

## Spring edition 2021



## Director's letter:

*Tamara Domicelj*

It has been an extraordinary few months and I hope that you and your loved ones are faring well amidst the maelstrom.

The virulence and spread of the COVID-19 Delta variant, the extended lockdowns which have ensued, the upsurge of gender-based and family and domestic violence, the announced perpetuation of Australia's offshore processing arrangement for people seeking asylum on Nauru, the fall of Kabul to the Taliban and its wake, the ongoing atrocities in Myanmar, and the parlous state of our climate (and related displacement) are amongst some of the tremendous challenges which we face and tragedies to which we

bear witness. Throughout these months acute suffering, extraordinary resilience and everyday acts of leadership have been on perpetual display.

And it is a year of anniversaries. Amidst unprecedented levels of forced displacement world-wide, we have marked the 70th anniversary of the Refugees Convention (which Australia was instrumental in bringing to life). And amongst other anniversaries, we celebrate an Ignatian Year, the 500th anniversary of the start of St Ignatius' conversion. And on November 14 we commemorate 41 years since JRS' commencement.

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cont from p1 Having recently also observed the 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, it is incumbent upon us to reflect upon how we best heed the call of Pope Francis to “break down the walls that separate us” and to “walk together without prejudice ... towards an ever wider ‘we’”.

And reflecting upon these last months, it is painfully evident that we must together “build a more inclusive world, which excludes no one”. And we must do so in a way which attends to the urgent need to enhance collaboration in the care of our common home – this precious, extraordinary Earth.

I am so very proud and heartened by how the extended JRS family – our magnificent staff, beneficiaries, volunteers, Board, community leaders with whom we work, and network of supporters and partners – have rallied and worked together, in precisely this way, and unwaveringly so, throughout these tough times.

The articles in this Link edition bear that out.

When we partnered with Western Sydney Local Health District’s outreach program to ensure access for people seeking asylum and refugees to COVID-19 vaccinations, our staff, volunteers and supporters rushed to assist with frontline and logistical support and vital donations of personal protective equipment (PPE). As we delivered food and other essential items across locked down Greater Sydney, then needed to pivot to online emergency relief payments, then incrementally recommenced our delivery service, our staff, volunteers, donors and partners have adapted and engaged with determination and zeal in doing all possible, within safety parameters, to meet escalating need amongst our beneficiaries.



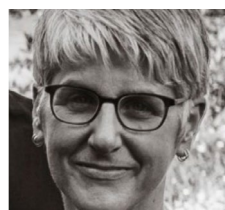
And on Afghanistan - with open, aching hearts we have watched aghast as scenes of chaos and despair have flooded our screens. And we have listened deeply as the diaspora from Afghanistan in Australia, as elsewhere, has exercised extraordinary leadership, shining an unwavering light upon the situation, articulating clear calls, struggling tirelessly to save lives, and galvanising others to action.

As the Taliban took control of Kabul, JRS and our sister agency Jesuit Social Services (JSS) worked as co-chairs of the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA) to join the calls of the diaspora community, urging the Australian Government to pursue three actions:

1. Commit to an intake of an additional 20,000 refugees from Afghanistan, focused on those most at risk
2. Make immediate arrangements to bring the families of refugees from Afghanistan to Australia.
3. Grant permanent protection to all people from Afghanistan in Australia on temporary protection visas or currently seeking asylum.

We have also been pleased to join the Christians United for Afghanistan campaign and to work closely and tirelessly with parishes, schools and our extended network of supporters and partners to do all we can to accompany, serve and advocate for and with our sisters and brothers from Afghanistan at this time of terrible need.

As ever, we are immensely grateful for and humbled by the compassion and support of all within our extraordinary extended JRS family as we work to fulfil our mission to accompany, serve, and advocate for and with refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, that they may heal, learn, and determine their own future.



In peace and solidarity,  
Tamara Domicelj



Left: Refurbished laptops generously donated by the Asylum Seekers Centre and Sydney Catholic Schools that will go directly to clients to support them in finding work and training opportunities.

