

# Women at Risk Visa Holders (Subclass 204)

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Consultation Report





Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) is Australia's national peak body representing the rights and interests of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and those who work with them. MYAN works in partnership with young people, government, and non-government agencies at the state and territory and national levels to ensure that the rights and interests of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are recognised and addressed in policy and service delivery. MYAN provides expert policy advice, undertakes a range of sector development activities, and supports young people to develop leadership skills.



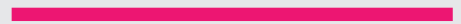
The Migration Council Australia (MCA) is an independent, national, not-for-profit body established to enhance the benefits of Australia's migration program and support better settlement outcomes for Australia's migrants and refugees. MCA works across sectors – and fosters partnerships between community, industry and government – to provide a national voice for effective migration and settlement programs. MCA consults widely and undertakes research to develop informed policy advice to government and non-government stakeholders.

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01



Background

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Around the world, women and girls face an elevated safety risk due to their gender. Without the protection effectively provided by male family members, some women and their dependents are subject to violence and persecution, and may be forced to leave their home countries. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) considers that **'women or girls who have protection problems particular to their gender, and lack effective protection normally provided by male family members'** are vulnerable to gender-related human rights violations, alongside experiences of trauma often reported by other refugee cohorts.<sup>1</sup>

Due to the vulnerability experienced by these women and girls, their experience of the refugee journey and settlement in a new country will likely differ from that of their male or not at-risk female counterparts.<sup>2</sup> A 2006 UNHCR Executive Committee conclusion on Women and Girls at Risk recognised resettlement as one of the key protection tools that UNHCR has to respond to this group. UNHCR created the 'Women-at-Risk' resettlement submission category to fast-track suitable protection and support for identified refugee women through resettlement in countries including Canada, the United States, and Australia.

Australia created the Women at Risk (WaR) visa in 1989 as a special category of visa for especially vulnerable women such as single mothers, abandoned or single women. Applicants must be living outside their home country, without the protection of a male relative and in danger of victimisation, harassment or serious abuse because she is female to qualify.<sup>3</sup> The program assists refugee women and their dependants who are in vulnerable positions to rebuild their lives away from the constant threats of danger and violence that they experience. The program anticipates that countries of resettlement provide additional settlement services and case management to this cohort of women, in recognition of the violence and trauma they have suffered.<sup>4</sup>

Protection of the most vulnerable remains central to Australia's humanitarian program, and Australia has long been committed to delivering high quality settlement support for newly arrived refugees.<sup>5</sup> Consistent with UNHCR global resettlement priorities,<sup>6</sup> Australia gives high priority to women-at-risk and their dependents. **Since the Women at Risk program was established in 1989, Australia has supported over 23,500 vulnerable women and their dependants to resettle and rebuild their lives in safety in Australia.**<sup>7</sup>

Australia is recognised globally as a leader in settlement and integration services for refugee and migrant populations, and has a strong history of providing important contributions towards resettling vulnerable young people and women through humanitarian programs including the WaR visa program. This program is delivered in Australia through its Refugee and Humanitarian Program and internationally recognised settlement services. Delivering strong settlement services equips Australia to continue meeting the needs of our diverse population and to respond in ways that support social cohesion, inclusion and respect.<sup>8</sup>





## Purpose

### *Project*

WaR visa holders share common pre-arrival vulnerabilities, including exposure to physical and sexual violence, and post-traumatic stress disorder<sup>9</sup>, but to date, no national work has been undertaken to understand the particular issues and settlement challenges experienced by young people arriving on this visa and good practice in youth settlement for this group. Further, there was a need to explore the different needs of WaR visa holders across various states and territories, as prior research focused on specific settlement locations.

Both MCA and MYAN also considered it important to understand the current settlement experiences of Women at Risk visa holders in light of the 2019 Australian Government announcement to increase the intake of Women at Risk cohort to 20 per cent of Australia's total humanitarian intake. While this was subsequently impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and Australia's international border closures in 2020, MCA remained committed to exploring the nature of gender-responsive settlement in Australia, particularly in relation to Women at Risk visa holders as well as LGBTIQ+ refugees.



Additionally, in 2020, MYAN learnt from colleagues that young people arriving in Tasmania on a 204 visa were experiencing particular settlement challenges, which required more targeted settlement support. MYAN wanted to understand if these experiences were shared across Australia and to identify good practice in supporting the settlement of young people arriving on 204 visas, gaps in support and strategies to strengthen the responsiveness of settlement services to this particular cohort.

