

Executive Summary

Understanding Social Cohesion for Women at Risk and their families



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MRC Tas acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, sea, and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to elders both past and present.

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Background

The 'Women at Risk' refugee subclass (204 visa) is a significant pillar of the Australian humanitarian program, granted to individuals who are “subject to persecution or are otherwise 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”. The program has continued to grow over the last three decades, with Tasmania becoming a significant regional settlement location for Women at Risk (WaR) and their families. The families arriving on these visas have often been subject to higher levels of trauma, violence, and psychological distress than other humanitarian migrants and have complex needs that impact on settlement outcomes. To date there has been limited research on the settlement experience of WaR families in Australia, or of humanitarian migrants in Tasmania. Still less research explores the settlement experiences of refugee youth from single parent households, and the multigenerational outcomes for WaR and their families.

This project aimed to address research gaps and build evidence about the settlement experiences of WaR and their families, and to identify unique challenges they faced in settling in Tasmania. The project emerged from an identified need to improve social connections and mental and physical health outcomes for WaR and to address emerging issues in interfamily relations.

The project’s objectives were to investigate challenges and solutions to achieving cohesion within the family, cultural community and broader Australian community faced by WaR and (204) youth, through a case study of (204) settlement in Tasmania. The research aimed to identify appropriate strategies for improving the settlement outcomes for WaR and their families.

The key research questions were:

1. What is the social cohesion status of WaR who settle in Tasmania?
2. Do WaR experience additional challenges to social cohesion in comparison to other humanitarian arrivals?
3. As the host community, does Tasmania foster an environment conducive to the social cohesion of humanitarian arrivals?
4. How can the social cohesion of WaR be improved?

A key outcome from the project was the development and testing of a social cohesion framework and set of indicators relevant to refugee populations including Vulnerable Women and Children (VWC).

Methodology

Data was collected in Hobart and Launceston between November 2018 and June 2020. A mixed method approach was used, based on the collection of quantitative and qualitative data.

Data collection proceeded through the following activities:

- In depth interviews with 25 stakeholders from a variety of settlement, health, support and government services.
- An anonymous online and phone assisted survey of 406 community members from the Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Glenorchy, Launceston, Hobart and Clarence.
- In-depth interviews and social cohesion surveys with 43 refugee participants including women arriving on a 204 visa and Youth aged 18 years and over arriving on a 204 visa.
- Three participatory workshops with 18 refugee participants including women arriving on VWC visas and one community information session with four male humanitarian visa holders.



Key Findings

Key issues impacting WaR and their families are similar to those faced by other female humanitarian entrants, but with additional stressors stemming from trauma, adjusting to changed family dynamics of female headed households and isolation from community, social networks and family support. Youth 204 visa holders also face additional challenges including dealing with intergenerational acculturation and added stresses arising from their family obligations.

Tasmania presents particular challenges and benefits as a settlement location. While classified as regional, all humanitarian migrants settle in the two main cities of Hobart and Launceston. It is also the oldest and fastest ageing state in Australia. In contrast, a significant proportion of 204 and humanitarian arrivals are youth under 25 years. The relatively low numbers of humanitarian migration to Tasmania means many refugee communities do not have well-established support networks. The majority of humanitarian migrants are increasingly housed in areas distant from the CBD and settlement services. The housing locations are often not well-serviced by or close to public transport. Findings from the research identified key areas where WaR and their families faced particular challenges and barriers.

Housing

WaR families struggle to find affordable and appropriate housing, due to lower financial capacity as well as the non-traditional makeup of their families, which range from mothers with one child, to mothers with six or seven children, and single women on their own. Within the Tasmanian context of a continuing affordable housing crisis, 204 families often face uncertainty about permanence of housing and may have longer periods in temporary or unstable housing situations.

Housing shortages mean they are also often housed in areas remote from services or public transport, with cascading effects on access to services, children's schools and Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) classes.

English Literacy

Learning English was identified as one of the most difficult challenges for WaR. Mothers struggle to regularly attend classes due to difficulties with child care, difficulties transporting children to school and getting to their classes via public transport. Many 204 women have limited literacy in their own language and over 80% spoke no or very limited English on arrival. Due to additional demands of parenting they struggle with the style and format of learning and in most cases desire more individual at-home support.

Community

Most WaR suffer from social isolation with very few social supports or local friend networks. Most of the women were very disconnected from their communities of origin due to ostracism and suspicion about single mothers. Their low levels of English prevent connections with host community groups or organisations. For the majority of the women, attending AMEP or programs at Settlement Services and support organisations like the Migrant Resource Centre Tasmania (MRC Tas), Catholic Care or Save the Children was their only form of social contact outside their family.