Right: A generous donation of PPE from St Vincent’s Hospital Sydney.



# Keeping Our Community Safe


During Sydney's recent lockdown, JRS Australia began hosting vaccination clinics for refugee and asylum-seeking communities, as part of Western Sydney Local Health District's outreach program to reach people in situations of vulnerability. More than 250 individuals have attended clinics, held in the St Patrick's Cathedral Hall, Catholic Diocese of Parramatta during Sydney's lockdown.

The outreach clinics formed part of a much broader commitment from the NSW Government and the Federal Government to ensure vaccine equity for everyone in Australia, an approach that JRS has been calling on all Governments worldwide to adopt.

JRS Australia's Assistant Director Maeve Brown said "JRS Australia is delighted to work with NSW Health to ensure that people seeking asylum and refugees in vulnerable situations are able to access COVID-19 vaccinations in a safe and familiar environment.

Not only does everyone in the community have the right to be vaccinated, but it is also an obvious




 Zaki Haidari, community leader and Leadership Coordinator at JRS Australia receiving his first vaccine jab at the JRS clinic

public health imperative at the moment. JRS Australia will continue to work closely with health authorities to support the vaccine roll-out in Western Sydney."


The urgency of the vaccination outreach clinics was heightened by the dramatic surge in COVID-19 cases across Western and South Western Sydney, where the majority of people seeking

asylum and refugees in NSW live.

Those who are elderly, and have co-morbidities are at particular risk of contracting a more severe and life-threatening case of the virus, although as warned by the authorities, COVID-19 is a virus which does not discriminate, and has caused hospitalisation and deaths amongst the young and people without underlying health conditions.

 Community leader, Idrissa Dumbuya, receiving his first vaccine jab.



 Maeve Brown, Assistant Country Director and Chloe Tremblay-Goyette, SGBV Caseworker, staffing the vaccine clinic check-in desk.



# Locked Down and Locked Out

JRS Australia is proud to announce our participation in a joint research project which explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalised communities in Australia.

As part of the Australian Catholic University's (ACU) new and innovative Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU), JRS Australia along with St Vincent de Paul NSW, Catholic Social Services Victoria, St Mary's House of Welcome, and Lord Somers Camp and Powerhouse are working together to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted community members in particularly vulnerable situations and community sector services.

Researchers from the university will work with staff, volunteers, and service beneficiaries from all five organisations to examine the effects of last year's lockdowns for temporary visa holders, people who experienced long-term unemployment, and people who had access to support for the first time.

During the most recent lockdown in Sydney, JRS Australia saw a significant increase in demand for support. The average number of weekly referrals to JRS Australia's intake service during Sydney's



Image by Amber Clay from Pixabay

lockdown has **increased by 43%** from the months prior.

With increased restrictions and limited access to services, it has certainly been a challenging time for the people we work with. We have provided emergency financial support to hundreds of families in order to help them pay rent, utilities, medications, and food. Our specialist case workers have also been responding daily to mental and physical health emergencies, and situations of domestic and family violence.

The Employment Program team has also been working tirelessly with clients to access work and training opportunities which have been

limited due to the lockdown. JRS Australia is currently distributing **laptop devices to more than 80 households**, enabling them to be more connected to family, friends, services, and employment opportunities.

Responding to the demand in our services during a crisis like this has been difficult however we have been able to maintain a strong connection to our clients and do our best in filling the gaps to reach the most vulnerable and marginalised.

Our experiences during this lockdown will help inform the research project on how best to improve access to support services and highlight ways in which the broader community sector can be prepared to respond to future needs following the roll back of Federal Government emergency relief measures. We also look forward to providing insight to the project on the effects on mental health and wellbeing of our clients during this tumultuous time.

JRS staff, volunteers, and City of Parramatta volunteers helping deliver much needed food hampers. Due to COVID restrictions, our food bank operation was scaled back dramatically. Our team were able to continue to support the families we work with through emergency relief payments.





# What's Next for Afghanistan?



It has now been over a month since the Taliban seized Kabul. As attention inevitably shifts elsewhere, the painful question arises: What next? Is this another back to the future moment? The signs are grim. Over the last two weeks, the Taliban have issued a number of edicts which demonstrate that their attitudes to women have not changed.

