



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Getting settled

women refugees in Australia





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Contents

- Acknowledgements 4
- Introduction 5
- Australia’s role in helping refugees 6
- Australia’s humanitarian visas 6
- The Woman at Risk visa 7
- Facts and figures 8
- Getting settled—an overview of Australia’s settlement services 11
- Getting settled—regional settlement 13
- Research on vulnerable refugee women 14
- Good practice initiatives 20
- Service provider initiatives 26
- Community initiatives 28
- The contributions of refugees 28



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Introduction

Refugees are among the most vulnerable people in the world. Refugee women and their children are at even greater risk, particularly if they have become victims of gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse. This can happen to many women and girls while they wait for years in refugee camps for an opportunity to resettle elsewhere.

In 1989, Australia established the Woman at Risk visa, in recognition of the priority given by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to the protection of refugee women in particularly vulnerable situations. Since it was introduced, this visa has assisted more than 13,000 women and their families to build new lives for themselves in Australia.

Australia remains one of only a small number of countries that has a dedicated refugee visa and settlement program to assist women at risk and their dependants.

Getting Settled is intended for anyone who has an interest in refugee women and their settlement experience in Australia. It contains information and a range of good practice ideas that have been shown to be effective in the successful settlement of women and their families. Most importantly, it recounts the real-life stories of some of the women themselves. We feel confident that general readers, former refugees, settlement service providers and others who work with refugees will find this information helpful and inspiring.

Our thanks go to the courageous women who shared their stories and photos. For many women, sharing their story is very difficult. Some women, when invited to tell their story, were taken back to painful and traumatic events—re-living their stressful experience.

“When retelling your story it feels like you are right there. When you tell your story it is very emotional, how your memory and your brain captures these things—captures it so strong, so strong...it will never go”, one woman stated.

These women provide a voice for refugees who have struggled, often against unbearable odds, to overcome adversity and to forge new futures for themselves in Australia.

You can read more *Getting Settled* stories on the [Department of Social Services website](#).



Australia's role in helping refugees

Today, Australia is a world leader in assisting refugees through its humanitarian and settlement programs. Australia is a signatory to the United Nations' 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and to the subsequent 1967 Protocol, and since the end of World War II, has helped more than 800 000 refugees to build new lives in Australia.

The Australian Government's humanitarian program is only one element of Australia's response to international humanitarian assistance needs. The government's targeted humanitarian aid projects include the provision of food aid, disaster relief, conflict prevention, peace keeping, gender equality projects and post-emergency recovery and reconstruction.

Australia also contributes financially to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and works closely with them to identify people in need of humanitarian assistance. Resettlement is only considered for those groups who cannot return home safely and who cannot remain in other countries where they have temporarily sought protection.

Australia's humanitarian visas

The Woman at Risk visa is one of five categories of offshore humanitarian visas offered by Australia:

- **Refugee (subclass 200) visa**
This visa is for people who are subject to persecution in their home country and are in need of resettlement.
- **In-Country Special Humanitarian Program (subclass 201) visa**
This visa offers resettlement to people who have suffered persecution in their country of nationality or usual residence and who have not been able to leave that country to seek refuge elsewhere.
- **Global Special Humanitarian Program (subclass 202) visa**
This visa is for people who, while not being refugees, are subject to substantial discrimination and human rights abuses in their home country.
- **Emergency Rescue (subclass 203) visa**
This visa offers an accelerated processing arrangement for people whose lives or freedom depend on urgent resettlement.
- **Woman at Risk (subclass 204) visa**
This visa is for women and their dependants who are subject to persecution or are of concern to UNHCR, are living outside their home country without the protection of a male relative and are in danger of victimisation, harassment or serious abuse because of their gender.

These categories go beyond Australia's international obligations and have been introduced to enhance the protection Australia offers to those in need.



The Woman at Risk visa

Australia is one of only a few countries in the world that specifically offers a Woman at Risk visa subclass and provides dedicated refugee settlement programs for women and their families.

In recognition of the priority given by UNHCR to the protection of refugee women in vulnerable situations, the government established the Woman at Risk visa category in 1989. It provides a pathway for the resettlement of vulnerable women refugees and their dependants who are living without the effective protection of male relatives.

While women at risk of persecution may be eligible for any of the humanitarian visa subclasses, the specific Woman at Risk cohort represent the most vulnerable. For this reason, the government is strongly committed to this program and allocates a set number of visas from the refugee component of Australia's humanitarian program to this group. Since its establishment in 1989, the Woman at Risk visa has helped protect more than 13 000 vulnerable women.

Who are women at risk?

It is estimated that 80 per cent of the world's refugees are women and children. They are forced to flee their homes and their countries; many suffer violence, torture, sexual abuse and hunger.

UNHCR defines women at risk to be women or girls who *have protection problems particular to their gender and lack effective protection normally provided by male family members. They may be single heads of families, unaccompanied girls or women, or together with their male (or female) family members.*¹

The key issue is whether or not the applicant lacks traditional protection mechanisms and is in danger because of her gender. For example, sometimes male family members may have been imprisoned for their political beliefs or are not able to provide effective protection for a range of other reasons.

Under Australia's visa policy, Woman at Risk refugees are afforded a high priority.


A visa applicant may include any dependent children and certain dependent relatives living with her.

From hardship to hope

For many women, their first experience of loss is often the loss of their home as they flee their villages, towns or cities. They may also lose their children, husbands, fathers, brothers and other family members. Without the effective protection of a male family member, they often struggle to access food and shelter. While this is a common experience for many refugees, these women often have the added challenge of caring for small children and elderly relatives without support.

Women at risk may have come from urban areas and been educated and employed. Women are often the first to experience serious threats when civil disturbances affect the area where they live, as they may have no traditional sources of protection and often lack the means to relocate on their own. Others may have lived in refugee camps for many years waiting for resettlement and are likely to have experienced or witnessed significant trauma and disturbances to their lives.

¹ UNHCR Resettlement Submission Categories, July 2011, [http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendocPDFViewer.html?docid=3d464e842&query=women at risk](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendocPDFViewer.html?docid=3d464e842&query=women%20at%20risk)



In the camps, women and children tend to miss out on food which is often scarce, and this may leave them more vulnerable to illness. Additionally, they can be preyed upon and subject to abuse and gender-based violence within the camp environment.

However, refugee women are strong and resourceful, despite all they endure. The Woman at Risk visa provides a pathway for resettlement and opportunities for women and their children to rebuild their lives free from the threat of danger or violence.

Many women granted a Woman at Risk visa have no family in Australia and rely on Australia's Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) to help them settle. From the time of arrival in Australia, HSS provides refugee women with intensive settlement support which focuses on enabling self-reliance, developing English language skills and connecting them with mainstream services and the wider community.

A recurring theme among refugee women in Australia is that through support received from settlement services and access to education, many are able to gain qualifications and begin careers. Becoming an Australian citizen also plays an important role in making them feel they belong to the Australian community.

As the stories in this book show, these women display remarkable resilience and a great willingness to contribute to society. Their stories highlight the fierce determination they possess to build a new life for themselves and their families.

Facts and figures

Since the Woman at Risk visa began in 1989, more than 13 000 visas have been granted. In recent years, some of the characteristics of the entrants are as follows:

- The majority of women at risk have little or no formal education.
- At least 30 per cent have experienced torture and trauma. This figure could be significantly higher, as many cases go unreported.
- The majority are younger than 26 years old; however, about 20 per cent are older than 50 years of age.
- Their average family size is between three and four people.
- The top five countries of birth for Woman at Risk refugees during 2012–13 were Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia.
- Over the last five years, Arabic and Farsi were the most commonly spoken languages by women at risk.
- The most common cultural backgrounds in 2012–13 Hazara (Afghani), Iraqi and Karen (Myanmar).
- Compared with other humanitarian cohorts, a high proportion of women at risk are without social and family links to Australia.
- The oldest woman to arrive in Australia on the Woman at Risk visa was over 100.
- The youngest was aged 8 months and 7 days.



Since 1989, the settlement of Woman at Risk refugees has become an important part of Australia's humanitarian program.

