



The Centre for Refugee Research
UNSW

THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW SOUTH WALES



The Women at Risk Research Project Plan and Methodology

The passage of refugees from situations of danger to the comparative safety of resettlement is becoming increasingly more complex. Sexual and gender based violence and discrimination against refugee women continues to increase. Despite international recognition of the phenomena, reflected in refugee policy, legislation and the human rights framework, programs designed to address this issue continue to fail to fully achieve their aims.

This is particularly evident in the problems experienced in the effective implementation of the “Women at Risk” (WaR) resettlement program. The WaR program is sponsored by UNHCR. The aim of the program is to identify refugee women at extreme risk of violence and without family protection, and to fast track their removal to a resettlement country. Australia is one of a number of resettlement countries that have a quota of resettlement places within its refugee program for women and children at risk.

A three-year longitudinal action research based study is being undertaken by a team of researchers from the University of New South Wales. By working closely with UNHCR, international NGOs and local women’s organisations the project team have had the opportunity to explore the needs of refugee women, the effectiveness of current policy to address these needs, the roadblocks to efficient policy implementation and the role of ideology and discourse in the policy process. It has been identified that in most refugee situations the majority of women and girls are at risk. This points to an urgent need to ensure that legal, physical and social protection mechanisms are fully implemented in all refugee settings. However the research has clearly identified that for some women and girls the risk they face is so extreme that resettlement is the only solution. For many of these women, their risk has increased as a result of numerous and multi layered human rights abuses and has been compounded by a series of protection failures during their search for safety. The case study included in Appendix A highlights the way in which a refugee woman’s risk of abuse can increase based on her earlier experiences of violence and human rights abuses, and that this risk is compounded by either the lack of, or the failure of protection mechanisms.

This project also explores the health dimensions of Women at Risk. Despite the clear recognition of the health needs of refugee women little has been done which directly links this to the concept of increased risk.



Five distinct problem areas have been identified in the implementation of the WaR Program. They are:

1. Problems in definition and interpretation of the concept of “women at risk” when used in a refugee context, and the impact of these on the implementation of the program.
2. Problems in the implementation process, including determination of risk and the removal of women from situations of danger, to resettlement in Australia.
3. The quality of protection and assistance provided to women in camps.
4. The response to the special needs of women at risk once in Australia, and the impact of these on their resettlement.
5. The lack of effective protection available to refugee women in situations of so called asylum is often in itself a major risk factor, and often leads to a situation in which resettlement is the only protection solution.



Kakuma Camp – Kenya
(near the Sudanese border)

The following questions which will be addressed in course of project.

1. Do the current definitions of the nature, root causes and impacts of sexual and gender based violence and discrimination accurately describe the phenomena under investigation?
2. What is the impact of the current definitions of “women at risk” and the ways in which they are interpreted on the effective implementation of the WaR Program?
3. What are the risk factors which refugee women face and how do these intersect to create a situation of unacceptable risk?
4. How do multiple human rights abuses coupled with serial protection failures compound the risk faced by refugee women?
5. What role does discourse and ideology play in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of refugee policy in particular that relating to refugee women?

6. How do recent changes in international law designed to recognise and address sexual and gender based violence of women in conflict situations, impact on policy and service provision?
7. What aspects of health and health service provision should be considered in determining the risk to women refugees?
8. How are women in situations of extreme risk currently identified and “processed” for resettlement?
9. Are the current processes for the identification and resettlement processing of women at risk effective in addressing their needs?
10. Are resettlement services provided for War in countries of resettlement in addressing their needs?



Anticipated Research Outcomes:

1. Clarification of the definition of “women at risk” and guidelines and benchmarks for the measurement of risk in given situations to guide interpretation and identification of potential candidates for the program to the Australian Government and UNHCR.
2. A specific set of health guidelines for use in determining risk factors for refugee women, in particular for application in the WaR program.
3. Recommendations to Governments, UNHCR, the Human Rights Commission and the non Government Sector which address barriers to the identification of women at risk. These will include a case identification and management system supported by an effective monitoring system.
4. A model of resettlement service provision for refugee women at risk, which provides intensive and specialised on arrival support and integration assistance.
5. Input into a new EXCOM Conclusion on Refugee Women at Risk.

Where will it happen?

Research will be carried out in Australia and in two locations that generate and process refugees, Thailand and Kenya. These countries, which are very different in their treatment of refugees, raise questions of how a single category defining those at risk is interpreted and implemented in very contrasting settings. Although hosting a large number of Burmese refugees, Thailand is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention. Until recently there has been no organised resettlement program from Thailand and for these reasons, while there are documented cases of many Burmese “women at risk”, very few reach Australia from that part of the world. Nairobi is the major post for the processing of refugee claims in the East Africa, which is one of the regions targeted for Australia’s WaR Program (PAM 3, 2002).

The University of NSW Project Team:

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A number of key refugee agencies have come together to work with us and support the project. They are:

Formal Project Partners

Australian National Committee on Refugee Women (ANCORW)
Asian Women Human Rights Council (AWHRC)
Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Kenya and Thailand
Public Health Association Australia (PHAA)
Refugee Consortium of Kenya (RCK)

Informal Partners

Caritas Australia
Mercy Refugee Service (Australia)
UNHCR Regional Office Australia

Project website

Further information about the project can be obtained on the Centre for Refugee Research Website at www.crr.unsw.edu.au. This site will be regularly updated so that all project partners and interested others can receive regular updates and progress reports. The full project background and a six month progress report will be available shortly on this website. For further information please contact Dr Eileen Pittaway at: e.pittaway@unsw.edu.au or Linda Bartolomei at: linda.bartolomei@unsw.edu.au