## ***Report***

This report is intended to provide insights into how women and young people arriving through the WaR program are faring in their settlement journey, including good practice and gaps in support. It provides a summary of key findings from a national sector consultation and individual interviews with service providers in relation to the settlement experiences of women and youth under the 204 visa category.

The report is further informed by available literature on Women at Risk settlement experiences in Australia, including recent findings from research conducted in Tasmania by the Migrant Resource Centre on the settlement experiences of women and families arriving on the 204 visa. The report identifies a number of measures for government and the sector to consider in improving responses that restore rights and address the complex needs of Women at Risk visa holders, in order to improve the settlement outcomes of this cohort.



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## Consultations

In October 2020, MYAN facilitated a national sector roundtable on the settlement of young people arriving in Australia as part of the Women at Risk program. This meeting provided an opportunity to learn from service providers across Australia about their experiences of supporting young people arriving through this program. Insights from the national roundtable were supplemented by individual interviews with service providers conducted by MCA and MYAN between July 2020 and February 2021.

Service providers included settlement service providers, youth case workers, health workers and educators located in New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia and regional Victoria.



# 02

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The settlement  
experiences of Women  
at Risk visa holders

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## Women at Risk visa holders face specific barriers to successful settlement in Australia

While Australia has been resettling women and their families through the Women at Risk program since 1989, there is limited data available on their settlement experiences and outcomes. However, researchers focusing on this cohort have placed emphasis on the nature of trauma and abuse that Women at Risk visa holders may have experienced in their country of origin or during transit, which underpin the need for a gender-responsive and trauma-informed approach to settlement.



For instance, Bartolomei et al. (2014) found that a significant proportion of women who are resettled under this program have experienced rape or forced marriage.<sup>10</sup> In a study of 104 Women at Risk visa holders resettled in Queensland, Vromans et al. (2017) found that the majority of new arrivals experienced distress from events such as long separation from family members, friends and community members as well as the death of family members, which impacted on their settlement.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to experiences of sexual and gender-based violence and trauma, Women at Risk visa holders may experience a number of challenges to settlement in Australia. These include high levels of unemployment, difficulties learning a new language, lack of appropriate and affordable housing, racism, intergenerational conflict, financial stress, trauma, isolation and lack of understanding regarding Australian systems and gender roles.<sup>12</sup> While most of these issues are not unique to the Women at Risk cohort, and are often experienced by resettled refugees in general, they are compounded by the heightened vulnerability of Women at Risk visa holders due to a lack of male protection and absence of family support in Australia more broadly. However, despite the inherent and gender-specific pre-arrival trauma and vulnerability for this cohort, there is a distinct absence of settlement programs or support that specifically target those arriving through the Women at Risk program in Australia.<sup>13</sup>

Interviews with service providers indicated that most individuals arriving on Women at Risk visas receive Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports under the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP), indicating a higher level of need and the presence of multiple and complex barriers to engaging with appropriate supports.

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## The settlement needs of Women at Risk visa holders are complex and multilayered.

Given the nature of trauma and abuse they have experienced, many Women at Risk visa holders require longer and more comprehensive settlement support. Some of the specific settlement needs of this cohort are discussed below.

### Housing

Access to safe and affordable housing is the most pressing settlement need identified by Women at Risk visa holders and their support workers.<sup>14</sup> The absence of appropriate housing is linked to financial stress, isolation and issues with safety and security. Pittaway and Pittaway (2013) highlight the difficulties that Women at Risk visa holders may face when seeking housing, due to a lack of rental references and mistrust from rental agents. In some cases, housing can comprise of over 50 per cent of women's weekly income from Centrelink, straining their ability to afford other basic necessities.<sup>15</sup> Consultations with service providers indicated that some Women at Risk visa holders faced difficulty accessing suitable housing as a result of high rental prices in metropolitan areas, with large families living in smaller homes due to lack of affordable options.



