

Human Rights and Trauma

The impact of the understanding of rights
on successful settlement and healing.

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Why this project?

To explore the trauma caused by misunderstandings and misconceptions of human rights by refugee communities and some service providers have on the refugee resettlement process in Australia.



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Background to this project

This project built on the findings and outcomes of a number of previous CRR Projects, these include:

- Two ARC linkage project: 'Refugee Women at Risk: Protection and Integration in Australia'
- 'Rights in families' project with AMES in Melbourne and Relationships Australia in Sydney
- 'African Women talking' project with ACCES Inc in Logan, Queensland.



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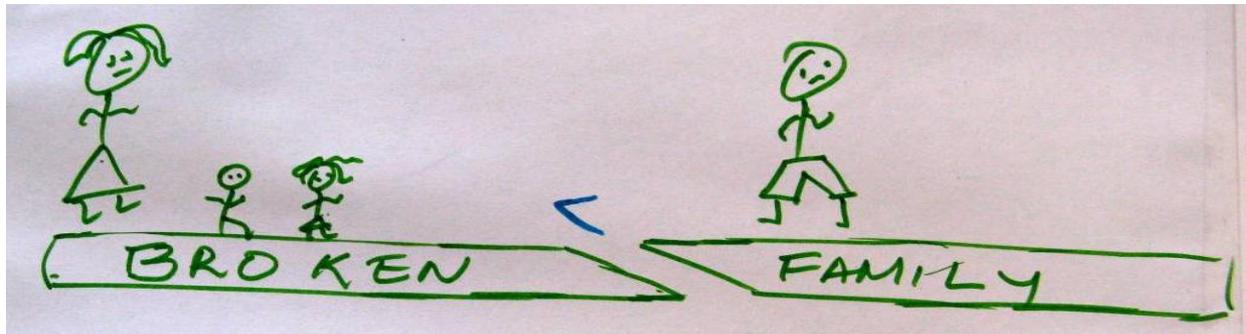


Why this project?

“Just imagine 20 years in suffering, then you reach here and face some of these issues . . . “rights” destroy our families – our women leave and our children rebel against us.”



Why this project?



The biggest problem is broken families; broken families. As we can see it happens in many families: the man is left alone; the woman, the wife and the children are taken in different places. This is a very stressful situation. [Community member]

Research Aims and objectives

1. Determine the role that misunderstandings and misperceptions of rights and meanings of culture and cultural practices of refugee communities, have on refugee settlement outcomes.
2. Explore the impact of assumed knowledge and understanding of the meaning of rights in Australia by service providers, and the host communities, and its impact in the context of settlement.
3. Contribute to a human rights framework to inform the protection of refugees upon resettlement to Australia with the potential for application to other countries of resettlement.
4. Contribute to the current conceptual debates in literature and discourse on refugee rights in settlement and the application of the rights based approach in refugee protection



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Methodology

Consultations and interviews with Service Providers – 1/3 from refugee backgrounds in each site > 100 participants

Consultations and focus groups with women, men and young people from >200 people from diverse refugee backgrounds who have come to Australia from:

Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burma, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Liberia, Rwanda, Syria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe



Theoretical framework

“human rights are best understood as part law, part philosophy and part political movement.” The values that drive the idea of human rights owe almost as much to poetry and music as they do to legal principles. They owe nearly as much to the spirituality of all the great religions and to the eternal quest for righteousness as they do to revolution and the demand for freedom from state tyranny” (Klug 2000, p18).



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Project Findings: Confirming the Hypothesis

“We are very happy in Australia, but we have issues with our children because they have too many rights”

“First it’s the kids, then it’s women, third it’s my dog, then men ... men come last in Australia!”



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Legal Aspects of Human Rights

Findings in progress

- Lack of understanding of the link between human rights and Australian law
- Distrust of the legal system
- Over-reliance on community leaders for information
- Confusion of the meaning of rights and responsibility



Philosophical Aspects of Human Rights

Findings in progress

- Assumptions about cultural and religious practice
- Women's and children's rights a major point of contention but are highly appreciated by many women and children
- A belief that Child protection law prosecutes rather than protects



Political Aspects of Human Rights

Findings in progress

- Challenge in accessing rights such as the right to work and to adequate housing
- Racism, xenophobia and Islamaphobia
- Men in particular lose their self-worth identities and struggle to find new ones
- The struggle to learn English and lack of social networks are barriers to accessing human rights.
- The role of community leaders



The Project Outcomes

This project has assisted in understanding the different ways in which “rights” are understood and experienced by refugee communities and has explored how this impacts on the trauma experienced during the settlement process. These findings have informed these theoretical, policy and practice recommendations.



