WOMEN&MIGRATION

‘They consider us as guests’ – Burmese and Iraqi refugee women’s experiences in Australia

Australia has a dedicated resettlement programme for refugees. But settling into a new community still presents challenges for women on humanitarian visas.

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Despite its harsh treatment of irregular migrants who arrive by sea, Australia has a comprehensive resettlement program for UNHCR-approved refugees – those identified by the United Nations to be eligible for visas to settle there. Australia accepts between 13,000 and 20,000 humanitarian entrants per year. Around equal proportions of men and women are granted visas, with some 2,500 migrants arriving under the “women at risk” category.

The resettlement experiences of these women vary depending on a range of factors including country of origin, level of English literacy, level of education, stage in life, family situation and more. This case study explores the experiences of resettlement for 15 women migrants from Myanmar and Iraq who came to Australia under its humanitarian programme. We asked them about their experiences of education, training, employment, learning English, health, housing, belonging, integration, citizenship and social networks.

Australia offers a range of **settlement services**[1] to refugees, providing material, social and emotional support as well as some programmes that target belonging and integration. Initial settlement assistance includes dedicated reception and assistance on arrival, housing services, cultural orientation, free English language tuition and trauma counselling in the first six to 12 months. Refugees are settled in the community rather than in hostels.

The definition of “successful” settlement includes self-sufficiency and participation in the **social and economic life of the community**.[2] But **research**[3] indicates refugees often do not settle as easily as other migrants. **My own research**[4] shows that there are **many reasons**[5] for this, from language barriers to education, differences in values, family issues including domestic violence, inter-generational conflict, changing gender roles and discrimination.

‘We must belong here in Australia’

The women we spoke to said the support provided by paid case workers, family members, religious leaders, and for some, neighbours, was vital to settlement. But there was also a lack of understanding of the service provision system, relevant organisations, personnel changes and so on.

'I would like to thank the government and all the services which have supported our family so we are all living a peaceful life,' said one woman from the Karen minority in Myanmar, who had been in Australia for two-and-a-half years.

Some of the women we spoke to, generally those from Myanmar, made strong claims of belonging in Australia. It is unclear whether this was a result of the interview situation, where they may have felt obliged to articulate a strong sense of identity and allegiance, or whether it was a result of genuine attachment based on positive experiences of settlement.

'Currently we are living here in Australia,' another Karen refugee from Myanmar said. 'We must belong here in Australia.'

The appreciation for services appeared to be linked to a sense of civic belonging, although it often wasn't sufficient on its own, as the following exchange with an Iraqi woman shows:

Intervewee: I feel that I belong to Australia because I have the same support that the Australian people get from the government such as the social security, Medicare etc.

Interviewer: Do you think that white Australian people feel you belong here?

Interviewee: Some of them yes but I always feel that I am strange in this society. Also, the Australian people don't do anything to make you feel that you belong to Australia. Instead of that they try to avoid you sometimes.

When asked what their strongest identity was, most Myanmar participants said it is was Australian; although one woman from the Chin minority, who had been in Australia for nearly four years, told us:

'It is impossible to forget my home country where I was born … I believe I belong to my Chin land.'

This participant described herself as a refugee, saying, ‘How can I be anything other than a refugee?’ She said she didn’t know what her strongest identity was: ‘I am who I am,’ and described being integrated as ‘a kind of happiness and feeling comfortable in living with others.’

One Iraqi woman said she would not feel integrated into Australian society until she has an ‘effective’ and ‘correct’ role in society. This is not, she was quick to emphasise, because of any experience of discrimination due to wearing the veil, something she had anticipated before arrival. It was more to do with having a job that she felt contributed to society.

‘If I could speak English very well, nothing would be difficult’

Participants identified language learning as a problem that affected a range of other aspects of settlement, including developing friendships, finding a job, dealing with bureaucracy, understanding the local culture and obtaining formal citizenship.