Key Findings

Employment

Most of the mothers interviewed wanted to work but considered themselves unable to, due to their lack of English, as well as appropriate training or employment pathways that could build on existing or new skills. The demands of single-parenting and cost of childcare also negatively impacted on employment possibilities. Many women also struggled to gain their driver's license which further limits job opportunities. Youth 204 visa holders noted the difficulties of gaining employment in Tasmania where unemployment rates are high, and among the worst nationally for youth unemployment. Young people also saw literacy as a barrier to employment, as well as potential discrimination. Both 204 women and youth were disappointed that no work experience programs were available that combined continuing English classes with work that did not require high levels of literacy.

Separation from Family

All of the 204 families interviewed were separated from close family. Many suffered extreme distress and trauma due to being separated from children, parents or siblings. The impact of family separation is one of the major barriers to successful settlement and impacts most strongly on women and single parents. Some 204 youth were also significantly impacted by taking on the burden of family responsibility, when the family unit could be better supported by allowing older siblings to join them. Many families experienced additional stress and anxiety due to the drawn out and costly experiences of applying for split family visas. Misunderstandings and limited support and advice concerning migration increases these stressors.

Family Dynamics

Adjusting to being the head of household puts a significant strain on 204 mothers already facing many barriers in the settlement journey. The shift in family responsibility and lack of other family support can be experienced as a debilitating loss of culture and community. Many mothers rely on children to be interpreters, or to help with childcare for younger siblings. Some 204 young men may take on head of household obligations including finances which can disrupt family dynamics and lead to tension and even family violence. It also further intensifies intergenerational acculturation gaps as young people navigate family duties in the context of a more liberal Australian youth culture.



Recommendations

Recommendations for Government:

- Recognise WaR as a priority needs group that requires intensive, specialised services, including dedicated case management hours and individual assistance for up to two years post-arrival.
- Establish training programs for former WaR to become trained Bicultural Workers (BCW) to support settlement of WaR families.
- Establish specialised and integrated on-arrival housing for WaR and their families, located in areas accessible to core settlement services and public transport, available for 6 months post arrival.
- Offer additional support to secure long term housing through providing prioritised pathways to public housing and additional services to support securing private rentals.
- Prioritise more flexible models for WaR to attend AMEP, including satellite teaching centres, on-site free childcare and additional individual tutoring support in the home.
- Increased funding to support gender-sensitive driver mentoring programs, with priority places for WaR mothers and youth.
- Provide specialised employment and training programs for WaR that enable continued English language support within vocational training, including Social Enterprise projects.
- Fund vocational English support and community learning programs for youth-at-risk and youth from VWC families focused on building employability through volunteering, work experience and skills development.
- Fund mental health and social support programs targeted at youth-at-risk and youth from VWC families providing mentorship and peer-support programs delivered by trained multicultural youth.
- Prioritise family reunion for WaR and their families and streamline the family reunification process as proposed in reports by Oxfam, Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) and Monash Migration and Inclusion centre (Gardener & Costello, 2019; RCOA, 2019; Wickes et al., 2019).



Recommendations

Recommendations for Settlement Services:

- Provide specialised intensive case management services for WaR, including trauma-informed training for case workers, BCW, and volunteers working with WAR.
- Provide increased orientation support in first year of arrival for WaR including home visits and increased specialised volunteer support.
- Offer additional group programs targeted at WaR and VWC to build self-sufficiency in everyday life skills including financial planning, parenting classes, wellbeing, health advocacy.
- Provide specialised support and information programs for WaR around legal issues, citizenship and migration advice.
- Develop programs supporting WaR and WaR youth to engage in volunteer work and work experience, including social enterprise opportunities.
- Build capacity of volunteer networks working in settlement services to provide gender-responsive and trauma-informed support for WVC and WaR.
- Support WaR to establish multicultural single women's groups to run independently of settlement services.
- Conduct ongoing consultation with WaR and WaR youth to support effective co-design and delivery of targeted programs, and build opportunities for ongoing engagement through leadership and advisory groups.
- Work with Local Government Agencies to provide community information sessions for community leaders and members to highlight issues impacting on WaR and their families.

Recommendations for Local Government Agencies and NGOs:

- Support formation of multicultural and single women's groups through, for e.g. provision of free venues and volunteer mentors.
- Provide training and support for local community groups to involve WaR and WaR youth in place-based community groups and activities.
- Offer information sessions about legal and civic rights directed at WaR and WaR youth.
- Develop community linkage programs to build connections between WaR families and mainstream community services and programs.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Research:

- Government and services to commit to longitudinal community-based participatory research into the settlement experiences of WaR, VWC and their families.
- Funding made available to embed ongoing research and consultations with vulnerable refugee populations within multicultural and settlement services.
- Increased funding to support translation and transcription of in-language participatory research with VWC and WaR families.

