

Refugee Women at Risk in Australia

An evaluation of service provision for refugee women settled under the Humanitarian Settlement Services Scheme

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Foreword

Settlement Services International (SSI) commenced providing settlement services under the Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) program in April 2011. SSI has set up this program in this short span with the support of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and its existing membership, the Migrant Resource Centres.

As the Program Manager of the HSS program, I am delighted to present this preliminary report of an evaluation we have commissioned in early stages of this program. This report will examine how the services we are offering are addressing the needs of refugee women who come to Australia as part of the women at risk program. We are also interested to fully understand the needs of women who enter on other visas categories, as the experience of our staff indicates that many of them have also suffered similar form of violence and trauma prior to arrival.

The emerging findings of this project indicate how valuable refugee women find our services when they first arrive. They also highlight gaps and challenges, which we are determined to address.

We look forward to sharing the full report of the project in April 2012, and to work co-operatively with the sector so that together we can enhance the services refugee women and their children need to settle successfully in Australia.

Amrit Versha

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Introduction

This is a report of the emerging findings of an important evaluation of the impact of Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) provision on newly arrived refugee women.

The evaluation will assess the effectiveness of settlement services provided to refugee women resettled to the Sydney metropolitan area under the mandate of Settlement Services International (SSI), funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. It will compare the experience of a group of refugee women who entered Australia on Visa Category 204, designated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as “women at risk”, who have received specialist targeted services, with a group of women who have entered Australia as refugees on other visa categories (200 and 866) and who received general settlement services.

The evaluation will be based on a series of day long consultations with newly arrived refugee women, SSI case managers and bilingual guides followed by 30

in depth interviews with women and staff. To date, four consultations have been held, involving 30 newly arrived refugee women, 20 case managers and other concerned SSI staff and 12 bilingual guides.

The findings of the consultations are summarised in this interim report. A full report including the data from the interviews will be available at the end of March 2012. A separate report on SSI organisational infrastructure will be submitted to the SSI management.

Executive Summary

This is a report of the emerging findings of an important evaluation of the impact of Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) provision on newly arrived refugee women. This interim evaluation report presents the findings and preliminary recommendations from four consultations with refugee women and SSI case managers and bilingual guides conducted in January 2012. A further phase of key informant interviews will be conducted and final and more comprehensive report will follow.

The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of SSI's HSS services for refugee women. Based on the evaluation, policy recommendations and tools to enhance future service provision will be developed.

The project uses an internationally acclaimed action research based participatory assessment methodology. The consultations utilised a 'storyboard' technique developed by the evaluators for use in research with refugee populations.

In this interim report, the findings from the consultations are organised under headings related to the questions used in the storyboard process.

The findings indicate that SSI is providing a critical and positive role in settlement of newly arrived refugee women. The women in the consultations spoke very highly of SSI services and the qualities of the staff members who worked with them.

The provision of links to other essential services by SSI case managers was repeatedly identified as crucial assistance in the settlement process. The role of the bilingual guides is also critical in the first weeks and months of arrival, as the women spoke about how the bilingual guides provide their 'only voice' and 'light their way' in their early days of learning how to navigate Australian systems. It is very important for newly arrived women that the bilingual guides share the same refugee background as them, which gives them a genuine understanding of their experience arriving for the first time in Australia. The bilingual guides at SSI provide a critical service, which is essential for the women's physical and emotional wellbeing in their early days of settlement.

In addition, the evidence suggests that SSI staff themselves find their contact with refugee women rewarding and satisfying because they can see the difference that they are able to make in easing the settlement process.

Nonetheless, the findings also indicate that there continue to be numerous challenges to settlement for refugee women and in particular refugee women who are 'at risk'. Their additional trauma and vulnerability compounds the barriers and obstacles that many refugees face when settling in Australia.

Difficulties in accessing affordable housing, learning English, finding employment, connecting to their community, and parenting in the new cultural environment, all present challenges that can feel insurmountable to single women attempting to manage their family alone in Australia and cope with their accumulated trauma. The findings also show that these women are often ostracised from their own community as a result of the 'shame' and discrimination associated with being labelled a 204 entrant.

In particular, the consultations highlighted that women who have been in detention have an additional layer of trauma, and need more specialised psychosocial support. Another group who needs additional assistance is older women currently arriving on 204 visas, with no family and few personal resources to rely on. They find it almost impossible to find appropriate housing, and experience extreme isolation. Caseworkers and bi-lingual guides also reported that from their experiences that many women who arrive on 200 and 202 Visas and those released from detention on 866 Visas often have pre-arrival experiences similar to those of many women who enter on 204 visas as women at risk. These women also need specific and targeted support to assist their settlement into Australia

The evidence from the evaluation suggests that additional services are needed to support refugee women to overcome the compounded barriers to successful integration they face. These are addressed in the preliminary recommendations below.

Background

The UNHCR Women at Risk Program began in 1989. It was designed to facilitate the speedy and effective resettlement from refugee sites of women identified as having experienced high levels of rape and violence and being at high risk of further violence or death. It was anticipated that countries of resettlement would provide additional settlement services and case management to this cohort of women, in recognition of the violence and trauma they had suffered.