The situation for those from Myanmar was the most pressing, with the simple need to communicate a real challenge for the first year or two. Many had come from rural farming backgrounds, with limited literacy in their own language. For many women, the challenges of health and childcare meant they could not necessarily access their 510 hours of free language tuition, leaving many vulnerable to long-term language difficulties.

‘The biggest challenge that I have faced while being in Australia was spoken English language,’ a Karen woman in her third year of settlement told us. ‘If I could speak English very well, nothing would be difficult.’

Almost all the Iraqi women had some English on arrival, and they sought higher level language skills, technical language skills and vernacular necessary for transitioning to professional employment. This need for more advanced learning was not met by the services available.

‘Hi, bye and see you!’

Participants spoke of difficulties in meeting non-migrant Australians, but relationships with other refugees through English language classes, and with people of their own ethnic background, were generally strong.

For the Burmese refugees, friendships often developed from English language classes and at church, which most attended weekly and provided an important source of material, psychological and spiritual support. Some had friendly relationships with their neighbours.

However, deep friendships were missing for some. Many talked about knowing people but not considering them friends. Some attributed this to communication issues. ‘Sometimes if I met with the people who were English people, it was very hard to communicate with them,’ a young woman from the Karen minority who had been in Australia for over a year said. ‘If I met with people from my country, it is easy.’

In relation to the development of relationships with non-migrant Australians, an Iraqi woman told us: ‘Actually, not strong relationship, only “Hi, bye and see you!” Because Australian people don’t want to create any deep relationships with migrants and they just consider us as guests in Australia.’

‘I applied for jobs many times’

There were differences between the two communities regarding employment. For women from Myanmar, most were not in paid employment but studying English, and most had home duties. For those from Iraq, most were pursuing some form of education beyond English language classes and trying to upgrade their tertiary qualifications. Some experienced barriers to using their existing knowledge and skills.

‘I feel that I belong to Australia because I have the same support that the Australian people get from the government such as the social security, Medicare etc.’

One Iraqi woman in her 40s had studied management at Baghdad University. She was critical of settlement service providers for failing to offer relevant assistance. ‘I had more than 15 years’ experience in accounting, and I was an auditor and deputy head of an internal auditor department. Nowadays, I am a uni student … I applied for jobs many times, I failed, nobody accepted me.’

Another Iraqi woman said that if her qualifications could not be recognised and used in a suitable job, she would consider returning to Iraq, as she did not want to remain on welfare.

‘Don’t look at us and think we are stupid’

Refugee women from Myanmar and Iraq appear to be settling successfully in Australia, although employment, language, relationships and a sense of belonging are areas where service provision could be improved. The services they receive are appreciated, but require tailoring to a range of needs.

Language and orientation classes should address the specifics of each student, and greater flexibility in terms of qualification recognition is also necessary. Beyond service provision, it was suggested that non-migrant Australians could do more to welcome newcomers:

Interviewer: Do you have any suggestions for improving support for refugees to integrate into Australian society? What do you think the important issues are?

Interviewee: To give more consideration and don’t look at us and think we are

stupid, and we don’t know anything, especially when we do something wrong. They have to put themselves in our position, with a new country, new language, and different culture.

Clearly more needs to be done to raise awareness among the general population about the value of cultural diversity, the potential contributions of those of refugee backgrounds, and the need to work at building an inclusive society.

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Suggested further reading

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Fozdar, F., & Hartley, L. (2014). **Civic and ethno belonging among recent refugees to Australia.**[10] *Journal of refugee studies, 27*(1), 126-144.

Links

1. https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/settlement-services/3/
2. https://www.dca.org.au/sites/default/files/economic-social-civic-contributions-booklet2011.pdf
3. https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article-abstract/32/3/23/1525746?redirectedFrom=PDF&casatoken=y3z9uYsQWswAAAAA:bG47xLo0TR8YC3zuQLSoRRvjucDPWBNvTboGRmjHmdYPYdNY9nqz80cbbP6AvT77Vw_HuxOaHzC5lw
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