## Social support

Research indicates that social participation has a protective effect for migrants, in particular those facing discrimination, so the need to foster social connections between Women at Risk visa holders and their host communities is critical.<sup>16</sup> However, some service providers expressed during consultations that the settlement of Women at Risk visa holders in rural and regional areas can pose a challenge in building local social networks, particularly in communities with little diversity. This is supported by Vromans et al. (2018)'s finding that 'current resettlement strategies fail in helping women at risk secure new social networks'.<sup>17</sup>



Another form of social support for Women at Risk visa holders may be provided by ethnic communities from the same country of origin but there is a need to address social stigma often faced by single women resettled without the protection and support of male relatives. Although the development of refugee networks is normally encouraged in settlement countries to further community connection and self-reliance, for the WaR cohort in particular, stigma means they often find the same negative social consequences and protection risks amongst their communities in settlement countries.<sup>18</sup>

Bartolomei et al. (2014) highlight that:



**The stigma of being single causes many women to be isolated from their communities. Women and girls who become pregnant outside of marriage are often made to feel ashamed and ostracized. Without the support of family and community, women and girls are vulnerable to sexual abuse, harassment, and forced relationships.**



Consultations with service providers indicated that some women on 204 visas received unwanted male attention from members of the same ethnic community who were more settled in the area. Further, providers highlighted child protection risks arising from single women with children who were perceived as vulnerable by some community members, identifying the risk of exploitative advances in the absence of male protection. One service provider emphasised the need to empower Women at Risk visa holders to be more independent, so they are not forced to rely on men for financial or other assistance.

Many service providers expressed concern that young women could be taken advantage of by men because they did not have an understanding of Australian laws regarding the age of consent or how to establish positive/protective boundaries in relationships. In some cases, examples were provided of young women being ostracised by their community after entering into relationships with men who were not deemed appropriate, leading to feelings of shame and embarrassment. Intercommunity conflict was a common theme across consultations, with social exclusion and isolation negatively impacting the settlement of Women at Risk visa holders. For example, one service provider highlighted the experience of two families settling in regional New South Wales, with two women discovering that they had been seeing the same man in a refugee camp. One of the women shunned the other, including her young family, shaming her within their local African community. The exclusion and social stigma created issues not only for the mother but also for her children in school and social settings, affecting their settlement experience more broadly.



## Parenting support and childcare

Research by Settlement Services International and the Centre for Refugee Research (2014) found that access to family support services such as relationship counselling and parenting classes, is critical for Women at Risk visa holders.<sup>19</sup> This finding was echoed by numerous service providers in consultations, who highlighted the need for tailored parenting support, including breastfeeding classes, as well as affordable and accessible childcare options for Women at Risk visa holders with young children. This need is heightened by the absence of family networks in Australia to provide childcare. Without childcare, women's access to work and opportunities to obtain job skills is limited, increasing their financial insecurity.<sup>20</sup>

Service providers noted that a major challenge for Women at Risk visa holders with children was navigating shifting family dynamics upon settlement in Australia. In particular, with children acquiring English proficiency at faster rates than their parents, some women relied on their children to facilitate communication with schools and other institutions, which undermined parental authority. Further, some service providers expressed that clients struggled to discipline their children in ways acceptable to local culture, that is, without using corporal punishment. The need for classes to educate women on parenting norms in the Australian context was raised by providers.



### English language classes

Limited English proficiency is a key settlement barrier experienced by Women at Risk visa holders, particularly if they are illiterate in their own language. Some service providers expressed that for clients with memory and concentration difficulties, often as a result of a history of trauma, acquiring English proficiency proved even more difficult. Without adequate English language skills, the economic opportunities for women resettled in Australia are limited. For instance, one service provider highlighted that some Women at Risk visa holders attempted to start their own microbusinesses, utilising their transferrable skills in cooking, but encountered challenges with regulation and food safety processes due to their limited English proficiency.

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## Settlement experiences of young people arriving on the 204 visa

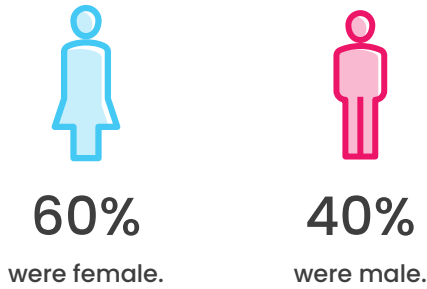
The specific experiences of young people arriving in Australia through the Women at Risk program are a key focus of this report. Young people are individuals aged between 12 and 24 years of age including children, young people living independently after leaving the family home and female heads of households. The Data Snapshot overleaf provides a breakdown of the youth Women at Risk cohort.