Figure 1 - Woman at Risk visa grants from 1989-90 to 2012-13

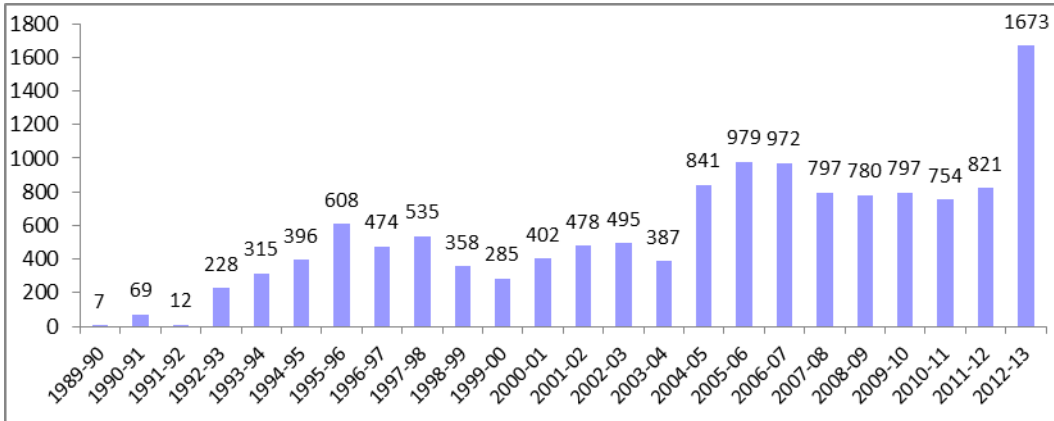


Figure 2 - Woman at Risk visa grants by age in 2012-13

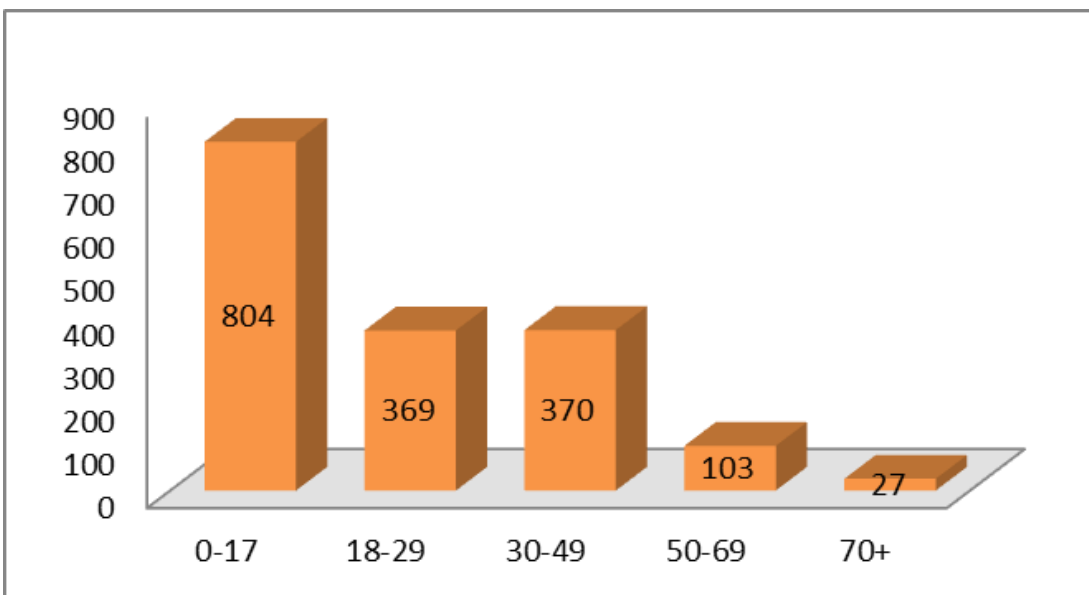
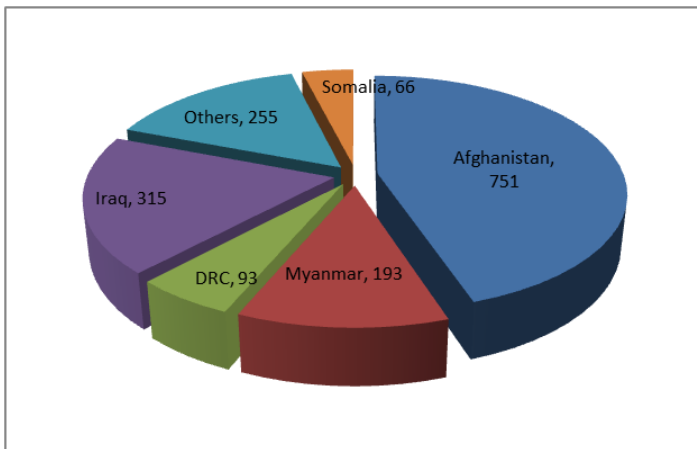




Figure 3 -Woman at Risk visa grants by top five countries of birth in 2012-13



Note: The country of birth of principal visa applicants is applied to secondary visa applicants

More information about Australia's Humanitarian Program can be found on the Department of Social Services' website at www.dss.gov.au.

In 2012-13, almost 1700 visas were granted to Woman at Risk visa applicants – the highest number since the visa was introduced.

The top five countries of birth in 2012-13 for Woman at Risk visa grants were Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Somalia.



Getting settled—an overview of Australia’s settlement services

Settling into life in Australia can be a very challenging and stressful time for most refugees, who have already experienced trauma and dislocation in their country of origin and possibly their country of first asylum as well. The Australian Government provides support in a number of ways.

The Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO) program

Preparing refugees for life in Australia begins before they enter the country. The AUSCO program is provided offshore to refugees over the age of five who are preparing to settle in Australia. It is delivered over five days and provides practical advice and an opportunity for people to ask questions about travel to and life in Australia. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) currently delivers the course on behalf of the Department of Social Services.

The Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) program

In late 2009 the Australian Government announced changes in settlement services for migrants and humanitarian entrants. The changes followed an extensive consultation process on the government’s Integrated Humanitarian Services Strategy (IHSS). In April 2011, the IHSS program was replaced by the Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) program. The aim of the HSS program is to assist humanitarian entrants achieve self-sufficiency in the settlement process through the assessment and delivery of settlement services on a needs basis.

The HSS program provides early practical support to refugees and humanitarian entrants to help them settle in the community. Initial services may include:

- arrival reception and assistance
- assistance with finding accommodation
- provision of an initial food package
- case management
- assistance to register with Medicare, Centrelink, health services, banks and schools
- linking with community and recreational programs.

HSS service providers tailor their services to the needs of refugees and humanitarian entrants. The program is intended to build their ability to participate in the economic and social life of Australia and provide them with the knowledge and skills to independently access services beyond the initial settlement period.

Some entrants, including those on a Woman at Risk visa, may have other needs that are not met by the HSS program. They may be eligible for other settlement programs or additional mainstream services available to all Australians, because of their particular vulnerability and often intensive support needs.



Other settlement programs and services

In addition to HSS, refugees can also access:

- **Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National)**
TIS National is an interpreting service provided by the Department of Social Services for people who do not speak English. TIS National has more than 30 years of experience in the interpreting industry, and has access to nearly 2300 contracted interpreters across Australia who speak around 170 languages and dialects. TIS National is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for any person or organisation in Australia requiring interpreting services.
- **Settlement Grants Program (SGP)**
Through the SGP, services are delivered to people in greatest need of settlement assistance. These services assist eligible clients to become self-reliant and participate equitably in Australian society as soon as possible after arrival.
- **Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)**
The AMEP delivers up to 510 hours of basic English tuition to eligible migrants, refugee and humanitarian clients who do not have functional English. Humanitarian entrants with special needs may also receive additional tuition under the Special Preparatory Program. The AMEP complements the department's orientation programs. Participation in the AMEP program is voluntary.
- **Complex Case Support (CCS) program**
The CCS program delivers intensive case management services that may be beyond the scope of other settlement services, to refugee and humanitarian entrants with exceptional needs. CCS is designed to work in partnership with settlement and mainstream services to address barriers some entrants face in settling in Australia.