Australia was an early adopter of this scheme, starting with a quota of 60 places in 1989, and gradually increasing that number to 10% of the refugee resettlement caseload in recent years. Specialist service to this group over the years has been patchy. For the majority of the time, no specialist services were provided. Settlement services providers have become increasingly concerned that the special needs of this group of refugees were not being met by the existing service provision structure. Women identified as suffering from posttraumatic stress were referred to mainstream trauma and mental health services, which often have no specialist knowledge of sexual torture. Additionally, many service providers noted that a significant number of refugee women who did not enter on the 204 Visa also had suffered from extreme violence, sexual violence and trauma. Their needs on arrival are very similar to those of women who enter on the 204 Visa, and they also do not receive specialist targeted service provision.

Description of SSI Humanitarian Settlement Service provision

Since 2011 under the auspice of Settlement Services International (SSI), specialist services and case management have been provided to women on 204 Visas in the Sydney region through a DIAC-funded intensive case management program. SSI supports interagency collaboration for the case management of single refugee women, and women on 204 visas. This includes Case Conferences, in addition to regular referrals and contact with services, which are local to the client and accessible via Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs). SSI encourages involvement of specialist service providers such as Centrelink, social workers and mental health experts, in the management of complex issues.

The Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) Program provides basic on-arrival settlement assistance. SSI support clients through their settlement journeys which are individual and unique. Using a human rights framework, the HSS Program:

- provides assistance with airport pickup, essential registrations, with the provision of food, mobile phones and baby packs, and assist with immediate health needs.
- help clients to understand and learn new skills about accessing services through SSIs Orientation Program.
- fosters social connections and inclusion through volunteers.

Case Management of the HSS program adopts a collaborative, client focused approach that aims to effectively address individual settlement needs. Case Management Planning is driven by the immediate settlement needs of the client or family, and is delivered within an empowerment framework.

The Orientation Program delivers information on Australian systems and processes through bilingual educators, translated materials and visual resources. Some topics covered in the Orientation Program include the Australian legal system, the NSW Health and Education systems, child safety and nutrition, youth issues, budgeting, and working in Australia. The Orientation Program focuses on clients developing life-skills and becoming confident to navigate their local area independently.

For refugee women who are single and those that arrive on 204 visas SSI adopts a gender friendly approach with only female workers allocated to work with them. There is also regular collaboration with specialised services like social workers and psychologists to provide additional support.

Evaluation Process

Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of those services. It will also examine how well the needs of women who have not received specialist services have been met. Based on the evaluation, policy recommendations and tools to enhance future service provision will be developed.

Methodology

The project uses an internationally acclaimed action research based participatory assessment methodology specifically designed by the evaluators for working with refugee women.

The evaluation involves:

- A one-day consultation with SSI staff working directly with resettled women, as designated by SSI management (up to 30 participants)
- A one-day consultation with women who have recently entered Australia as “Women at Risk” (up to 30 women). They will be over the age of 18 and from a number of different ethnic backgrounds
- A one-day consultation with women who have recently entered Australia on other refugee or humanitarian visas (up to 30 women). They will be over the age of 18 and from a number of different ethnic backgrounds
- 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with services providers identified by SSI management
- 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with self-selecting women participants in the consultations
- One half day meeting between service providers and service recipients in which each group presents its findings and recommendations to the other group and a list of action points is agreed upon
- One half-day trial of training to staff on the tools developed from the consultations

This interim report presents the findings from four consultations with SSI case managers, bilingual guides and refugee women from both the ‘Women at Risk’ and other visa categories. The consultations utilised a ‘storyboard’ technique developed by the evaluators for use in research with refugee populations. Participants worked in small groups to represent their reflections pictorially and analyse a series of questions about their experience of resettlement and settlement service provision.

The questions used in the storyboard process were:

1. What were your hopes and dreams when you came to Australia?
2. What are the very best things about life in Australia?
3. What are the hardest and worst things about life in Australia?
4. What has helped you most to settle and start a new life in Australia? And how?
5. If you were in charge of services for refugee women what else would you provide to help them?
6. If all these services were available what changes would it make to the lives of refugee woman?

Ethics

A strength of the methodology used by the evaluators is ethical and reciprocal contract that is agreed between researchers and research participants. A strict confidentiality was negotiated with the participants at the consultations, and the

facilitators signed a commitment that the women would receive copies of the reports from the process, and that their photos and stories would not be used without their permission. Bilingual guides acting as interpreters in the consultations were briefed by the research staff prior to the sessions and debriefed afterwards. They also signed confidentiality agreements. Acknowledging the sensitive nature of the consultations and the sharing of personal stories, a trauma counsellor is on call if needed at any time during the evaluation process. The evaluators are themselves both trained counsellors with long experience of working with refugees who have survived torture, rape and extreme trauma.

Emerging Findings

Initially, it was envisaged that the finding would be presented separately focusing on the differing perceptions of the refugee women, the bilingual guides and the case managers. However, a major strength of the service provision from SSI is that so many of the guides themselves came to Australia as refugees, and the boundaries of these categories became very blurred. It has therefore been decided that for this interim report the findings will be combined, and a decision about the major report will be made once all interviews have been conducted and further analysis of the combined data undertaken. The findings are organised under a number of storyboard question headings.

1. Initial hopes and dreams

Question 1: What were your hopes and dreams when you came to Australia?