On 18 September, they banned girls from attending secondary school. Then on Sunday 19 September, the Taliban instructed female employees in Kabul's city government to stay home. Men would replace them where possible.

These edicts, restricting the rights of women and girls to work and study, hark back to the last time the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, emanating from the group's extreme interpretation of Sharia law.

When the Taliban last ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, the group forbade women to go to school or university, forbade women to work, and only allowed women to leave their homes if accompanied by a male family member. Breaking these rules incurred punishments such as public whipping or stoning, as they likely will now.

The plight of Afghanistan's religious and ethnic minorities such as the Hazaras is equally precarious. Experts and close watchers of Afghanistan have been warning of ethnocide and politicide under Taliban rule since the day Kabul fell. These warnings are grounded in a long history of persecution and pain for minorities.

In the aftermath of the West's hurried departure from Kabul, the Australian Government can and should

take a number of key practical steps to protect people from Afghanistan. Australia's recent announcement of \$100 million in aid, including \$65 million in urgent humanitarian assistance is a welcome development, which will save lives.

This money should be distributed to local civil society organisations and refugee-led organisations with close contacts on the ground.

Australia can do even more to protect people from Afghanistan.

More than 5,100 refugees and people seeking protection from Afghanistan have been separated from their family members for more than eight years and denied access to family reunion. In addition, they have been subject to prolonged immigration

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 Zaki Haidari

cont from p5 detention, denied access to formal education, and denied access to vital supports such as the NDIS.

These refugees have been living, working, volunteering and praying in our communities for years. They cannot ever live safely under a Taliban Government, and their family members stuck in Afghanistan are in grave danger.

Australia should grant permanent protection visas to these refugees and prioritise pathways to family reunification for them and so many other people from Afghanistan currently in Australia.

Australia can also accept more refugees from Afghanistan for resettlement.

Diaspora leaders have continuously called for a special intake of 20,000 people in addition to the annual humanitarian intake of 13,750, and large segments of Australia including churches, unions, and business groups support this call. Indeed, many Australians have already offered to lend practical support to those who arrive as part of such an intake.

Australia has shown leadership of this kind in the past, offering 42,000 visas to people fleeing the Vietnam War between 1975 and 1980; offering 42,000 visas to people from China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989; and offering 12,000 visas to people from Syria and Iraq in 2015.

Now is the time for the Australian Government to step up and do more to protect people from Afghanistan.

**Hava Rezaie is a refugee rights advocate; Hayat Akbari is the Chair of the Youth Working Group at the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN); Zaki Haidari is a refugee rights advocate and Leadership Coordinator at Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia.**

**This article was originally published by Eureka Street on 28 September 2021. To sign the Action for Afghanistan petition visit, [www.actionforafghanistan.com.au](http://www.actionforafghanistan.com.au)**

*JRS Australia is working hard to serve, accompany, and advocate for the protection of people from Afghanistan. At the ground level, JRS is triaging applications for protection and making referrals to legal partners such as the Refugee Advice and Casework Service (RACS).*

*JRS Australia is also working closely with diaspora leaders and communities to raise awareness of the urgent need for Australia to show more ambition and compassion in its response to this crisis. Our work has involved facilitating media coverage, meeting with parliamentarians to discuss the core policy issues at play, co-coordinating a national Catholic response in our role as Co-Convener of the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA), and working with school and parish leaders across Sydney to engage their local decision-makers.*

📷 Paul Fletcher MP meeting with the representative delegation of Catholic leaders living, working, & praying in Bradfield, calling for urgent #ActionForAfghanistan, including the announcement of an additional intake of 20,000 resettlement places.





# Reflections from the Frontlines:

## A caseworker's notes

When I first meet with a client, I hand her three pieces of paper, each one representing her past, present, and future respectively. I ask her to think about all the things that she no longer wants in her life and to write them down. She scrunches this piece of paper up and throws it away. On the second paper she will write about everything that is currently going on in her life and the issues that we will work together to address. With our clients, we focus on the here and now in order to forge a brighter future. On the last paper, I ask her to write about the life that she wants and hopes to achieve.