HSS service providers and other relevant community services have developed successful approaches that address the specific needs of women and children settling in Australia without the support of a male adult family member. The tailoring of HSS and mainstream services is particularly important in ensuring flexible service delivery and successful settlement outcomes.



Getting settled—regional settlement

While the majority of refugee and humanitarian entrants have links to family or friends and settle near them in metropolitan areas, regional settlement for humanitarian entrants is becoming more important.

Since 2003, successive Australian governments have promoted the increased settlement of refugees to regional locations. This helps utilise existing capacity in regional areas and recognises the potential of humanitarian entrants—particularly those from rural backgrounds or with employment skills suited to regional areas. Critically, it also helps reduce the load on settlement services and resources in capital cities.

The Australian Government is committed to strengthening regional settlement with continued referrals of refugees and humanitarian entrants to regional locations. In 2011–12, regional settlement represented around 20 per cent of refugee and humanitarian settlements. To promote positive settlement outcomes for Woman at Risk refugees, the Department of Social Services and Citizenship refers these visa holders, whenever possible, for settlement close to family or extended family in Australia, wherever they might be.

Many Woman at Risk entrants have no relatives in Australia. They may, however, have links to friends or acquaintances. Although these are not family, they are nonetheless very important for successful settlement and where possible, these women and their families will be settled nearby.

When a refugee has not identified any family, friends or anyone they wish to live near in Australia, they are considered to be unlinked. Unless there are significant health or other issues present, they will be consequently considered for settlement in a regional location.

A planned and structured approach to the referral of unlinked refugee women and their families to specific locations helps them start their settlement journey in a very supported and effective way.

In regional areas, the strength of the local people-to-people networks and community groups and local services help to meet the individual needs of refugees. Many refugees who have come from regional and rural backgrounds report that they find the different pace and employment opportunities in smaller towns more aligned to their previous experiences. In addition, participation in local social activities, education and employment fosters a growing sense of independence and belonging.

Currently HSS services funded by the Department of Social Services operate in the following regional locations. The key regional locations identified by the department for the settlement of unlinked women at risk and their families are marked with an asterisk. These regional centres are well placed to meet the needs of refugee women as they often allow for greater cross-agency cooperation.

Cairns	Townsville*
Newcastle	Toowoomba*
Wagga Wagga	Logan/Gold Coast*
Albury/Wodonga	Coffs Harbour*
Shepparton	Wollongong*
Launceston	Geelong*
Hobart	



Research on vulnerable refugee women

The Centre for Refugee Research at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women recently completed a three year research project involving resettled women and their service providers in Australia. Over 500 women who came to Australia as refugees and 100 settlement service providers took part in the project. The research, funded by the Australian Research Council, assists in identifying risk factors in resettlement and in developing solutions to protection concerns.

The particular vulnerabilities of women at risk

To develop a better understanding of the particular issues faced by women at risk refugees, Dr Eileen Pittaway, Dr Linda Bartolomei and Dr Rebecca Eckert of the Centre for Refugee Research, UNSW, interviewed a number of women.

"What happens there... follows us here." (Refugee woman, 2008)

All of the women who were interviewed reported experiencing high levels of torture and trauma prior to arrival in Australia. These experiences included systematic rape, sexual torture, being forced to witness the rape of family members, including their children, being forced to engage in survival sex, having borne one or more children as a result of rape, and having suffered rejection, violence and isolation from their own communities.

The following quotes from women interviewed give an example of their pre-arrival experiences.


"Men are affected in the war because men get killed but women and children, they rape the women, they rape the little girls and mistreat the children ... do you understand? So I really want this message to go for the women and children and people. No one wants to live as a refugee." (Refugee woman, 2008)

"As a refugee you don't have rights so they just take advantage of you and take or strike you on the street. They can walk up to you and say are you going with me? You say no and they just grab you and beat you and rape you." (Refugee woman, 2009)

"Sometimes I say, it was good just to kill all of us. Kill the men and the women all together. Because they were saying: 'No we don't want to kill the children, the women. Only the men.' But they kill your husband and after that you are still suffering. They kill women in their own way [by raping them]." (Refugee woman, 2009)

Many refugee women and girls have experienced more than one of these traumatic incidents. The research has shown that the compounding effect of multiple abuses can make women more vulnerable to future violence and impact on their resilience and wellbeing. The majority of the women who took part in the research project identified the critical need for services and for policy makers to be aware of their experiences.

For many refugee women, resettlement is not an instant solution to their problems. Some experience further problems in their new country, including gender-related violence, which negatively impacts on their wellbeing and settlement outcomes. They have spoken of the devastating impact of the shame associated with past and current experiences and the impact of sexual and gender-based violence on their relationships with family and community.



Some refugee women can encounter problems in finding affordable and adequate housing, employment and education, and can also experience discrimination and exploitation—all of which creates barriers to successful settlement.

The most vulnerable are 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 victimisation by their own community in Australia
- isolated from their own and host communities because of shame factors
- suffering from misunderstandings and conflict over women's and children's rights
- experiencing increased vulnerability due to separation from family members
- living in situations of family and domestic violence
- suffering impairment in daily functioning due to severe psychological trauma
- being forced to engage in survival sex.

The impact of pre-arrival experiences can potentially be compounded when the absence of specifically tailored programs for these women and girls make the provision of effective services more difficult.

Some excellent models of service provision response are emerging in both regional and urban areas. However, service providers have identified knowledge gaps and have requested additional training and assistance—central to which is to develop knowledge that is specific to the needs of this group of vulnerable women.



Why we need Woman at Risk visas and effective service provision

The following two case studies provided by the Centre for Refugee Research illustrate different pre and post arrival experiences of women at risk.²

Susan's story

Susan is a 25 year old woman who fled the Congo after her village was attacked by rebels. She witnessed the brutal death of her husband and father, before she, her mother and her sisters were raped repeatedly by rebel militia in front of her children. Susan fled to Kenya with her three children where she sought refuge in Kakuma refugee camp. Shortly after arriving in the camp, she discovered she was pregnant and gave birth to her fourth child there.

During her time in Kakuma, Susan received some support from members of her community but as a single woman, she was often ostracised. Many people called her names and abused her. It was difficult for her and her children to survive. One of the refugee men in the camp told her that if she formed a relationship with him then he would help her and her children. She didn't want to do this but felt she had no choice. The relationship was violent and he would often beat and rape her. When Susan eventually tried to leave him, he threatened to kill her and the children. Her case came to the attention of protection officers within Kakuma and she was moved to the protection area. After spending a year there she was resettled in Australia under the Woman at Risk program.

Susan arrived severely traumatised and with complex physical and psychological health needs. Because she spoke some English her case worker assumed she would need only limited support. Subsequently, Susan only saw her caseworker three times before being referred to a new service provider who had no information on her history. Susan was forced to retell all aspects of her story. The service provider had not worked with women at risk previously and was so horrified by the details that she queried whether Susan's story could really be true.

Susan refused to return to the service and subsequently tried to seek assistance through a number of other services, without success. Another service provider who worked with Susan later explained that her case was so complex that workers felt they did not have the skills or knowledge to help and often did not have an appropriate place or service to refer her to. At one stage Susan was referred to a torture and trauma service, but as she had not experienced counselling before, she was terrified this would be seen as confirmation that she was mentally ill.

Susan had limited community support as she found it very difficult to trust people. She felt isolated and often only left her house to take her children to school. As a single mother Susan worked hard to care for her children but sometimes struggled. In particular, Susan's relationship with her youngest child was especially difficult because of her memory of the rapes she had witnessed in the Congo. Susan eventually moved to another location where she received the support that she needed from a service that had more experience in working with complex women at risk cases. She and her family are now doing well.

² Names have been changed to ensure anonymity



Zahra's story

Zahra is a 30 year old woman from Somalia. Her ordeal began when rival clans attacked Zahra's village, killing all of the men, including Zahra's husband. Zahra and her two eldest daughters were raped repeatedly before being left for dead by the militia. Her three youngest children escaped with a neighbour but they were later reunited. She and her children then fled to Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, travelling at night to avoid being attacked. However, life in the camp was also very dangerous. Women and girls were often raped and there was never enough food or money for essential items such as soap or medicine.