“Freedom! Freedom of speech, religion. Freedom for everything; health, food, water shelter, education. Making money. And a better life for ourselves and our children”.

– Consultation participant

“Finding a stable job, living independently”.

– Consultation participant

The refugee women spoke of “having high hopes” of being able to start a new life in peace, safety, and security. Having experienced trauma, persecution, war, violence, and separation from or the death of their loved ones, they expressed looking forward to their new life in Australia where they could put their traumatic past behind them and provide the things necessary for the happiness and health of their children. Secure housing, education for their children, and access to health care were especially emphasised.

“A beautiful house. Mum watching kids play in yard. There she is dreaming of having access to hospital, better shops, learn English, children in school. Beautiful fence around her house, also safety for her”.

– Consultation participant

“For the hopes and dreams...we are all refugees, when we are migrating to a new country the dreams and hopes are really big and the picture is huge. Education is very important. We want the home to fit the size of the family. Education for the entire family. Of course we want our kids to have education from a higher university, food, health medical service. Because for most of these countries we are coming from when you are sick it is hard... And a playground and recreation for kids because that wasn't likely during refugee the experience”.

– Consultation participant

“Housing, happy sunshine, positivity, happy, happy families. Peace. Nice and bright. The education”.

– Consultation participant

“Freedom! We didn't have it in our countries. We lost our kids. At the airport someone welcome you with your name...SSI welcoming at airport. Helping with accommodation, passport, health issues. How was trip? Transport to accommodation. We feel like we are on honeymoon! Then more dreams about money, house from Centrelink. Back in the camp we don't get money. They give me the thing but not money so I get the choice of which one I want. So first day it's a very big dream that come true. Income, health, doctor services. No-one cares in our own country about our health”.

– Consultation participant

2. Best things about Australia

Question 2: What are the very best things about life in Australia?

“Peace, freedom, education”.

– Consultation participant

“The best thing in Australia is the respect for women, who are equal to men, no other country is it like this – equal rights for women”.

– Consultation participant

“Everyday you thank your god that your family arrived in Australia”.

– Consultation participant

Many of the women spoke of the sense of peace, safety, freedom and equality as the best thing about life in Australia:

“When we come to Australia we feel the peace the safety. The life has changed for the people when we leave their country and come to Australia”.

– Consultation participant

“Everyone is equal: poor, rich, black, white”.

– Consultation participant

"I have been in Australia since 2004. My country was in a war. I want everyone to forget what happened and come here and be happy".

– Consultation participant

"Many Australians are welcoming, smiling".

– Consultation participant

"Now I have a home, family harmony away from war, together happy. No more are we refugees. The mum has an education and able to learn new language skills to empower her. And of course money to spend".

– Consultation participant

Other women spoke of particular services or access to support as the best thing about their life in Australia. Free English classes, Centrelink benefits, education, child and pension support, Medicare and free public health care, translators and telephone interpreters and access to good psychologists were all identified, for example:

"When I am sick here I have free medical access".

– Consultation participant

"Psychologist because I feel like I own the world when I go there".

– Consultation participant

SSI was repeatedly singled out for its critical role in helping the women and their families when they first arrived in the country and felt lost and unable to access any services or understand any Australian systems. The refugee women identified that for many of them, the bilingual guides are their only voice in their first weeks and months after arrival. Their support is essential to newly arrived women's physical and their emotional wellbeing. The importance of the bilingual guides being refugees themselves and understanding what the new arrivals are experiencing was also emphasized repeatedly by the women.

"Someone has to show us our first steps, they have to give us the start ...

Bilinguals [SSI bilingual guides] are like the sun - they give us light.

Everybody need that sun. They give us light and security".

– Consultation participant

"Refugees are people in water, trapped, and bilinguals are the helpers".

– Consultation participant

"SSI is a very good service. A lot of convenience, high in energy, help to rebuild life in Australia, [help to understand] new systems". – Consultation participant

"New country barrier - SSI settlement service to get back hope to move on with new life".

– Consultation participant

3. Settlement challenges

Question 3: What are the hardest and worst things about life in Australia?

“After honeymoon phase, many services is not enough. So the rollercoaster is coming down. The challenges begin... language barrier, financial hardship... Time of resettling is full of stress... Financial independence is a big, big one. Education, plus language barrier makes a problem - don't understand Australian system. Isolation is another problem. Finding a good stable job. Becoming more depressed”.

– Consultation participant

“How to overcome the torture and trauma she has been through? Paperwork. Qualification for employment. DIAC application forms for extended family. Housing. Learning English”.

– Consultation participant

Despite the many positive stories about the importance of SSI's role in assisting with settlement, the refugee women nonetheless reported numerous challenges faced by them and their families as they struggle to build new lives in Australia. Although these have been presented as separate issues below, many of the quotes demonstrate how in fact they pose intersecting and compounding barriers to successful settlement.

3.1. Language barrier

Lack of English was a commonly raised issue that affects all other settlement difficulties:

“If you can't speak English when you first arrive it is really difficult”.

– Consultation participant

“The biggest challenge is the language barrier, for most of them. And that actually affects their dignity because everything is like unknown for them... they have to [look after] the children and go about there and find food and provide for the family”.

– Consultation participant

“Also letters from Centrelink, one after another, that's a challenge as well. Especially because some of them are illiterate, it is a stress. Also she is shy in taking these letters to service providers and asking what Centrelink wants”.

