

## **Pathways to employment for refugee women: Enhancing social inclusion and health and wellbeing**

*Adelaide and Flinders University researchers are taking a longitudinal snapshot of pathways to employment for women from refugee backgrounds with the aim of contributing directly to the social empowerment of refugee women.*

According to the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), finding employment is one of the highest priorities for humanitarian migrants. Employment enables refugees to provide for their families and facilitates their connections into the community, producing a range positive outcomes for health and well-being (Hartley 2014). A lack of engagement in employment or other meaningful occupation has likewise been linked to social isolation and poor health (Crawford 2016).

Work can play a particularly important role for women from refugee backgrounds, who face a high risk of isolation and associated negative health effects. Through connecting refugee women to opportunities and social networks, employment has the potential to facilitate a range of positive settlement outcomes.

Despite the importance of employment, recent figures from the Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) survey<sup>1</sup> reveals that unemployment amongst refugees remains high. These findings support other research which has suggested unemployment rates of 50-70% among refugees, and for those who were employed, only small numbers were in full time work, with many employed for less than two days a week (Marston 2004).

Refugees face many barriers to employment including poor English language proficiency, lack of qualifications, skills and Australian work experience, as well as the impact of trauma and

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<sup>1</sup> BNLA Building a New Life in Australia is a long-term research project about how humanitarian migrants settle into a new life in Australia. The study has been commissioned by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and is managed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), with the fieldwork undertaken by Colmar Brunton Social Research in conjunction with Multicultural Marketing and Management.

torture (Humpage & Marston 2005; RCOA 2010). Refugee women confront additional challenges entering the workforce, including family responsibilities, the gendered nature of labour markets (ECCV 2009), and much available work being located within the informal economy (RCOA 2010). When refugee and migrant women do find work, they are more likely to do so in industries with poor pay and conditions such as aged care, cleaning and childcare (Williams 2012; Anglicare 2016).

Humanitarian migrants make a significant and long lasting contribution to the economy once they are employed (Hugo 2011, RCOA 2010b). Not surprisingly, then, there have been a range of government and non-government employment programs for refugees at the state and national level in Australia. However, very little research has explored the impacts of such programs on settlement and health outcomes for refugee women.

The research, which is funded by the Department of Social Services, Resilient Communities Grant scheme, will provide an assessment of employment programmes and initiatives in Australia and abroad that target refugees. In addition, the lived experiences of refugee women will be captured at three separate points in time over a two and a half year period through interviews focusing on employment and the impacts of work on their social inclusion and health and well-being. Interviews with a range of service providers and employers of refugee women will also provide valuable insights into the key issues facing refugee women in the workforce. The research team also plans to analyse the (BNLA) longitudinal data set to examine the links between employment, social inclusion and health and well-being.

The project will shed light on refugee women's employment experiences and will contribute to the enhancement of employment assistance programs. A key outcome from the project will be a targeted policy and best practice guidelines for facilitating employment and social inclusion and health and well-being.

The research team includes Alex Reilly and Joanna Howe of the Adelaide Law School, and Clemence Due in the School of Psychology from the University of Adelaide, and Anna Ziersch from the Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity at Flinders University. Dr Moira

Walsh is the research associate on the project for its duration and will be responsible for conducting the longitudinal study. In describing the project, Alex says:

*'We know from research how important employment is to integration and well-being of new migrants. We want to gain an understanding of the engagement of refugee women with work in their early years in Australia, and consider how well existing employment programs cater to the needs of these women. We hope that this will provide insights for governments and NGOs in establishing well targeted programs to assist refugee women to enter the paid workforce.'*

Dr Moira Walsh, Research Associate, 'Pathways to employment for refugee women: Enhancing social inclusion and health and wellbeing'.

Professor Alex Reilly, Adelaide Law School and Director of the Public Law and Policy Research Unit.

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