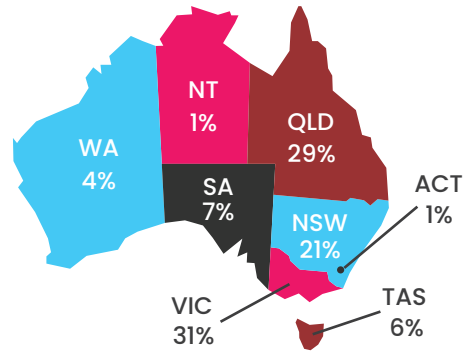
**Data Snapshot**

Between July 2015 and June 2020, **1,742 young people** between the ages of 12 – 24 arrived in Australia on the WaR 204 Visa.

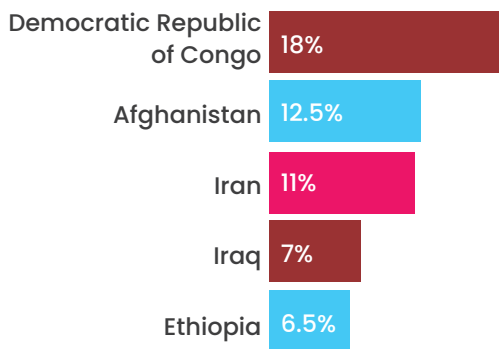
**Gender**



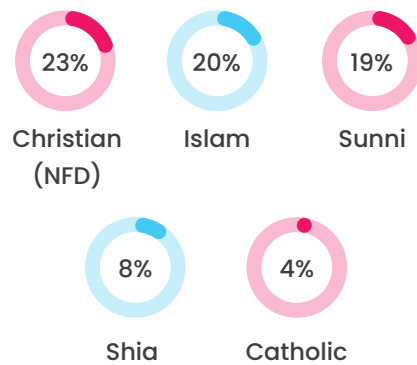
**Settlement States and Territories**



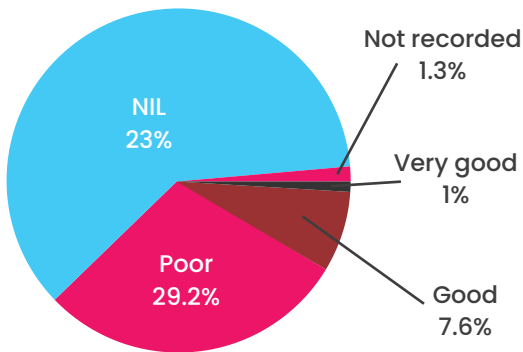
**Top 5 Countries of Birth**



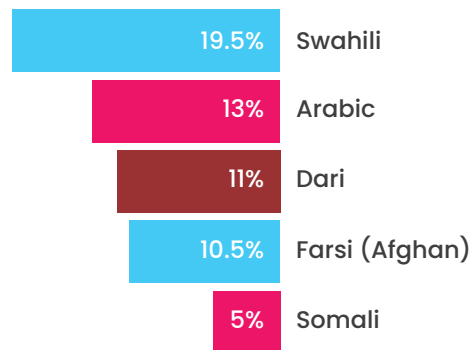
**Top 5 Religions\***



**English Proficiency**



**Top 5 Languages**



\*these are self-identified responses, and represent how individuals have nominated their religion.

Consultations with service providers indicated that young people arriving on the 204 visa face many of the same settlement challenges experienced by young migrants and refugees in general including:

- disengagement from education
- language and literacy barriers
- lack of trust in engaging with mental health services
- lack of connection to community
- difficulty accessing stable and affordable housing
- a lack of targeted and appropriate services that are provided in a youth-centred, culturally responsive and trauma informed way.

However, risk factors such as traumatic pre-arrival experiences and age contribute to the heightened vulnerability of this cohort, leading to additional settlement challenges. These challenges include increased adult responsibility, rising involvement in crime and limited sexual health knowledge, as discussed below.

### Increased adult responsibility

Taking on adult responsibilities is a common settlement experience for young people from refugee backgrounds. However, this is particularly challenging for families arriving on 204 visas, where single female heads of households are more common. In the absence of a father figure and separation from older siblings, service providers highlighted that young people are more likely to step into parental roles for younger siblings. Fulfilling additional responsibilities – for example, cooking meals for the family or transferring younger siblings to and from school – may negatively impact the education and employment opportunities of young people, as well as their ability to participate in social activities within their new community.