– Consultation participant

“Language barrier, how do you communicate, understand, access services?”

– Consultation participant

3.2 Financial stress

Financial stress is another cross-cutting issue that was frequently raised and linked to other settlement problems. Insufficient Centrelink benefits and low incomes for those who do manage to find work were both identified as

contributing factors. The women reported that as a result, basic services such as housing, specialist medical fees, and transport were unaffordable. They also discussed the social and psychological aspects of financial stress such as the shame and the pressure it puts families.

“I remember when I came I was struggling to pay bills and I met this lady as a friend and she says when you have to pay why not take the bill to the MRC? Why? It’s for you! But I was afraid to ask for charity voucher, it’s like begging”.

– Consultation participant

“Sometimes the financial management is very stressful. Homelessness. Some of these woman actually were married [before the refugee experience], and in times of financial management, the husband was the breadwinner, and now that has changed and now she has to financially manage, as he is most likely not around”.

– Consultation participant

The following case study, related by a case manager, illustrates the added stress that insufficient income causes the newly arrived women:

“We had this single mother, she’s been here for a few months now. In January, her child fell in the playground and broke her arm. She was afraid to call her caseworker because it was the weekend. So she took her to the hospital [alone] and [the girl] needed an operation and when they went home, she didn’t have money for taxi, she had to take the train. She can’t afford calcium and medicine for the child, because she doesn’t have enough to cover all the expenses. They only have 300 dollars for the week. They live in Penrith. They had a hard time getting someone to rent [a house] to them because they have no [rental] history. Their rent right now is too high. She’s worried about taking her child to school”.

– Consultation participant

3.3 Lack of accessible and affordable housing

As this case study illustrates, one of the biggest obstacles to successful settlement is the lack of safe, accessible and affordable housing. Many women spoke about how difficult it was for women on 204 visas to find appropriate housing. They find it extremely difficult to secure rental leases, because of mistrust from rental agents and a lack of rental references. When they do, it often costs more than 50% of their weekly income from Centrelink, leaving families to struggle on insufficient income for their basic needs.

When they do manage to find housing, they often have to settle away from family and friends in the more affordable outer Western suburbs, where they are isolated, unable to afford to travel to visit their family and friends. Single women are forced to share in often extremely over-crowded unsuitable accommodation. They are traumatised, without resources and family support and struggling to adapt to new systems and culture.

Case managers and workers currently see housing as one of their biggest challenges and one that is a major barrier to the successful settlement of new

arrivals. It prevents them moving forward in other areas, such as English acquisition, education and work. It makes social integration very difficult both within their own communities and with the wider community. Clients are depressed and unhappy and workers feel overwhelmed and powerless to assist.

“The biggest challenge is for single woman to access accommodation. Very hard to find accommodation for single in the rental market because of the limited income and they realise that the income is not enough, then they start seeking employment, to support themselves. This is a very big challenge for single to find employment with no educational skills and language barrier, to support children”.

– Consultation participant

“The big thing is when a lady coming here without a man support...they can’t manage...to find accommodation by themselves. They try, but look at the market! It’s so busy in Sydney and especially for a single lady, who her payment is around maximum \$400 something, \$460. If they have children, [the payment goes] up a little bit. Usually they couldn’t find suitable accommodation - they’re wandering around. We can’t translate for them, we can’t take them to real estate. They do not know how to apply for accommodation. They can’t read their details, they don’t know the system... This is not the system we are usually using in my home country or other countries... for a lady over thirty, coming here, has a language barrier, is scared and usually they are so in distress”.

– Consultation participant

[The landlords] “need a reference and a pay slip. Ok, they don’t have it. That’s the two main important factors. The third one is, ok, not even [they] haven’t got the reference letter and haven’t got the payslip, they are Centrelink client! They get paid from Centrelink and you know the view [of Centrelink clients] is not good, so three negative elements. It gets harder and harder for them. There is no privilege for these ladies. No privilege”.

– Consultation participant

3.4 Employment

The difficulty of finding secure employment was also discussed. Even those who are qualified find that they are unable to get work, since their qualifications and experience are not recognised in Australia. Language is also a huge barrier: [Even though their] “skills, knowledge and job from past not always recognised they love to learn and gain knowledge. But they don’t understand the system, language and so become isolated and depressed”.

– Consultation participant

3.5 Intergenerational conflict

Intergenerational conflict was a frequently raised issue, as the women spoke about the challenges of raising their children in a new cultural context while

struggling to deal with their own and their children's traumatic past experiences, overcome the difficulties of settlement, and maintain their own cultural practices and pass these on to their children. Very often this results in conflict in the home as children reject their parents' culture in an effort to fit to the Australian mainstream.