Like many other single women in the camp, Zahra felt she had no choice but to engage in survival sex in order to get enough money so her children could eat. Once this became known to others, Zahra and her children were abused, ostracised, and any rations they could get were stolen. Zahra worked hard to protect her family and was ashamed of what she was forced to do. Men would often force their way into her home and rape her, telling her she could not say no as she was a prostitute. Zahra gave birth to her sixth child in the camp. Soon after, her case came to the attention of one of the resettlement officers from Australia and she and her family were resettled a year later.


Zahra arrived in Australia scared and extremely traumatised by her experiences. She was welcomed at the airport by two women, both of whom spoke her language. She was settled into a house which was stocked with food from her home country and close to local services. Prior to her arrival, Zahra's case manager, who specialised in working with women at risk, did extensive research on the camp conditions Zahra had been in. The case manager also talked with other women from the community who had been resettled from Kenya to ask what conditions were like and what extra support they felt would be helpful in making Zahra feel welcome.

Soon after she arrived Zahra was assigned a volunteer who had experience working with vulnerable women. She was also connected with other women from other refugee backgrounds who had formed a women's support group. A torture and trauma counsellor visited the group to explain the service and what counselling meant. Zahra saw the counsellor regularly to help her cope with the traumas she had experienced. She was also able to access a family support program for single mothers. After a year Zahra's case manager introduced her to another worker who was familiar with her story and women at risk clients. Zahra was able to seek ongoing assistance through a migrant resource centre and now, three years later, she helps other newly arrived women at risk.

Risk assessment and response tool

The Centre for Refugee Research has used the data collected in their research to identify common risk factors for refugee women in settlement. They have developed a risk assessment and response tool to provide guidance to service providers working with women at risk refugees. This is based on a similar tool they developed to assist UNHCR and non-government organisation staff in the identification of and response to the most at risk women and girls in camps and urban refugee sites. It was adopted as standard operating procedure by UNHCR in 2006. The resettlement tool is currently being trialled in Australia and was tabled at the UNHCR/Non-Government Organisations Consultations and the Annual Tripartite Meeting on Resettlement in Geneva, in 2012.

It is designed to assist workers to provide an effective response to women and girls at risk, and other women who have experienced severe trauma, rape and sexual abuse as part of their refugee experience.



Work at the Centre for Refugee Research includes a focus on the particular settlement needs of women at risk and the best ways these needs can be met by service providers in Australia.

“You see in a refugee camp it’s a hard, hard life and coming in this country to settle is also hard. You can see for example six women who are coming by themselves with children, I think they need a lot of support...they need more information... they need people to teach them how they can stand up by themselves, do things by themselves... because to start a new life is hard...they cannot express their problems and it’s hard.” (Resettled refugee woman, 2010)

Bas

“Even though I was risking my life I had to see my mother to say goodbye. I had to ask for her forgiveness, I needed to hear my mother say she forgave me for leaving in the first place and taking her grand kids away. I had promised my mother when I left with my two daughters, 9 years earlier, that I would come back to see her... Most of us don’t get to say goodbye...”

“I am a proud Australian citizen and pleased to share some of my story.

“I had lived in United Arab Emirates (UAE) for some time, although I was born and raised in Iraq. I was married and worked for various private companies in UAE. My husband was Palestinian and unfortunately he died from cancer in 1989. When the war broke out in 1991 my daughters and I were living in Baghdad.”

“I arrived in Australia in 1994 with my two daughters aged 14 and 10 on a Woman at Risk visa. It is not easy to arrive in a strange country. I didn’t know who I was going to see, what I was going to say. I was frightened, tired and I didn’t know what would happen to us. The Department of Immigration provided support services and within two years we were quite settled and getting on with our new lives.”

“I didn’t think I would earn a Bachelor of Visual Arts Degree with Honours, establish myself as an artist, and end up working in the public service. Or that my oldest daughter would become a geologist working in Western Australia, and that my youngest daughter, a graphic designer, would also work for the public service. Nor did I think I would later make a perilous return journey to Iraq to see my dying mother.

“In 2003 my brother in Jordan let me know that our mother was very sick and likely to die fairly soon. I felt I had to see her before she died. I decided to travel to Iraq even though all the advice we received was not to go as it was just too dangerous because of the war. I understood the situation in Baghdad was really bad.

“I still had some contacts from my time working in Jordan and I began planning the very dangerous journey back to see my mother. The United Nations and some non-government organisations had special flights but all other flights were grounded. Travel by car from Jordan to Baghdad was also out of the question. People travelling in cars were often robbed and sometimes killed for very little. The embassies warned us not to travel, but I had to see her.



“But I had a contact, a British friend I had worked with (she is dead now—she was captured and killed about two years later). I met her in Jordan and she wrote me a recommendation letter stating she had worked with me and I was a good person and of good character. This helped me with the arrangements to get on a flight to Baghdad.

“To be safe I needed to blend in. My brother who lived in Baghdad told me to wear daggy clothes so as not to attract attention. ‘Only foreigners wear sunglasses, watches or jewellery and hats – you may get killed as people need money.’ I knew that when I got to my mother’s house I must stay inside and not leave the house.

“When I arrived in Bagdad I was shocked and scared because everywhere there were soldiers with guns. I felt sick and emotional all the time, shaking inside. Outside the airport, driving along the roads was the next shock—all the roads were occupied by the military. There were tanks and sand bags, rubble, broken glass and beside the roads soldiers were sitting with guns pointed at the cars, each car length was another tank. The other thing I noticed was that all the trees had been ripped out; this was done so no one could hide. It looked so sad, such different scenery to what I remembered, devastation everywhere.

“I cried and cried when I finally arrived at my mother’s; my family there couldn’t understand why I cried. There were so many reasons for my tears. My mother was very ill but gained consciousness at times and was so happy I came to see her. She had lost her eye sight so she couldn’t see me but we hugged and talked when she was well enough. My mother and I were able to talk from the heart and it meant a lot to me.

“I could only stay for twelve days, but it felt like twelve years. It was a very heavy time. I had to hide in the house the whole time and was always worried that the neighbours might let slip I was there. Our other family members came to the house to visit and brought what little food they had to share. I was scared and always thinking who knows I am here? People talk and pass on information.

“The trip to Baghdad and getting out again was all very complicated. But I do not regret going. When I came back to Australia I was so stressed and depressed from having seen my mother like that. I called her every day, even if it was just to hear her breathe. I would tell her ‘I am on the phone, don’t try to talk, just relax’.

“It all comes back clearly. It feels like it hasn’t been a long time, while it has. Everything opens up... it feels like you are right there when you retell your story; it’s very emotional how your memory and your brain captures these things, captures them so strong, so strong... it will never go.

“We always leave close family behind. I feel so sad my father died without me being able to see him, I feel a choke in my chest when I think of him... it is hard not to have said goodbye. People are lucky to be born in this country and see their family around them. But I am a very proud mum and my life experience has made me very strong person. I am very grateful for Australia for giving me and my daughters a safe life.”



Good practice initiatives

'Good practice' is a term used in the human services sector to describe high quality or proven evidence-based approaches to working with people. The aim of good practice models is to help improve service delivery. The information provided here highlights approaches that both research and practice indicate are appropriate for working with traumatised women. Studies have shown that when these needs are met early and comprehensively, it can significantly and positively impact upon the ability of the woman and her family to successfully settle in Australia.

Exposure to trauma brought about by such things as disaster, war or violence is an issue that affects people long after the event has ended. It also significantly affects the health and well-being of many refugees. Understanding how trauma affects people's emotional and physical health has an impact on the design of services delivered to refugees.

As part of their commitment to good practice, HSS providers have developed policies and procedures to ensure vulnerable women and their children have the best chance of positive settlement outcomes. The provision of appropriate assistance using good practice models has helped many women to thrive.

HSS providers are aware that for refugees, many everyday activities can be quite frightening. This is particularly the case for women, whose confidence is often very low. For them, using public transport, going alone to public places, or leaving their children in the care of strangers in child care centres can be terrifying.


