

# The Refugee Convention

## Where to from here?

Refugee communities, teachers, activists, students, community workers, church groups, academics and lawyers attended an international conference to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention at the University of NSW last December. “The Refugee Convention Where to From Here? As the title indicates, examined the Convention and assessed its relevancy in today’s society. Eileen Pittaway from the Centre for Refugee Research based at the University of New South Wales said that the conference main themes were settlement and resettlement, the concept of asylum, the treatment of asylum seekers and the protection of refugees while in transit or based in a camp. At the end of each session participants workshopped ideas and came up with a number of recommendations for action.

*“By the end of the conference we’re hoping to come up with a series of really strong recommendations to UNHCR and to Government,”* said Eileen.

The conference was organised to coincide with a series of United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) international consultations that are currently being undertaken. The aim was to connect with the topics being discussed by the United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). “We’re not just going to send a book off to UNHCR, we’re going to tailor it specifically to the right places,” Eileen says. “The outcomes were very focussed and policy oriented for UNHCR, the Australian Government and other governments as well.”

There are currently no international monitoring guidelines in place for the Refugee Convention. “The big international push is for a monitoring mechanism for refugees whether it be a treaty body or a special international monitoring body. We discussed that and came up with some recommendations,” says Eileen.

While the setting up of an international monitoring body is one objective, conference convenor, Linda Bartolomei, says that the conference has examined a broad range of issues. “The whole point of the conference was not just to have a talk fest but something that produces solid tangible outcomes and plans,” she said. “We are looking at a range of recommendations and suggesting a range of measures that we believe will make concrete change and these go from a really domestic policy resettlement focus in Australia for example to international issues of the massive numbers of asylum seekers and those who are fleeing conflict.”

A scholarship scheme has been devised which enables refugees who have settled in Australia to attend the conference and share their own experiences. The Mercy Foundation provided substantial funding for the conference

and part of that grant includes \$10,000, which is specifically for bringing refugee participants in from interstate. Fairfield City Council sponsored four refugee positions and the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women (ANCORW) has provided two.

“The scheme was for a mix of people who come from a refugee-like background who wish to come to the conference. We’re not forcing people to contribute their personal stories if that is not what they want to do. It’s about their active participation in the conference in whatever form they want that to take,” says Linda.

Refugees from Sudan, Nicaragua, Chile, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and East Timor attended the conference. “There was representation from most refugee communities right back from the first waves over the last 20, 30, 40 years.”

A panel comprising a variety of views participated at each session. “On each panel we had an academic view, a refugee giving their personal story and a community worker explaining what it is like in the community. We are endeavouring to get that mix in all of the sessions so that everyone gets to hear each other,” says Eileen.

Aside from the formal streams of the conference, there were also three satellite events that provided further examination. Two days prior to the conference a ‘World Court of Women’ was held focusing on human rights abuses and racism towards refugee and indigenous women.

A ‘Hypothetical’ hosted by Julie McCrossin, an Australian television and radio presenter, took place on the opening night to explore the political angles of the issues. The following day a Moot Court at Parliament House took an unnamed country to the International Court of Justice.

In 1993, Eileen and STARTTS Director Jorge Aroche were involved in a two-year project that involved a conference looking at resettlement policy in Australia. “There was a great deal of work around resettlement across a whole group of people and then we put together a really big report, which went to Government,” Eileen says. “It was really successful and we’re hoping to see the same result this time.”

**By Sheree Went**