution
- Unable to access secure and appropriate housing
- Unable to access livelihoods including education/employment



Compounding Factors

“I don’t like telling people what I have gone through because I feel shame I didn’t wish it to happen to me, it was something that happened to me because of the war.....”
(Resettled refugee woman explaining the impact of sexual violence on women)

These risks are further compounded by:

- Pre arrival experiences of torture and trauma including rape and sexual violence
- Disrupted or limited access to health support including prior to resettlement
- Shame as a result of past and current experiences of human rights violations
- Misunderstandings and misinterpretations over rights for women, men and children within Australia
- Challenges of negotiating different social roles for women and girls in Australia
- Family breakdown and separation including intergenerational conflict



Factors influencing risk within regional areas



“I wish the government would open their eyes and see that we need help here”
(A settlement worker voicing the challenges of providing support in regional areas)

In regional areas, additional factors influencing the level of risk experienced by refugee women and girls include:

- Gaps in access to specialist health support
- Mainstream services tasked with providing specialist torture and trauma support
- Isolation and resource restrictions of health and settlement workers
- Limited opportunities for training and support for workers including debriefing
- Limited availability of face to face interpreters particularly those of the same gender
- Social, political and economic climate of host communities
- Absence of a critical mass of refugee populations in the local area



Good practice responses to health needs

“I just want someone to care”

(A resettled refugee woman’s wish for changes to future settlement service provision)

A systemic holistic approach to health care is needed which focuses not only on the individual but which also includes family, social networks, refugee community, broader community and policy and service providers.

- Consultation! Finding out what people really want and need and how THEY would like to work together and be supported
- Co-ordinated flexible health responses- strong links between settlement providers, health providers and mainstream organizations
- Knowledge and understanding of pre arrival experiences specifically risks encountered and protection failures



Good practice responses to health needs

“Walk slowly....”

(Resettled refugee woman’s advice to service providers working with survivors of sexual violence)

- Recruitment and support of workers from refugee backgrounds – particularly women
- Alternative models of counselling and psycho social support - including community based and led initiatives
- Training and support for workers to increase knowledge and understanding of health issues and appropriate responses
- Adoption of a rights based approach
- Consideration of health as both a right and a protection measure - intrinsically linked to all other settlement issues



“We draw a big tree. This tree represents protection, support and happiness for women living under this tree.”

(A group of resettled refugee women share their hopes for their life in Australia)