The following characteristics are common amongst women who have survived trauma:

- difficulties with sleeping or staying awake, difficulty with memory and concentration, dealing with emotions, learning new skills and/or making decisions
- experiencing nightmares, fatigue and fear of the unknown can make travelling and living alone in a new place very frightening
- social isolation and difficulties in engaging with people, a lack of trust of authority, a sense of sadness or helplessness, shame, irritability
- loss of confidence in their parenting skills and independent living skills.

A universal concern expressed by refugees is for the well-being of relatives left behind in often dangerous and unstable situations.

The following good practice information contributed by HSS service providers and other groups that assist refugees is not exhaustive, but highlights some of the successful practices and policies developed by service providers and government.

Also included are some of the recommended practices developed by the Centre for Refugee Research at UNSW, in particular by Dr Pittaway, Dr Bartolomei, Dr Eckert and associates. The information has been grouped under themes that reflect the elements considered essential for successful, sustainable settlement:

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- the importance of understanding issues impacting on refugee women
 - a welcoming community
 - general settlement support information
 - suitable accommodation
 - health and wellbeing
 - English language
 - employment and training.

The importance of understanding issues impacting on refugee women

Many refugee women have overcome significant trauma and are determined to make a better future for themselves and their children. However, their increased vulnerability and lack of confidence means their successful settlement requires a flexible approach that allows them time to learn and practise the skills they need to function independently.

- Workers report that having in-depth knowledge of the pre-arrival experiences of women at risk and an understanding of the impact of years of sustained human rights abuse assists them to provide appropriate support.
- Services need to identify and respond to any risks arising during settlement.
- Rights-based and culturally responsive practices that acknowledge, respect and incorporate the strengths, skills and capabilities of women from refugee backgrounds are essential to successful settlement.

A welcoming community

- An initiative of the Refugee Council of Australia, [Refugee Welcome Zones](#) are important for new arrivals, giving them hope. Nationally more than 70 communities have signed a declaration to promote and support refugees and their communities.
- Refugee women have appreciated being matched with a female member of their local community who supports them in the first 12–18 months of settlement.
- Local women's groups provide transport to, and include women in, activities and events such as children's play groups, conversation skills practice opportunities, cooking and sewing groups.
- Community support assists women's involvement in faith groups, sports, volunteering, clubs and other groups. Children are encouraged to participate in school and after hours activities.
- Many workers recommend driving lessons should be a priority to address safety concerns and promote independence for women.



General settlement support information

- Having continuity of support people, volunteers and case managers is vital so women don't have to re-tell their story over and over.
- Refugee women report they felt safe and welcome when met at the airport by a female HSS worker who spoke their first language. The worker also helped them settle into their new home and introduced them to the community. Women also felt more comfortable when linked with female volunteers, support workers, case managers and counsellors.
- A longer support period may be necessary for women to become independent.
- Staff should consult directly with women from refugee backgrounds, to identify their concerns and understand their needs and to develop responses tailored to suit their needs. Women need to be involved in the planning, management and delivery of appropriate programs.
- Women may need access to interpreters and the legal system including legal advice, and local Women's Associations or support groups.

“Supportive practices include being mindful of the effects of trauma, communicating often and openly and being patient and sensitive. Offering practical support, listening and watching for non-verbal cues to decide the best way forward is vital to achieving good outcomes.” (HSS Service Provider)

Suitable accommodation

Under the HSS contract, service providers are required to help women liaise with real estate agents and landlords and provide accommodation that is close to schools, healthcare and transport services.


Other assistance includes:

- careful placement of women in safe housing in appropriate suburbs, and single women not housed in isolated locations
- short and long-term accommodation for vulnerable women should be secure, with security screens, working locks, fenced yards and secured gates
- women to be taken to their accommodation by female workers or volunteers and given orientation in their own language to ensure they are able to use electrical appliances and equipment safely
- assistance with property management, including help to set up automatic rental payments, utility management, bonds and any other requirements.

Health and wellbeing

Successful approaches include:

- women to be escorted to their first health or wellbeing appointment by a female
- the use of accredited female interpreters

- 
- appointments scheduled with gender-sensitive services and female doctors, nurses and other health professionals, in an environment where women feel safe to address personal issues
 - women and family members provided with access to torture and trauma counselling
 - HSS providers deliver mandatory mental health and cultural awareness training to staff and volunteers to ensure they are sensitive to the clients' needs.

English language

Examples of good practice include:

- providing opportunities for women from the same cultural group to attend the same classes for support
- settling women in locations where appropriate education options are available for all family members
- providing English classes at flexible times and locations, including at a work location if possible, or referral to an online distance learning provider
- ensuring free childcare is available while women attend AMEP classes
- providing home tutoring for women who are pregnant, have babies or health issues that prevent them from attending English classes.

Employment and training


Many refugee women don't feel settled until they gain employment. However, there are a number of barriers to employment that can be difficult to overcome. These can include low levels of literacy in their first language, limited English proficiency, lack of established networks, inability to access transport and limited knowledge about the Australian workplace.

Any assistance to overcome these barriers is worthwhile and includes:

- using an interpreter to promptly and sensitively address issues around income security to ensure there are no misunderstandings when dealing with agencies such as Centrelink
- providing specifically targeted work entry programs and work experience
- giving priority to money management education, as many women who have lived for years in refugee camps have not had the opportunity to save, manage household bills, or use an ATM (automated teller machine)
- helping women have their skills recognised and facilitating opportunities for work experience through volunteering. Some HSS providers have employed former refugees as support workers or interpreters to provide them with work experience. Many of these women go on to full-time training and employment.

Delivering services well

Having access to culturally-inclusive services empowers women, is respectful and focuses on their individual strengths in a supportive way. In addition, a case management approach assists with early assessment and risk detection. Successful approaches include:

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- prioritising a mental health and well-being assessment to determine the circumstances and level of need
 - recruiting women who have an interest in developing their knowledge and understanding of refugee women pre-arrival experiences, including expertise in gender-related violence and an understanding of conditions in countries of origin and asylum
 - providing intensive and consistent settlement support to women, including the option of home visits during the first year of settlement
 - promoting respectful, clear, open, honest and consistent interactions by the support worker and/or volunteer of the same gender and ethnicity
 - developing referral pathways to mainstream agencies to ensure women receive specialist services when they need them
 - providing regular debriefing and support to settlement workers who are supporting women at risk.

Children and young people

Many young refugees have no English language skills or prior education, and face significant disadvantage. These following approaches have been identified as helpful:

- providing family relationship sessions to ensure vulnerable young women and girls remain within their family and community environments, where safe and practical
- providing leadership training to support young women in becoming advocates and mentors to their peers
- organising training workshops or group sessions on issues of concern
- providing pathways for participation in mainstream decision-making, such as in the Young Women's Association or other advocacy groups
- promoting children and young people's direct participation in program development and monitoring, utilising their ongoing feedback
- focusing on providing children and young people with services that address their specific needs
- providing children and young people with flexible learning options as they enter the Australian education system at age specific level, rather than their education level or English ability
- prioritising access to education, healthcare, employment and training opportunities
- supporting children and young people who need additional help accessing English as a Second Language support in schools
- providing links to specific projects and programs for girls and young women, such as a sporting club.



Group work and programs that build capacity

Programs are funded through Commonwealth, state and territory agencies to provide comprehensive and targeted casework services offering individualised support to vulnerable women. As a result of this approach, customised programs are designed in response to needs. Life skills development programs are offered in a small group setting for women with common settlement issues. Some examples of the skill development groups are:

- Australian laws on domestic violence, child abuse, child protection and mandatory notification
- negotiation and decision-making skills
- parenting issues and life skills
- cultural transition to assist people to settle into a new life in Australia
- group activities around shared home interests such as sewing, cooking, gardening and children's groups can assist women who have experienced trauma and isolation.

HSS settlement staff report that these groups can empower women to go on to develop their own community networks.