## Limited sexual health knowledge

A number of service providers highlighted that many young people arriving through the Women at Risk program demonstrated a lack of knowledge around sexual consent, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. We know that for many women arriving via the WaR program their pre-settlement experiences have meant that they have been exposed to rape and gender-based violence which can make them more vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>21</sup>

Further, stigma around sex and topics of a sexual nature contributed to a culture of silence where young people felt too embarrassed to seek advice from family members or health care providers. However, some providers shared that community-led initiatives such as workshops on women's health and consent were effective in reaching young people and improving their knowledge around sexual and reproductive health.



## Rural and regional settlement of Women at Risk: Tasmania

For women and young people arriving on the 204 visa, resettlement in rural or regional areas presents an additional complication to settlement. Research from Tasmania conducted by the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) highlights some of the unique challenges experienced by women and their families on 204 visas living in regional and rural areas, as described in the case study below.\*

### Figure 1 | Case study of Women at Risk arrivals in Tasmania

MRC has recently undertaken research on young people settling in Tasmania on the WaR visa. Their findings highlight that Tasmania is the fastest and oldest ageing state in Australia, and persistent issues around housing affordability, high rates of youth unemployment and low numbers of humanitarian migrants have exacerbated settlement challenges for these young people.

Particular challenges include:

- High cost of housing, which forces young people and their families further out of the CBD and away from settlement service providers
- Limited long-term housing
- Limited public transportation, which impacts access to education and employment opportunities
- Limited or no knowledge from the community around the refugee and settlement experience
- No established support networks due to low numbers of humanitarian entrants
- Limited meaningful employment options available for young people

To mitigate these issues in the community, MRC recommends that specialised and integrated on-arrival housing for WaR and their families should be located in areas accessible to settlement services and public transport.

\*MYAN and MCA gratefully acknowledge the work of Dr. Helen Merrick and the Migrant Resource Centre Tasmania in producing the findings contained in the case study above. The findings are from a research project investigating the social cohesion of women and families arriving in Tasmania on the 204 visa, which was funded by the Department of Social Services.

# 03

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**Future considerations  
for the settlement of  
Women at Risk  
visa holders**

MCA and MYAN commend the Australian Government's commitment to promoting the rights and protection of refugee women and their dependants through the Women at Risk program. A number of recommendations, as identified through consultations with service providers, as well as the national roundtable hosted by MYAN, could be adopted to strengthen the settlement experiences of Women at Risk visa holders and improve social and economic outcomes for this group.

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## **A strengths-based approach that empowers Women at Risk clients is critical**

While Women at Risk visa holders may require a high level of support due to their complex needs, it is critical that supports are delivered in ways that reinforce the independence of this cohort. For new arrivals, some service providers noted that it is common practice to accompany Women at Risk visa holders to appointments at banks and Centrelink offices. However, they noted that over time, reliance on settlement providers for support in relation to these interactions did not diminish for many Women at Risk clients, indicating a need to strengthen independent living skills and the ability to navigate institutional settings. Further, as highlighted above, if Women at Risk visa holders are more independent, they are less likely to need to rely on community members for support in day-to-day life. Recognising the many strengths, including resilience, of this cohort is key to empowering Women at Risk in the settlement process and may lead to better outcomes.



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## Preferences for case managers should be accommodated where possible

Overall, consultations with service providers indicated that female case managers were preferred by Women at Risk visa holders, due to a history of trauma and abuse which may include experiences of sexual assault and sexual harassment. However, while service providers noted that female case managers are almost always assigned to 204 visa holders, this may not occur if the person prefers a male case manager, which is sometimes the case. Further, as is the norm for some settlement service providers, the cultural background of the person should also be considered when assigning case managers, as many women do not want to be supported by members of the same ethnic community due to potential stigma. While accommodating the individual's gender and cultural preference for case managers may not be feasible in smaller organisations due to limited resources and staffing constraints, where possible, this practice should be adopted to help improve engagement with Women at Risk visa holders. For instance, in situations where a female case manager is preferred by the individuals but unavailable, a buddy system pairing a male case manager with a female support worker could be a suitable alternative.

