

Women at Risk

Who are women at risk?

The UNHCR Women at Risk Program began in 1989. It was designed to facilitate the speedy and effective resettlement 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.

Research conducted by the Centre for Refugee Research at UNSW suggests that women in this category experience higher levels of post-traumatic stress and face greater challenges on resettlement in a new country. Support services need to focus on facilitating access to specialist services as well as establishing a safe and supportive settlement pathway which includes adequate and affordable housing.

As the largest provider of services to refugee women in NSW, SSI has observed that a significant number of refugee women who enter via other visa classes also suffer from extreme physical and sexual violence and trauma prior to their arrival in Australia. Their needs on arrival are very similar to those of women who enter on the 204 Visa yet they do not generally receive specialist, targeted service provision. SSI therefore takes a broader approach in the assessment of the women's needs to ensure adequate support for all vulnerable refugee women.

The primary challenges for this group of women are:

- learning a new language
- financial stress
- lack of affordable and appropriate housing
- employment
- intergenerational conflict
- lack of understanding about Australian systems and gender roles
- isolation and racism
- vulnerability and discrimination
- trauma and depression
- lack of trust

In 2012-2013 SSI supported 171 cases in the Women at Risk 204 visa class. These cases included single women and single mothers with children. SSI supported several hundred other women with similar backgrounds and support needs to Women at Risk 204 visa holders (the majority holds class 200 or 866 visas).

These clients range in age from 23 years to 83 years and live throughout the Sydney metropolitan area but are primarily based in Fairfield, Liverpool, Blacktown, Mt Druitt, Auburn, Parramatta and Rockdale LGAs. The women's countries of origin include Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan and China.

While some women in this group have had no formal education, others have attended school and achieved tertiary qualifications. Their education levels, however, tend to be poor and range from the equivalent year 5 to year 9. Among those women with education, the occupation types include teacher, hairdresser, child care worker, tailor, farmer, government employee, doctor, secretary and small business owner.

Supporting women at risk

In late 2011, SSI commissioned the UNSW Centre for Refugee Research to evaluate the organisation's work with women at risk and to identify recommendations for improved service provision to this vulnerable group. The findings confirmed that SSI was providing a critical and positive role in the settlement of newly arrived refugee women. The women in the consultations spoke highly of SSI services and the professionalism of the staff members who worked with them.

As a result of this research, SSI has established the following strategies to support women at risk:

- Convened a working group to monitor the implementation of recommendations from the report and to advise SSI management of strategies to improve ongoing services to refugee women.
- Provides all female clients the option to attend on-arrival orientation sessions for women only. This includes specific sessions on health, parenting, Australian culture and accommodation targeted at vulnerable women.
- Provides training to all staff on the needs and circumstances of refugee women at risk
- Allocates all vulnerable female clients to a female case manager and, where possible, from the same cultural background.
- Developed partnerships with ethnic women's groups to ensure that appropriate support networks are available in the local community and to assist with responding to issues that arise post settlement such as domestic violence.

Future projects to better support Women at Risk

SSI is committed to maintaining best practice services to refugee women at risk and as a result continues to engage with the Centre for Refugee Research as well as forming additional links with NSW Refugee Health and various women's groups throughout Sydney.

SSI will be implementing the following strategies during 2013-2014:

- implementation of women at risk assessment and case management tools
- updating research and consultations with women at risk completed in 2011
- working with partners to establish support groups for refugee women at risk that are supported and/or run by previous members of this category
- engaging with the Department of Immigration and Border Protection and the Department of Social Services to bring issues relevant to refugee women at risk to the forefront of policy discussions
- delivering additional training to all staff and supervisors regarding vulnerable refugee women
- review of on-arrival support and orientation sessions for women