Advocacy

Many in the settlement sector view advocacy support with government and non-government services as essential. These have been identified as important considerations for women:

- the development of strong links between communities, settlement providers, health services and mainstream organisations
- the support of refugee community-led initiatives
- regular consultations with community leaders on improvements to the participation of women in their respective communities
- advocacy to relevant Commonwealth, state or territory agencies to develop ongoing programs for training, employment pathways for women and access to affordable childcare
- support for women in volunteering, training and employment roles

- volunteering opportunities within community groups and mainstream agencies.

Australia's settlement and orientation programs have a commitment to continuous improvement and incorporate many of the practices outlined above. The government's Onshore Orientation Program, for example, is tailored to meet refugee entrants' specific needs and helps develop their ability to participate fully in the social and economic life of Australia.

The Department of Social Services works with a number peak bodies and organisations to advance the interests of migrant and refugee groups across Australia. These organisations advise the government on a range of issues and assist the department in formulating policy and effective program management.



Service provider initiatives

The following contributions from service providers have been included to provide specific examples of good practice initiatives. There are many other excellent examples in the wider community.

Community Guides Program—Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) Victoria

AMES has developed a good practice initiative called the Community Guides Program as part of their refugee settlement support services. AMES currently employs 150 community guides, 65 of whom are women. Guides play an important role in the provision of practical assistance and social support and assist in linking new arrivals to services, their own community and the wider community.

The decision to match an appropriate guide with a client is based on the language, culture, gender and locality needs.

The role of community guides in settling vulnerable women

The community guides initiative is an integral part of settlement services provided by AMES. Community guides offer settlement assistance and are from the same cultural background and often share a common language and refugee history. They are ideally placed to offer meaningful support to newly arrived women. The guides share an understanding of what it is like to be new to Australia and from a refugee background. They can quickly build rapport, gain a client's trust, and build their confidence, which assists in achieving positive settlement outcomes.

Appropriate training is provided to those involved. The community guides initiative also gives an employment pathway for refugees. This can potentially include their first employment opportunity, on-the-job training and local work experience.


A Driver Education Program—Edmund Rice Centre

The Edmund Rice Centre Mirrabooka (WA) Driver Education Program is funded by the Department of Social Services through the Settlements Grants Program. The program was established in July 2008. It aims to address the needs of humanitarian entrants who often encounter difficulties in getting a driver's licence.

The centre provides a driver education program for humanitarian entrants who have been in Australia between six months and five years. Single women with children are one of the priority groups due to their circumstances. For these women, public transport can be daunting and difficult.

The program is in high demand and includes:

- up to 35 practical driving lessons with a qualified instructor speaking a learner's first language if possible
- weekly 'Drive Safe' classes to assist with the theory of practical driving
- up to 25 hours of supervised driving and assistance with completion of a log book, provided by trained volunteers if required
- assistance in preparing for the hazard perception test if required.



Programs such as this one are critically important in helping refugee women to gain independence, and allow them greater social participation and integration into the broader community.

Multicultural Craft Group—Riverina Community College

The Multicultural Craft Group facilitated by the Riverina Community College (RCC) helps break down barriers faced by refugee women in the region and allows for greater social inclusion. First formed in 2008, the group focuses on the strengths of participants, allowing for self-expression, support, language and social participation, while providing an opportunity for participants to display and sell their work. Over 50 refugee women have been involved with this group over the last four years, including women from the Sudanese, Burundi and Myanmar communities.

Members of the craft group are given the opportunity to teach a new craft-related skill to the other, newer members of the group. Some of these skills have included basket weaving, embroidery and sewing.

RCC has also facilitated a women's cooking group, which helps members develop their skills through accredited cooking and food hygiene courses at the local TAFE. Women can go on to run their own workshops and sell their products in the local community. Many also set up their own stalls at the annual Multicultural Street Festival.

The Blueberry Bus—Anglicare in Coffs Harbour

Refugee women often raise the issue of getting to work safely and express anxieties about using public transport. In responding to these concerns, Anglicare in Coffs Harbour saw an opportunity to provide a safe journey by bus, which also offers settlement services and orientation during the trip.

This model is a favourite of clients who work a distance from home and don't want to miss out on receiving important assistance, particularly English classes and the HSS orientation program.

Having settlement workers and AMEP teachers available on the 45 minute bus journey reduced women's anxiety and promoted a gradual transition to independent travel. This initiative also supports early participation in the labour market.

Overcoming educational barriers

Anglicare in Coffs Harbour is supporting refugee women to engage effectively with education and language programs by using a combination of flexible and innovative delivery models, including:

- having a community classroom located in the same apartment complex as several short-term accommodation properties. The classroom is easily accessed by women who are working with home tutors and volunteers to practise English. This classroom is designed to be very informal and welcoming, especially for mothers who have no childcare arrangements in place
- delivering some programs on the journey to and from work
- having community conversations/meetings in the local art gallery.



Community initiatives

Around Australia there is a wealth of grass roots community programs that women have developed to support their own communities. These initiatives are community-based and self-supporting. Below are two examples:

The Bhutanese Didi (big sisters) Project

An innovative community mentoring program was organised through the Women's Participation and Empowerment sub project under the Department of Immigration and Citizenship funded Settlement Grants Program of the Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia. They call themselves the Didi (meaning 'big sisters') Project. They have a number of small initiatives such as a women's support group, savings group, community volunteer group and they hold community education sessions throughout the year. The savings group opened a bank account in which members deposit money fortnightly. The money saved is then distributed back to its members at the end of each year for the group to use as they decide, for example, to purchase an appliance, to buy a car or to make a mortgage payment.

The Didi Project empowers women in their community through advocacy, volunteering and the mentoring of new arrivals. More established group members become mentors and encourage newer women to participate at all levels in the group's activities, which encourages an ongoing flow of roles.

The Didi Project also provides a 'buddy' support role for young mothers, single mothers and young girls.

Similar initiatives are also happening in the Congolese and Oromo communities in Adelaide.

Transport initiative—Oromo women helping each other

Oromo women in Hobart who obtained their driver's licence were proud of their achievement. Women in their community each contributed \$100 towards purchasing a car for a new family with a licence and are now planning on doing this for each new family.

The contributions of refugees

A recent report commissioned by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship—The Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants—indicates the scale and nature of the contributions that humanitarian settlers have made to Australia's economy and society over the last few decades. The report highlights the considerable achievements and contributions humanitarian entrants and their children make over the longer-term to Australian society.

In addition, a five year longitudinal study of humanitarian entrants—The Settlement Outcomes of New Arrivals (SONA) was published in 2011. The survey examined the extent to which humanitarian entrants felt they were faring in terms of social participation, economic well-being, level of independence and personal well-being.



The study found, among other things, that overall, humanitarian entrants are as well connected in their own communities as other migrants, and even more so in terms of religious, cultural and school connections. This is important as connectedness is a key predictor of how well humanitarian entrants feel they have settled in Australia.

Both these reports are available on the [Department of Social Services' website](#).

“Women are active and positive change agents—when given the proper resources— and are capable of improving their lives and the lives of their children, families and communities.” (UNHCR)



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The personal stories of refugee women

No two refugees share the same story but each is important. Most of the women interviewed for this booklet have encountered traumatic situations resulting in grief and loss. For some, recounting their stories brought back very strong emotions. The personal courage and resilience demonstrated by refugee women is remarkable. They have shown extraordinary strength and determination to overcome adversity, find ways to deal with their grief, and rebuild their lives.

The importance of education and training

Evelyn

“I very much look forward to contributing to our society.”

“I arrived in Australia in January 2005 with my three older siblings. I was 22 years old. Our family escaped the civil war in Liberia in 1990 by fleeing to the Ivory Coast. We stayed there until 2002 when war broke out and we had to flee to Guinea. It was in Guinea that the UNHCR registered us as refugees and helped us obtain humanitarian visas.

The biggest challenge I faced after arriving in Australia was the local accent, which took a while to get used to. The next great challenge was using public transport. Because it was difficult for me, I decided to get my driver’s licence. I was one of the first Liberian women in my community to do so, and this in turn inspired other women in the community to also learn to drive.