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## Greater investment in targeted settlement support for young people

MYAN's initial consultations, complemented by the research undertaken by Dr. Helen Merrick indicates that young people in the WaR category are likely to experience additional settlement challenges. Greater investment from Humanitarian Settlement Program in targeted, youth-specific settlement support services, early on arrival is needed. A focus on early, targeted, youth-specific support will:

- Maximise the strength of the WaR program.
- Ensure local providers are aware of the particular service needs of this group and better equipped to implement the necessary resources and programs at the time of arrival.
- Empower young people and improve their capacity to develop the social and cultural capital necessary to successfully navigate life in Australia.



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Recommendations

## MYAN and MCA make the following recommendations:

### Australian Government



1. As part of settlement planning, develop a common set of criteria for optimal WaR resettlement sites by:
  - a. thoroughly assessing regional settlement locations to determine availability of stable and affordable housing, schooling and employment opportunities;
  - b. identifying service gaps and response strategies; and
  - c. measuring community attitudes, and concerns towards refugees and migrants, including WaR.



2. Invest in more research on the settlement experiences of young people on WaR visas to build on this preliminary investigation undertaken by MYAN and MCA. This would help to better understand the extent to which the identified settlement challenges are experienced by all arrivals, and how settlement services can be more responsive to this group.



3. Invest in a national evaluation of the WaR program to develop stronger empirical evidence about how the program is meeting the settlement needs of this specific cohort. This would help policymakers and service providers in achieving successful settlement outcomes for this group.



4. Prioritise family reunification for WaR visa holders given the significance of family reunification to successful settlement outcomes and, more specifically, so that WaR visa holders and dependants may be better supported by extended family.



5. Invest in employment programs for youth-at-risk from refugee backgrounds, that are focused on building employability through volunteering, work experience and skills development, including consideration of the expansion of the Youth Transition Support Services beyond the existing three states.



## Settlement Service Providers



6. Conduct targeted needs assessments soon after arrival to identify the particular settlement needs of WaR visa holders in order to guide the delivery of tailored gender-responsive and youth-specific supports to this group.



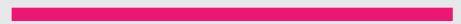
7. Recognise and respond to the specific settlement challenges faced by young people, and include opportunities for co-design with young people.



8. Collaborate with community organisations to deliver culturally responsive and quality sexual health education. This could be delivered through peer-led gender-segregated workshops to create a safe and open space for discussion.



# 05



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<sup>2</sup>Schweitzer, R.D., Vromans, L., Brough, M., Asic-Kobe, M., Correa-Velez, Murray, K. & Lenette, C. (2018). Recently resettled refugee women-at-risk in Australia evidence high levels of psychiatric symptoms: individual, trauma and post-migration factors predict outcomes. *BMC Medicine* 16(149), 1-12.

<sup>3</sup>Department of Home Affairs. (2021). Refugee Visas: Offshore. <<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/refugee-and-humanitarian-program/refugee-visas>>

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<sup>12</sup>Settlement Services International. (n.d). Women at Risk: Factsheet. <[https://www.ssi.org.au/images/stories/documents/factsheets/Factsheet\\_Women\\_at\\_Risk.pdf](https://www.ssi.org.au/images/stories/documents/factsheets/Factsheet_Women_at_Risk.pdf) >

<sup>13</sup>Schweitzer, R.D., Vromans, L., Brough, M., Asic-Kobe, M., Correa-Velez, Murray, K. & Lenette, C. (2018). Recently resettled refugee women-at-risk in Australia evidence high levels of psychiatric symptoms: individual, trauma and post-migration factors predict outcomes. *BMC Medicine* 16(149), 1-12.

<sup>14</sup>Settlement Services International & Centre for Refugee Research. (2014). *Today I am something! Refugee women at risk speak out: A report of consultations with refugee women at risk on successful settlement, good services, gaps and challenges held by SSI and CRR.* Settlement Services International & Centre for Refugee Research. Sydney.

<sup>15</sup>Pittaway, E. & Pittaway, E. (2013). *Refugee Women at Risk in Australia: An evaluation of service provision for refugee women settled under the Humanitarian Settlement Services Scheme.* Settlement Services International and the Centre for Refugee Research. Sydney.

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<sup>17</sup>Vromans, L., Schweitzer, R.D., Farrell, L., Correa-Velez, I., Brough, M., Murray, K. & Lenette, C. (2018). 'Her cry is my cry': resettlement experiences of refugee women at risk recently resettled in Australia. *Public Health* 158, 149-155.

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