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and capabilities of individuals and communities from refugee backgrounds are essential to sustaining successful settlement programs.

### Conclusion

Resettlement is a key protection measure, however, recognition must also be made that many women and girls continue to experience and be exposed to ongoing risks once resettled. Old and new risks merge and frequently compound to destabilize and challenge the safety of resettled women and girls. In spite of this adversity, women at risk remain strongly determined to rebuild their lives and to attain the rights to which they and their families are entitled. To achieve this, many will require intensive specialised settlement support which respects and acknowledges their strengths while also recognizing and responding to the potential risks which threaten their wellbeing. The protection of women and girls from refugee backgrounds should remain a priority for the country of resettlement, the international community, and UNHCR, including after resettlement.

### Recommendations

1. Acknowledgment by UNHCR and resettlement countries that women and girls from refugee backgrounds remain vulnerable to heightened risk and may experience genuine protection concerns when resettled to a third country.

2. Request UNHCR to consider extending their monitoring of the protection of women and girls from refugee backgrounds to include resettlement countries.
3. UNHCR 'Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls' be extended to include a focus on working with and supporting women and girls at risk during resettlement (to be developed in conjunction with UNHCR, countries offering resettlement, and resettled refugees.)
4. Intensive, specialized long-term settlement support specific to the circumstances of women and girls at risk and their families to be provided in countries of resettlement.
5. Settlement service providers in countries of resettlement to be appropriately informed and trained in risk identification and response mechanisms
6. In recognition of the key role of community support, training and resources to be extended to include refugee based community organisations who may then be formally engaged to complement existing settlement service provision.

### References

- i UNHCR 2004, *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook*, UNHCR Geneva, p.16.
- ii UNHCR 2006, *Conclusion on Women and Girls at Risk Executive Conclusions* No. 105 (LVII), UNHCR Geneva.
- iii UNHCR 2002, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration*, UNHCR.



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## “WHAT HAPPENS THERE .... FOLLOWS US HERE ” REFUGEE WOMEN AT RISK AND RESETTLEMENT

### Background

The Centre for Refugee Research, UNSW, and the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women are undertaking research to examine the experiences of resettled women and girls at risk from refugee backgrounds. This research engages women at risk and settlement service providers in identifying risk factors in settlement, and in developing solutions and responses to protection concerns. Findings from this research have formed the basis for this paper. It builds on earlier work which identified risk factors and protection concerns for women and girls during displacement and in countries of asylum.

### Introduction

In recent years, the identification and resettlement of refugee women and girls at risk has increased. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees “Women at Risk” program is designed to both identify and

respond to the systematized human rights abuses experienced by refugee women and girls, including by fast tracking their resettlement to other countries. Women at risk are identified by UNHCR as “those women and girls who have protection problems particular to their gender, whether they are single heads of families, unaccompanied girls, or together with their male (or female) family members”.<sup>i</sup>

It is well documented that most women at risk have experienced severe sexual and gender based violence. Many have been raped. Some bear children from rape, forced marriage and survival sex. Despite surviving such abuses, once resettled many women and girls continue to experience ongoing protection concerns and remain at risk. This paper explores the key risks facing resettling women and girls from refugee backgrounds and makes recommendations to enhance protection responses in countries of resettlement.

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*The Australian Refugee Rights alliance is a coalition of Australian NGOs, academics and advocacy organisations who are committed to advocating for the rights of refugees at an international level.*

*For more information, visit [www.arra.org.au](http://www.arra.org.au)*

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## **Risk Factors for Resettling Refugee Women and Girls**

*“You cannot imagine the risks single women face”*

*(Resettled refugee woman)*

Risks for women and girls in countries of displacement and asylum are widely acknowledged. However, there has been less focus on notions of ongoing risk within countries of resettlement. Resettlement as a durable solution is centred on the restoration of rights and the mitigation of risks affecting the safety and wellbeing of women and girls. It is a critical measure in responding to their protection needs. Yet research with resettled women from refugee backgrounds and settlement service providers has shown that some groups continue to be at risk of ongoing violence, human rights abuses and threats to their safety and wellbeing in their resettlement.

At risk groups include women and girls who are: (a) single, pregnant and without family or community support; (b) with a child or children conceived from rape; (c) in a forced marriage, or being coerced into a forced marriage in countries of resettlement; (d) experiencing rejection or victimisation from their own community; (e) isolated from their own and host communities; (f) suffering from the impacts of family, community and service provider misunderstandings (and conflict) over women’s and children’s rights; (g) experiencing increased vulnerability due to separation from

family members, including through the need to send remittances back to camps/urban areas; (h) living in situations of family and domestic violence (i) suffering difficulties in day to day functioning due to trauma (j) experiencing racism or other forms of discrimination including religious persecution; (k) unable to access secure and appropriate housing; (l) unable to access livelihoods including education/employment; (m) being forced to engage in survival sex.

This list forms the basis of a draft risk identification and response tool for use in countries of resettlement, which is being developed and trialled as an outcome of the current research. Based on the Heightened Risk Identification Tool for use with at-risk populations in situations of displacement, the identification and response tool is designed to assist service providers in identifying those most at risk and in need of additional or alternative support.

### **Compounded Risk in Resettlement**

*“What happens there....follows us here”.*

*(Resettled refugee woman)*

Many of the risks experienced by women and girls during settlement are compounded by other factors relating to previous abuses of their human rights; the practice and approach of individual workers and organizations supporting them in their settlement; and the social, political and economic environment of the resettlement country. Women

have identified a strong link between risks experienced prior to arrival and subsequent risks and challenges in settlement. Women have spoken of the fracturing impact of the shame associated with past and current experiences of human rights violations on their relationships with family and communities. The challenges of negotiating the different roles and expectations of women and girls in resettlement countries has also led to misunderstandings and misinterpretations about the meanings of rights for women, and their relationship to culture, amongst resettling refugee communities and among some service providers. This has caused severe problems for families resulting in reports of intergenerational conflict, family violence and family breakdown. Such challenges to the key support and protection structures of family and community renders many women and girls vulnerable to exploitation, stigmatization and isolation, and can act as additional barriers to them accessing much needed services.

### **Protection Responses in Countries of Resettlement**

*“When you fall there is someone there to pick you up”*

*(Resettled refugee woman)*

Key international policy and legal frameworks including the *Conclusion on Women and Girls at Risk*<sup>ii</sup> and the *International*

*Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration*<sup>iii</sup> acknowledge the complex and multilayered needs of women at risk and recommend specialist intensive support for resettling women and their families. The approach, practice and attitudes of service providers have a significant impact on settlement outcomes for women and their families. Although family and community support is crucial to assisting many women to settle well, these traditional support structures may be absent or are at times challenged by the stressors of settlement. Service providers thereby fill a critical role in assisting women and girls to be safe and secure in their new environment.

To fulfil this role, workers require indepth knowledge of the pre arrival experiences of women at risk and a greater understanding of the cumulative impact of years of sustained human rights abuses. This could be achieved by establishing stronger links between overseas posts and settlement service providers. Services must also acknowledge and respond to the risks generated during settlement and recognize their relationship to pre arrival experiences of risk and abuse. Programs which involve women directly in settlement planning are needed. Rights-based and culturally responsive practices which respect, acknowledge and incorporate the strengths, skills

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