I became a volunteer at the local Migrant Resource Centre. I worked in the New Arrival Program under Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Services, where I was assisting other new arrivals to settle in Australia. I completed Certificates in AMEP and in aged care and immediately started work in a nursing home. While doing this work, I also completed my Diploma in Nursing and now work as an enrolled nurse. My next step is to take up tertiary studies and become a registered nurse.

I am looking forward to the future with my partner, who I met here in Australia. I am very grateful to the Australian government for helping me and many other women. I very much look forward to contributing to our society.”

Jawaher

“I’m doing nursing now, something I’ve always wanted to do.”

Jawaher was 17 years old when she arrived in Australia with her mother and her sisters in 2006.

“I didn’t know what to expect when we arrived but everything was different—like the language and school. I went straight into Year 11 and had to learn how to write an assignment because the way school work is assessed here is so different to how it was in Iran. It was hard at first to leave our friends but it wasn’t safe for us to live in Iran any longer. Because our father had passed away, it wasn’t safe for us to return to Afghanistan.



The uncertainty we experienced when we first arrived was very hard on my mum. She was very nervous because there was a lot of pressure on her and she was keen to help us settle. She has no education and everything has been more difficult for her. We have all stuck together as a family and it's much easier for her now.

It is definitely better for us in Australia. I'm doing nursing now, something I've always wanted to do. We wouldn't have this life and these opportunities if we hadn't come to Australia."

Fatima

"All of my children are at university and I'm so proud of that."

Fatima came to Australia in 2007 with her three teenage children. From the moment she arrived, securing her children's education was a priority.

"When we first got here we couldn't speak English. My children went straight into high school and it took them only three months to pick up the language. It took me longer to learn because I had some trouble with my health so I wasn't able to regularly attend classes. I am now able to manage my diabetes and have become more fluent and confident in English.

All of my children are at university and I'm so proud of that. Everyone can study in Australia. It means a lot to me because I had always wanted to be a doctor but because of the war I wasn't able to do it. Now one of my daughters is studying medicine and I feel like I am learning it with her.

I like living in Australia and I enjoy speaking about my culture at schools. Living in a small town and rather than a big city is great for my children. I feel like I'm very lucky. I have a garden with lots of trees. I grow lots of fruits and vegetables like tomatoes, oranges, mulberries and pomegranates. For six months of the year we don't need to buy very much. We are very happy here, especially my daughters."


Nevena

"Education has played a big role in our lives here."

In 1998, Nevena and her three teenage sons arrived in Australia after fleeing from the war in Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"When an envelope arrived with a picture of a kangaroo and emu on it, I was so overwhelmed at first I couldn't open it. I had been hoping we would be accepted by Australia and I was about to find out. I had read Adelaide was a city of students which offered so much promise for my children. Most importantly though, upon reading that we were able to migrate to Australia, I felt that my family would finally be secure."

In August 1998 I arrived in Australia with my three teenage sons. We left a European summer to find ourselves, only 24 hours later, in Adelaide which was wet and cold. We passed through customs with our possessions packed into four suitcases. When we reached the public area of the airport I noticed a distinctive smell which was pleasant but unusual and Adelaide seemed somewhat promising.



There were many people in the airport arrival area. Two of them were our cousins who arrived in Australia a few years earlier as refugees. They came to the airport to welcome us along with a volunteer from the Migrant Resource Centre. These three people stood by our side during our first few days in Adelaide. They helped us to find a place to live, showed us where to buy food and introduced us to life in Australia. I remain thankful for all their help.

Soon after arriving in Adelaide, my children and I were enrolled to study. Although I had thought that only my children would be studying in Australia I found myself once again going to school. With an extremely basic knowledge of the English language we set out to make new friends. We were aware of the unavoidable struggle that was ahead of us, yet with enthusiasm we encouraged each other to continue studying.

Living in Australia gave us the opportunity to move ahead, and we were able to set aside our strong feelings of loss and grief. The more we learnt about the Australian way of life the more we fell in love with it. Even though it felt like we were rowing upstream at times, we eventually learnt how to participate in mainstream society and while practising our original language and culture at home.

After 13 years of living in Australia, my oldest son works full-time in the building industry. He is engaged and lives independently in Adelaide. My middle son lives in Melbourne and has a Bachelor of Arts and postgraduate study in Professional Relations from the University of South Australia. My youngest son has a strong passion for social justice and he will soon complete his double degree in Law and International Studies at Flinders University.

As for me, for the last thirteen years I have worked in a variety of paid and volunteer positions. In 2007 I completed a bachelor degree in Social Work at the University of South Australia and I will soon complete a Master's Degree in Grief and Palliative Care Counselling. I started studying in Australia and never really stopped."



Community leadership and engagement

Seblework

“I have continued to support my community here in Brisbane.”

“When I arrived in Australia in 2009 I became involved in the Brisbane Ethiopian community. I also became involved with a wider network of women through the Women Leaders’ Support Group. Within my first year in Australia I completed a work placement program and became a cultural support worker for a not-for-profit organisation that works with refugees.

Now I have enrolled in a Social Sciences and Arts degree at the University of Queensland. After working on community projects for various not-for-profit groups I began a full-time job with Inala Community House. This organisation offers services designed to strengthen the quality of life for families, children and individuals in the Inala area of Brisbane.

I have continued to support my community here in Brisbane and in 2011 was elected secretary of our community group. I have recently married and now have a beautiful baby girl.”

Esperance

“I have helped women from my community who would otherwise be isolated and disengaged.”

“I came to Australia seven years ago with my four children. I came on a Woman at Risk visa. Since then I have supported my children through their education. My oldest son is now doing an apprenticeship in mechanics, my daughter is finishing year twelve and my younger children are in grades eleven and nine.

My experience has helped me to understand the importance of community support. As a result, I now help other women in the Congolese community in Brisbane by providing leadership and support. Through cooking and sewing group activities I have helped women from my community who would otherwise be isolated. I am also actively involved in a Women Leaders’ Support Group .


Three years ago I started a small dress-making business at home and my designs have been shown at a Brisbane City Council event. I have also run a sewing workshop for the council.

Recently I took a trip to a refugee camp in Malawi, which inspired me to help the women and children who are still there. I know that doing this will not only help those in the camp, it will also help those of us who have resettled in Australia. By sharing the opportunities resettlement has given us, we can give them hope for the future and remind ourselves how far we have come.”

Esther

“I try to contribute to my community and the broader community.”

“I arrived in Australia in 2002 with three children, including an adult daughter. Before arriving here my children and I spent years in a refugee camp in Guinea after fleeing from the war in Liberia.



I have tried to be the guiding force for my three children, who have all now begun to make their mark in their new home.

My daughter works for a not-for-profit organisation and is raising two children of her own. She is active in the community as a member of the Women Leaders' Support Group and leader of the Liberian United Women of Queensland. My eldest son has finished his university degree and my youngest is now attending university. The family has remained a strong unit, supporting each other to achieve our goals.

I try to contribute to my community and the broader community by doing volunteer work to support other women who have similar experiences to me. Last year I helped teach craft to women from the Karen community living on the north side of Brisbane. I take care of my grandsons when my daughter is at work and continue to be active in the Liberian women's group."

Health, safety and freedom from violence

Regina

"I don't know what would have become of me."

"I am originally from the Congo and arrived in Australia in 2006 with my sisters. We all came on a Woman at Risk visa. As I am the oldest and our parents were not around, I had to protect my sisters as much as I could. From the time we arrived in Australia, I helped my sisters to settle and they are now all living independently. I have worked hard to overcome the traumas in my life and deal with my limited mobility. I was able to improve my English to academic level and enrol at university. It was a very proud moment when I graduated in 2011 with a degree in social work from the University of Queensland.


I have been an active member of a Women Leaders' Support Group and I am involved in community activities and my church group. During the 2011 Brisbane flood I worked with my local community to help people in my neighbourhood who had been affected. I was suffering pain at the time but the energy and spirit of the community sustained me.

I recently had surgery to give me more mobility. I am still in recovery but look forward to making even more of a contribution to my new community here in Brisbane. I am very grateful for the Woman at Risk program for giving me the opportunity to come to Australia and make something of myself. Without it I would not have been able to do anything, I don't know what would have become of me."