This is the most important step. I immediately see resilience and determination in her eyes. With our clients, we focus on the here and now in order to forge a brighter future.

My name is Sara Muzamil and I work as a Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) Specialist Caseworker at JRS Australia's Finding Safety Project located at our Women's Space in Western Sydney. The Finding Safety project supports women on temporary visas, including women seeking asylum, who are experiencing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). I work with girls and women from all over the world and from all walks of life. These girls and women are survivors of gender based violence.

As a SGBV Specialist Caseworker I have a great understanding of the complex forms of violence and unique barriers that women on temporary visas face. Many of the women we work with have experienced or are at risk of domestic and family abuse and other types of abuse, namely honour based violence (HBV). These include but are not limited to, female genital mutilation, early marriage, forced marriage, dowry abuse, and trafficking.

Due to the nature of their visa status, our clients are unable to access

government support and face extreme limitations on their freedom. Many do not have work rights attached to their visas and are therefore unable to support themselves and their families. If they are able to work, the lack of access to subsidised childcare limits their ability to find or avail of work and training opportunities. Their eligibility for temporary accommodation, refugees, and health services also relies on having a stable income.


In addition, as women who have fled their home countries to seek protection, they are in Australia with no families or friends to support them, and therefore experience significant isolation. Many of these women also face constant pressure from their families back home to stay with their abusive partners because of the shame they would bring upon their family. In some cases I have seen, women are ostracised from their own cultural communities for speaking up about abuse and shamed for seeking help.

All of these factors combine to ensure that many women end up remaining or returning to unsafe environments or going back to their perpetrator because they have no other place to go. The only other alternative is homelessness.

The JRS Australia Finding Safety Project acts as a safe harbour from life's tumultuous waves. It is a place where there is a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, and a space free from judgement. The sense of community that we try to foster enables our clients to open up and is a place – physical and otherwise – carved out for them to feel seen, protected, and safe.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges that women on temporary visas experiencing



 Sara Muzamil, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) Specialist Caseworker at JRS Australia's Finding Safety Project.

violence face in a number of ways. For us, connecting with clients during the lockdown has been difficult. With restrictions now easing, I hope that the Finding Safety Project can once again be a beacon of hope for the women we serve. Despite all the challenges our clients face day in and day out, they are resilient, and they always have a smile on their faces and positive attitudes towards the future.

The role of a Gender Based Violence Specialist Case Worker is far from easy because we work with people with life threatening issues. However, despite the difficult nature of the job, it is also a role I find deeply rewarding. I take pride in the work that we do and have heard so many times from our clients that they wouldn't know what to do or where to go if it wasn't for the services we provide at the Finding Safety Project.

From helping a woman find strength and independence, to saving a woman's life and helping her find her voice, we are proud to accompany them, serve them and advocate on their behalf.



📺 JRS Australia weekly team meeting during the Greater Sydney lockdown.

#### accompany.serve.advocate

### What JRS Does

JRS Australia advocates for policies of welcome and protection at all tiers of government. Through COVID-19, JRS Australia continues to provide emergency assistance, a Foodbank, professional casework support, an employment support program, facilitates free legal advice, as well as conducting targeted advocacy work, and a project to empower women.

 [www.facebook.com/JRSAustralia](https://www.facebook.com/JRSAustralia)

 @JRS\_Aus

#### donate

### How your donation will help

Your support allows us to continue to advocate for policies of welcome and protection and to provide people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations with COVID-19 safe specialist casework support, employment support, emergency payments and assisting women who are experiencing violence as well as providing food via our JRS Refugee Foodbank to people who have been otherwise left behind.

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia • ph: 02 9356 3888 • email: [info@jrs.org.au](mailto:info@jrs.org.au) • web: [aus.jrs.net](http://aus.jrs.net)

If undeliverable return to:  
Jesuit Refugee Service Australia  
PO Box 522  
Kings Cross NSW 1340

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