Post Migration Stressors

Research over the past decade has begun to acknowledge the impact of post-migration stressors on mental health outcomes.

These include:

The right to work, access to education, decent housing, religious difference, gender roles, lack of support services, separation from family and intergenerational challenges *(See reference list)*



Broken Dreams

The cumulative impact of the misconceptions, misinformation and lack of access to rights can be directly linked to trauma experienced by refugees in the settlement process.

Often they have survived their life in exile by dreaming of a better life for themselves and their families.

Resettlement to a developed country is often seen as that dream come true.

In some cases, failure to achieve the dream, family breakdown and loss of hope leads to a further set of traumas.

These are often blamed on the rights available to women and children in Australia.



Old Trauma – New Trauma

This is a complex issue, different for each individual and cohort of refugees

In some cases, the experience exacerbates existing trauma.

In others it can trigger PTSD trauma for people who had so far managed to keep this under control.

In other cases it creates entirely new levels of trauma.

For many it is a combination of all three.



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Men's Experience

Many men experience trauma because of loss of status and masculinity as refugees, in particular the loss of their role as head of household.

Many have also experienced torture and trauma experienced extreme violence, grief and loss.

This trauma is reinforced when they find that they are unable to regain these roles upon settlement.



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Women's Experience

Less is said about the traumas experienced by women who have also often survived severe trauma, rape and sexual violence, as well as their lower status in the social order of their communities.

They too hope for a secure and happy family life in Australia, but as they reach out to access rights beyond their wildest dreams, they often find that the additional and severe trauma of domestic violence and community disapproval is added to their lives.



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Youth Experience

Similarly, we acknowledge the trauma experienced by many refugee children pre-arrival to Australia.

Often, in settlement, their sometimes misguided attempts to reach out and enjoy the rights which they see Australian children enjoying are cruelly punished, both physically and mentally, and this can also trigger additional trauma.



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Community Leaders

Community leaders play a critically important role in the settlement of refugee communities

They are often under intense pressure to provide answers which they do not have, and solutions to problems which are incredibly difficult to solve

Many community leaders and representatives do an amazing job in guiding their communities through the maze of things that have to be learned in the settlement process.



Challenges

However

Some do not have detailed knowledge about human rights and law in Australia

Others use the knowledge they have as a means of controlling their communities

While usually well intentioned, this can also cause new traumas and build barriers to healing and successful settlement



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Trauma Informed Care

Research has highlighted the need for Trauma Informed Care (TIC) to address the resolution of trauma

Many of the principles of TIC are pertinent not only to the provision of counseling and therapy, but also for delivery of settlement services.



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Caring for Staff

Many of the service providers in settlement service delivery are themselves refugees, and also have suffered from trauma.

TIC literature highlights the parallel process of re-traumatisation and new traumatization which can occur to both staff and clients in the delivery of services to people who have experienced trauma.



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Ways Forward

Torture and Trauma Services in all states to develop and deliver materials designed for refugees experiencing secondary trauma or new settlement related trauma specifically related to changes in family rights in Australia.

Torture and Trauma services in each state be funded to provide an ongoing support role for staff working with refugee intakes, and vulnerable to secondary trauma, or re-traumatisation. High quality supervision sessions be made compulsory for all settlement services staff.



Ways Forward

Communities must be given opportunities to build their social capital and to identify and implement solutions to challenges which both address the issues of law and human rights and respect diverse cultural positions.

Services including government services must not assume that all community leaders and representatives have the requisite knowledge of human rights and law to pass on to their communities

Trusted Community leaders and community representatives who have demonstrated an understanding of the Australian system and the importance of this to their communities should be offered training and support to take the role of community educators and negotiators of the system



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