Aisha

"Freedom, a peaceful environment and living amongst kind and considerate people."

"I am from Malistan, a district in the west of Ghazni Province of Afghanistan. I am 52 years old and have five children. Like many of the Hazara minority in Afghanistan, my family fled our homeland to escape conflict.



For a few years we were on the move. We fled from Afghanistan to Pakistan and then on to Iran where we lived in a city in the desert called Bam. While there, I experienced tragedies that changed my life forever.

In December 2003 a powerful earthquake struck south-eastern Iran, killing over 43 000 people. In this disaster I lost my 20 year old daughter, my son-in-law and two grandchildren. During this time I also lost my husband and my 14 year old son in a car accident. I felt lonely and daunted by the many challenges faced as my roles and responsibilities changed. My life was becoming too difficult and we desperately needed help. As a family we stuck together and this helped us to keep hope in those difficult months before we were granted the Woman at Risk visa that brought us to Australia.

We have been living in Hobart since 2009 and our lives have changed for the better. For years I suffered ill health that was never properly addressed because we had no money. I am now receiving regular treatments and health awareness that gives me strength and confidence to keep going.

The education of my children has always been most important for me and because of our circumstances they weren't able to attend school in Afghanistan or Iran. I can confidently say that schooling and health care are the most important services we are receiving in our new home. I regularly attend English classes and have made many new friends.

Freedom, a peaceful environment and living among kind and considerate people are some of the many life-changing privileges we now have in Australia. These, in many ways, well and truly compensate for the years of neglect, suppression, prejudice, and hardship we endured in Afghanistan.

I am very happy and appreciative of the Australian government and the compassionate people that have supported us to settle in Hobart.”

Nadifah

“There is no war here.”

“I left my country when I was 18 because of the fighting and the war there. I came to Australia on my own as a refugee. I thought it was very beautiful here and friendly. Most important is that there is no war here. It is peaceful, calm and quiet. It was great to go to TAFE and I met students from different countries. I am learning English and I am very happy when I go by myself to places. I go shopping and I have a job looking after children. I live by myself and I enjoy having visitors over to my place, going to the movies, meeting friends, and going to parties. I also like meeting up with other people from my country who live further away. I like the freedom of Australia but I also miss my brother and sister who are still in Africa.”



Annie

“...let your heart take courage.”

“I had to flee to safety and security because of the political issues in my country. I left with my two children and went to Cameroon. There were no refugee camps there and finding accommodation was very hard for a single mother. Existing each day in Cameroon was very hard.

I arrived in Australia in 2008, with my son aged eight and daughter 12. We had no information about Australia other than photos we had seen in a book. We were met at the airport by the case coordinator of Melaleuca Refugee Centre, community members and volunteers. We were taken to our new home which had food, furniture and a fridge. Four community members from my country had prepared a meal for us. I didn't know any of this would happen and it was a wonderful surprise.

I had no idea about Centrelink or any services available to assist us when we first arrived. My children were quickly enrolled in school and I went to classes to improve my English. Before becoming a refugee, I had already attained a graduate Diploma in English-African literature and Culture and a diploma in Business Studies. However, as 17 years had passed, my English needed refreshing. Within two years of being in Australia I had earned a Diploma in Business Administration and was working in a full-time job with an organisation offering intensive support to humanitarian refugees.

Being a single parent is difficult but I try new strategies to address problems as they arise. My children are doing well and I am proud of my family as we have achieved so much in our short time in Australia. We have been able to overcome the traumas of the past.

My brothers are still in a refugee camp, I miss my family and life here would be so different if they could come and join us. I thank my God and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship for this start. I also thank Melaleuca for the warm welcome and the Red Cross for the connection with my families.


In Africa life is hard for refugees and people die with no support. I am happy because I have a house and we have all become Australian citizens. I support others in my community and life is good.' For single mothers I say—be strong and let your heart take courage for all situations.”

Arrne

“One day I will have a job and my children will have a good future, then I will be really free.”

“I am from Rwanda and my father was killed in 1996, when I was 13. Then in 2000 my mother was also killed. In Tanzania, I got married and had my daughter when I was 21. We were living in a refugee camp, and when my husband was with me life was alright, but one day he went missing. People from the camp told me the police took him.

I did not want to stay in the camp if my husband was gone so I had to move. To this day it worries me because I still do not know where he is. I want information about my husband so I can understand what happened.



I was happy to come to Australia in 2010 and I love the freedom I have now. When I first came here I had no English and could only say 'welcome'. I went straight into classes to learn to speak English and I am still studying now.

My daughter works hard at school and is good at doing her homework. I try to help her when I can and if not, I encourage her to ask her teacher for help. We have no computer, so she has to use the school computer.

I was happy and seeing a man here in Australia but when I told him I was pregnant he left, and he doesn't want to see me or our baby. I am very sad that this has happened but I will make a success of my new life and family here.

I had trouble with some neighbours who do not like people from Africa. My neighbour was aggressive to me and this made me scared and I tried to avoid her. I stayed in my house and closed the door to be safe. I reported this to the police, who helped me.

I have become friends with another neighbour from Africa who also a single mother. We are supporting each other now, and together we are stronger and we can try to sort out the problems with our other neighbour. I love my new neighbour.

When I am stressed I try to think of the future. I am happy that my kids and I are healthy. We are free. My kids love me. In the future when my baby is walking, I will get a job, I will save money. I want my kids to go to university, then I will study too. I would like to get a job in aged care and then get into nursing. One day I will have a job and my children will have a good future, then I will be really free."

Equal opportunity, inclusion and non-discrimination

Qui

"I think in Australia you can do anything if you try."

"As a single mother from Sudan, I arrived in Coffs Harbour with my five children looking for a place where we would be safe and my children could grow up healthy. The first year was very hard, as my English was poor. My children learned quickly and now they all speak better English than me. I am proud of all my children but a special thing happened last year when one of my boys became the captain of his primary school. The school invited me to come and they congratulated me on the stage in the big hall. They said they had never had an African school captain before, I am very proud. I think in Australia you can do anything if you try."

Jino

"Now she is writing our family story for the internet."

"I was born in Eritrea and spent 10 years living in Khartoum before coming to Australia. I arrived in Coffs Harbour with my mother, my brother, two sisters and three children. In Sudan we had all lived together but we now have separate houses.



Even though we are all in the same neighbourhood, at first I really missed my sisters. I still see them every day at English class and they also visit my home every day. One of my little boys is learning to play cricket—what a funny sport! My daughter is very smart and working very hard. I got a job picking blueberries last year and saved enough money to buy her a computer. Now she is writing our family story for the internet.”

Melika

“Every migrant and refugee that comes to Australia has a story to tell and they have to feel that they are valued.”

“I had big dreams when I was young. I wanted to study, practice medicine, get a job and raise a family. For refugees, leaving their homes is not a choice—they are forced to flee in order to survive. My first challenge as a refugee was survival. I lived in a camp in East Sudan for a year which was overcrowded and under resourced. Even though my life as a refugee was hard, it has strengthened my character, made me resilient and given me the courage to face my new reality.

In Sudan I persevered with my studies and obtained a First Class Honours Degree in Zoology but held on to my dream of becoming a doctor. A World University Services sponsorship allowed me to gain a Master’s Degree in Marine Biology in Egypt.

I was accepted for resettlement in Australia and arrived here from Cairo in 1992. Soon after my arrival in Melbourne, I was able to achieve the most important part of my dream—a Doctorate in Aquatic Science at Deakin University in Warrnambool.

Warrnambool has given me a sense of belonging, hope and acceptance and made me feel at home. I have felt lonely but I am grateful to the wonderful people I met and befriended who made it easier for me to learn and realise that things like race, colour or religion are only external features and do not make a person different as a human being.

Every migrant and refugee that comes to Australia has a story to tell and they have to feel that they are valued. Our migrant history also provides us with various traditions and cultural practices from across the world that we can all celebrate in our own way and be accepted as Australian. Having experienced constant war and persecution, I am now very thankful for Australia’s peaceful and democratic society.