"Generational conflict. It is a real big one. They want their culture to stay alive. Their kids are going to school and make different friends and want to go another way. The kids say they are in Australia now and "we can do what we want". They hate us. It's "us and them".
– Consultation participant

"Intergenerational differences - girls and boys socialising together or being friends, [wearing] tight clothes, the parents don't understand. When young people come to Australia, they say you can't treat me like that, you can't touch me or swear at me, I'll call the police. We need to raise our kids to grow in a safe way, teach them in a way that gets the best of two cultures. That's the way I've learned".
– Consultation participant

"It is a big challenge for the women to bring up the children in an Australian environment as child protection clashes with where they come from. The children they say "no mum".
– Consultation participant

"The schools support the children but sometimes in the wrong way, saying oh if your parents do this to you, why don't you call the police? We need to raise children successfully without this [happening]". – Consultation participant
"In Australia, they don't teach children how to talk to your family, parents. In my country we learn this, and teacher is like father, mother. Here it is different, we need to teach that".
– Consultation participant

"We need to have special teachers to teach cultures and also speak their language".
– Consultation participant

3.6 Not understanding Australian systems

"It's a new [system] for them. They feel powerless, hopelessness. It also has an impact on their self esteem too, as well as their confidence. You see here [in the storyboard above], there is general conflict. One of the kids, they there are not confident. She is not coping, the mother, and is crying. She is really stressed".
– Consultation participant

The challenge of not understanding Australian systems was also discussed. Seemingly, simple things like shopping and picking the kids up from school are difficult and frightening when women are newly arrived, do not understand the

language, and do not understand the way things work in Australia. Dealing with the paperwork and institutional systems required to get housing, Centrelink and medical care become insurmountable obstacles.

“And the embarrassment they feel bad because “oh I was someone in my home country. I was a professor in uni[versity]”. “I was a doctor. I was a uni student and a very high level student in the uni. And now I am nothing here. I cannot even make an appointment for myself”. And speaking [English] is huge for them”.

– Consultation participant

3.7 Isolation and racism

The women discussed the pressure and isolation they experience not only as a result of the factors raised above, but also because very often their family members are still in dangerous situations in other countries. Not only are their family not here to support them in the settlement process, but the additional stress and financial strain of worrying about them and trying to help them only adds to women’s difficulties in Australia.

“You come here [and] you might also have that extreme fear towards people from the community who may be of help to you here in the new country. You might not even speak to anyone and that will cause isolation, they won’t be able to be a part of community”.

– Consultation participant

“All our clients somehow suffer from participation and inclusion issues you know, like they all need more inclusion and it’s always difficult because they don’t have the language and they don’t really know many people so [a major challenge is] the whole welcoming into a community”.

– Consultation participant

They also talked about how the sense of isolation is compounded by racism from other Australians:

“Isolation. You’ve left your family, you got no one. By yourself. Not belonging. Not feeling welcome, leading to low self-esteem and constantly being treated as different. It is understandable that people want to hold on to their culture when it is under attack”.

– Consultation participant

“There is racism and sometimes there is a lot. Whatever you do, you are still treated as a refugee. Different. Even the teachers, the way they treat you, you have to earn your way. That’s what I think”.

– Consultation participant

3.8 Vulnerability and discrimination against women on 204 visas

In addition to the isolation and racism that refugee women experience from the mainstream community, when they are known to have come on a 204 visa they are often subject to additional barriers including discrimination within their communities:

“And some of them... being a woman under a 204 visa [are] ostracised from the community... they know that you have been raped, so when you come from that background they may take advantage of those with a refugee background. When you come here it is kind of, people who may not know, people start believing conveniently what people say about them...and some people blame her, you know, for ladies being raped and some of them are looked at, some of them look at her different because they don't perceive her as being...they have that bad image of her”.

– Consultation participant

“Some of them might be vulnerable because obviously being a woman, and the culture is new and if you are here by yourself, they kind of, you are kind of stereotyped, you know, there are things associated with being a women who come under a 204 visa”.

– Consultation participant

“That's why it's better to not even include a visa half the time, you know, as people's identity, because I read somewhere - and it was a great thing - some refugee said “I don't want to be identified with my worst experience”. You know that's not who I am, I don't want to be defined by my worst experience. So in many ways the 204 visa defines somebody by their vulnerability”.

– Consultation participant

“When you are on a 204 [visa] and don't have the traditional male support and you know you don't speak the language... you know it's much harder for you to go out and source what you need, then it's even more of an issue because you are very isolated”.

– Consultation participant

“It's a big, big difference... coping with [Australian systems] as a general [rule] for clients is difficult. But for 204 [entrants], the ladies, usually single and with children, is a disaster. They struggling all the time... with money management, financial hardship, very much indeed... I found out it is neck to neck: accommodation, money and language barrier. All the same, is their main problem”.

– Consultation participant

3.9 Trauma and depression

As well as dealing with the numerous challenges of settlement, refugee women and their families are also having to cope with the trauma of their refugee experiences. Very often, the combined stress of these factors becomes too

much, leading to family breakdown and violence, depression, suicide and problems like gambling.

“One of the strongest things [woman’s name] shared with us, the terrible suffering you and your husband faced, but what you continue to worry and suffer for is all of the people back in [country] who continue to suffer. You all worry about friends and family left behind”.

– Consultation facilitator

“Moving from one county to another especially with language, not in touch with the right services, you kind of lose hope”

– Consultation participant

“Mixed emotions: happy, depressed, isolated. Everything is not happening as quick as I want it to. I am isolated from community, no family, no friends. I become depressed and angry... I see everyone smiling and wonder why am I not like this, smiling? I don’t feel like they fit in”.

– Consultation participant

“Some of them have been through traumatic experiences and they have been through trauma and also when they come here some of them lose sense of belonging, hope, sense of identity is lost”.

– Consultation participant

“Being scared, not trusting people, the police. Being very very protective of their children, or being very soft on their children. The kids were getting in a lot of trouble because their mother cannot keep it together. They scream and run amok. The mother is just lying down”.

– Consultation participant

3.10 Navigating the Australian refugee system

Many women discussed how difficult and frustrating it was attempting to support family members who are in detention or overseas to obtain a visa:

“Not enough help, no one is listening when you have problems, especially if you are on a 866 visa and helping those in detention”.

– Consultation participant

“Not enough information to access when processing visa, where to go for health, most learn from word of mouth. When going for bridging visa maybe immigration can help? We sit here and wait”.

– Consultation participant

Some of the women had been in immigration detention, and they talked about how traumatic that had been. The following case study provides one example:

“I came by boat but they took me to Christmas Island. I stayed there on the boat for three days but there was no food, no water. My son got really sick and the

boat was about to - it was really bad. I stayed two and a half months on Christmas Island and we lived like animals. My son got really sick. They told him just to drink water and he'll be okay. No privacy, they would open the door even when I am changing. It was really bad, not like normal life. I stayed in Darwin three and a half months then the community supported me in Brisbane. The house I was in was haunted and I asked to leave because I couldn't live there. Nobody helped me. I was mentally scarred, if I don't get help I hurt myself, kill myself. They gave me a house in Sydney. I came to Sydney with my two kids, my husband still in camp. My youngest son is seeing counsellor. Whenever my son sees a kid with a father he grabs their hair and I have seen him do it to [a bilingual worker]. He is really traumatised. My husband is still in the prison in Darwin. I am also seeing a psychologist. Because of my mental health I think about killing myself but then I think about my kids. I have tablets that make me less angry. When my oldest son sees me, he gets really angry and scared because of the situation. I don't have any friends. I came from Iran, no family no family, no friends, no one that can help me. I feel really sorry for my kids. And that is my story".

– Consultation participant

4. What has been most helpful

Question 4: What has helped you most to settle and start a new life in Australia? And how?

"The help that refugees need is a combination".

– Consultation participant

The above storyboard and quote illustrates that many of the participants recognised a combination of services required to assist newly arrived refugees. Centrelink payments, access to medical care, torture and trauma counselling, accommodation and employment support, English classes, childcare and social programs to link and support women were all identified as critical services.

“Money is so important, especially for those who come by boat as they come with no money. And hospital. STARTTS counselling for empowerment plays an important role”.
– Consultation participant

“SSI is the answer. We try to ‘welcome to the new life’. All the services are needed: counselling from STARTTS, Department of Housing, health, employment, support groups for single women... they feel isolated. These services help them have support. Maybe they have children and maybe not enough [money] to go to leave them in childcare or preschool/early childhood, [then they can] use Karitane or something like that. And also the education at Australian school”.
– Consultation participant

“Women’s groups. Linking women to other women. Cooking classes. Support, skills and friendship. Sometimes people just need physical, emotional support. First thing you want to do is give hope to the client. It’s important to have hope even though things are difficult”.
– Consultation participant

The central and vital role that SSI plays for newly arrived women and their families as their first point of contact and as the bridge, linking them to other stories was also consistently emphasised. In particular the importance of the bilingual guides who speak the same language, understand their culture, and share their experience of being a refugee, was discussed repeatedly as being critical in the first weeks and months of arrival in Australia:

“The bi-cultural workers help us climb the ladder to a new life”.
– Consultation participant

“The bilingual guides save us from “drowning” when we arrive”.
– Consultation participant

Several participants spoke of success stories where women who were able to access the necessary services had positive outcomes. As one SSI staff member articulated:

“You can have a positive experience, [when you] have a good caseworker to advocate on behalf of the client. Equal rights, skills building and linking to and using all the services available”.
– Consultation participant

The following case study illustrates the effect that accessing appropriate services can have on the lives of the women and their families:

“The story I am going to share is [about a woman] from my own background... one of my colleague’s clients. [Before coming to Australia she lived] with her husband and two girls. He was abusive to her violently and she left her husband and this

brought shame to her husband. She moved out of the house but he beat her and said how shameful it was. She thought of leaving the country but in that second country she still had the same fear, locked in the home. So she applied for a visa and came to Australia on [a] 204 [visa] but in Australia she was still not herself. She would not attend English classes and she did not want to leave the house. After a few months she took the classes and improved her English and attended swimming classes and counselling, and really was coming out of her shell. I see this as a success story as she has improved her situation, it has been good for her little girls and we have been able to help her”.

– Consultation participant

5. Additional services needed

Question 5: If you were in charge of services for refugee women what else would you provide to help them?

“We need more education about the system in Australia. We don’t always want to be helped, we want to help others. We hope that in the future everyone being safe”.

– Consultation participant

“We need to understand the law too, lots of people misunderstand the law”.

– Consultation participant

“All of these [Australian culture, Australian systems] are things you need to understand before you can start to climb the ladder. And you have to be able to get work before you can get all of your rights in Australia. We have to take notice of this... because if you don’t understand it, you won’t get up that ladder”. – Consultation participant

5.1 Assistance in understanding and negotiating Australian systems

The most important additional service identified by the refugee women was increased information and support that enables women to become confident and independent in negotiating Australian systems. The women expressed aspirations to be self-reliant and able to help others in their community, but identified that they required additional initial support in order to understand and feel confident using and working with services and systems, ranging from Centrelink, health services, public transport, and understanding Australian laws and rights. They identified that if these services are provided early enough, are comprehensive, and are not withdrawn prematurely before newly arrived women have had a chance to stand on their own feet, they can lead to empowerment and independence in later stages of settlement.

In addition to on-arrival support, the women also raised the need for improved pre arrival information before they come to Australia. They reported that current the information provided is not sufficient and does not really prepare them for the reality of the different culture and systems and cost of living. Women who have been in detention were also identified as slipping through the cracks: they require orientation sessions before they are released so that they know what to expect when they are released to the community. In addition, SSI staff had many suggestions for the improvement of settlement services. In this interim report, the most frequently discussed will be presented, with more detailed and comprehensive recommendations to be included in the final evaluation report.

5.2 Additional services for 204 visa entrants

Several case managers talked about the need for more intensive specialised services for the women on 204 visa categories or those that have experienced sexual torture and rape. These included:

- Additional financial support
- Additional case management hours
- A support group for women on 204 visas to access on arrival
- Specialist women's health service
- Additional social support services to link women to others in their community and address isolation
- Safe and secure accommodation for at least the first 6 months after arrival
- Better and more timely provision of information about the women's circumstances to their case managers
- Additional training for case managers working with 204 visa entrants
- Collaboration with psychologists who can effectively assess the women's psychological needs

"There is no privilege for them. We have no way to give them more...no bonus, no money, no action...we can't spend more hours for them. They get the label but they get nothing else... there should be more [support available] for this 204 [category]. But it is not. So the service is the same.

That's the gap".

– Consultation participant

"I think the first thing if government really want to do something is arrange for 204 [visa entrants] safe, good accommodation, at least for six months".

– Consultation participant

"204 [visa entrants] need more money. Centrelink should know that. When you are giving them the label, '204', thank you, you are labelling them. Ok, then give them the bonus as well. What's the privilege? 204 need more money. When you classify the lady as a 204, give her financial help, give her transport".

– Consultation participant

"Training would be really really helpful and also I am just wondering if maybe we can have like, for example specialist workers you know, special workers that can really specialise and to assess from a psychological background, and can tell ok, this lady has this and that and she needs more attention in this and that".

– Consultation participant

"We need understanding of the immediate issues when someone is identified as a women who came under 204 visa... we should really facilitate an environment whereby someone can work with this woman in an appropriate way".

– Consultation participant

5.3 Additional case management time for complex cases

SSI case managers also spoke about the pressure and difficulty they experienced in assisting refugee women with complex cases because of their complex caseloads and the lack of provision of additional hours of case management for women at risk. They explained that case management for these women takes two to three times longer than for other clients, and strongly underscored importance of reduced caseloads and additional time for complex caseloads:

“Less clients so we can give better service. Some people don’t want it, because they are okay, have support, speak English already. Some people settle easier. Some other people really need help and support. I wish it was little bit more slower, less cases so we could give more quality for the ones who really need it”.

– Consultation participant

“If they give me, for example, five 204 [clients, they need to] try to make the other cases less so I can spend double time with these ladies, so I can manage more for them”.

– Consultation participant

“When they give a 204 [client] to some case manager, count it as three cases... If they really wanted to get better results, if they really want to see these ladies becoming independent, these ladies coming back to normal life and these ladies get what they deserve, they should give us more chance, more time so we can concentrate on these cases”.

– Consultation participant

5.4 Additional training and support for staff

All workers requested more training and information to assist them to provide services that are more effective. Areas included:

- Training for staff in dealing with trauma and psychosocial needs
- Training for staff in cross-cultural communication
- Training for staff about how to use interpreters and how to act as an interpreter if required
- Training for staff about refugee experiences prior to arrival
- Training for staff about the women at risk program - how people are identified and what it means for service provision in Australia
- Additional training for bilingual guides that indicates how to navigate the complex Australian system

Workers also requested a more formal system of de-briefing to assist them to cope with their own reactions to the terrible stories of persecution they regularly hear, and the problems they deal with on a day to day basis. This is particularly the case for workers from a refugee background, many of whom reported having ‘flash-backs’ to their own horrendous experiences when talking with new arrivals.

5.5 Better training for mainstream services and better collaboration between services

SSI staff additionally identified the need for better training for mainstream services that deal with refugee women, and better collaboration between the services.

“We have to consult with [the Department of Housing] about housing, and [they] needs to consult [us]. Consultation is the way this is going to happen”.

– Consultation participant

One case manager gave an example of where they provided additional information about refugee issues to Centrelink staff, and the positive outcomes this has had:

“At SSI in Auburn, Centrelink is almost next door and the manager came asked for me to come and talk to the staff over two sessions about refugee issues to build a stronger bridge to get refugees to use their services. The staff felt much better afterward about the complications they had been

having with their refugee clients, who so heavily rely on Centrelink. And it’s been really great and may [help to] deal with issues such as [clients] not understanding the letters [sent by Centrelink, and resulting in their payments being stopped]”.

– Consultation participant

Another important assistance for refugees in accessing mainstream services is the availability of interpreters, which case managers also identified as a gap:

“I think all refugee should be entitled to use a translator for whatever the matter it is. Especially for medical issues. In hospital [sometimes interpreters are not available]... you know, how many times you should wait for emergency? It is very difficult”.

– Consultation participant

6. Vision of successful settlement

Question 6: If all these services were available, what changes would it bring to the lives of refugee women?

“Money, food and housing, clothing. The people when they use the service they will find job, then learning, then the people find the home and the car. Then a beautiful happy ending picture. This is the dream, this is the hope, and hopefully they get there eventually”.

– Consultation participant

“Our family will be safe with us and we will not be sad anymore. We will enjoy all of our rights”.

– Consultation participant

DISCUSSION

This interim report provides a brief discussion of the main issues emerging from the findings. A more detailed and comprehensive discussion will follow in the final report.

Positive impact of SSI service

The findings indicate that SSI is providing a critical and positive role in settlement of newly arrived refugee women. The women in the consultations spoke very highly of SSI services and the qualities of the staff members who worked with them.

The provision of links to other essential services by SSI case managers was repeatedly identified as crucial assistance in the settlement process. The role of the bilingual guides is also critical in the first weeks and months of arrival, as the women spoke about how the

bilingual guides provide their 'only voice' and 'light their way' in their early days of learning how to navigate Australian systems. It is very important for newly arrived women that they share the same refugee background as them, which gives them a genuine understanding of their experience arriving for the first time in Australia. The bilingual guides at SSI provide a critical service, which is essential for the women's physical and emotional wellbeing in their early days of settlement.

In addition, the evidence suggests that SSI staff themselves find their contact with refugee women rewarding and satisfying because they can see the difference that they are able to make in easing the settlement process.

Ongoing settlement challenges

Nonetheless, the findings also indicate that there continue to be numerous challenges to settlement for refugee women and in particular refugee women who are 'at risk'. Their additional trauma and vulnerability compounds the barriers and obstacles that many refugees face when settling in Australia. Difficulties in accessing affordable housing, learning English, finding employment, connecting to their community, and parenting in the new cultural environment all present challenges. At times these can feel insurmountable to single women attempting to manage their family alone in Australia and cope with their accumulated trauma. The findings also show that these women are often ostracised from their own community as a result of the 'shame' and discrimination associated with being labelled a 204 entrant.

In particular, the consultations highlighted that women who have been in detention have an additional layer of trauma, and need more specialised psychosocial support. Another group who needs additional assistance is older women currently arriving on 204 visas, with no family and few personal resources to rely on. They find it almost impossible to find appropriate housing, and experience extreme isolation.

The evidence from the evaluation suggests that additional services are needed to support many refugee women to overcome the compounded barriers to successful integration they face. These barriers are not only experienced by women who arrive on the 204 Visa, but by many women who have suffered severe trauma, torture and sexual abuse before their arrival in Australia. They are addressed in the preliminary recommendations below.

Preliminary Recommendations

Recommendations for SSI:

New services for refugee women

- Skills sharing opportunities to recognise and strengthen the skills and experience of refugee women
- Specialised services extended to women on other visa categories who are survivors of torture, rape and sexual abuse
- Additional orientation for refugee women to learn about Australian systems, law and culture
- A support group for women on 204 visas to access on arrival
- Additional social support services to link women to others in their community and address isolation
- Dedicated Housing Officer at SSI

- Provision of rental references from SSI.

Changes to existing services

- Ongoing services for women who are at risk (not limited to 6-12 months)
- More time for case management of complex cases and clients on 204 visas
- Earlier provision of services for women moving between states
- Better and more immediate services for women coming out of detention, including orientation to life in Australia
- Reduced high case loads for case managers
- Improved strategic relationships with specialist services like Psychologist who can assess and support the psychological needs of clients and women on 204 visas
- Better and more timely provision of information about the women's circumstances to their case managers
- Better support and supervision including debriefing for staff.

Training

- Training for staff in dealing with trauma and psychosocial needs
- Training for staff in cross-cultural communication
- Training for staff about how to use interpreters and how to act as an interpreter if required
- Training for staff about refugee experiences prior to arrival
- Training for staff about the women at risk program - how people are identified and what it means for service provision in Australia
- Additional training for bilingual guides about how to navigate the complex Australian systems.

Recommendations for DIAC and other settlement services

Increased financial support for single refugee women and women at risk

Better pre arrival information to prepare refugees before they come to Australia

Orientation sessions for immigration detainees prior to release

Specialist women's health service for refugee women

Provision of safe and secure accommodation for women at risk for at least the first 6 months after arrival

SSI take on responsibility for short and long term accommodation

Policy consistency across migrant resource centres.

Conclusion

The outcomes of the evaluation to date have clearly demonstrated the value of SSI service provision to refugee women when they first arrive in Australia. It has already identified some of major challenges and service gaps that women face in the settlement process. The recommendations from the three groups who took part in the consultation are clear and realistic.

The information from the interviews will be combined with the data presented in this interim report to provide a comprehensive picture of the needs of newly arrived refugee women. It will inform the development of a set of detailed recommendations for future service

delivery. The participants reported their satisfaction in having the opportunity to participate in discussions about these issues, which are critical to their lives.

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