

## Christmas edition 2021



## Director's letter:

*Tamara Domicelj*

As we enter the final days of 2021 and cast our eyes forward to Christmas and a new year, with the hope that both can bring, it is timely to reflect back upon what has been an extraordinary year, replete with immense challenges, heartbreak, and everyday acts of heroism and goodwill as extraordinary efforts were mounted and sustained to accompany, serve and advocate for and with refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants in situations of vulnerability.

As we have borne witness to unfolding tragedies and a crescendo in the challenges which we face globally, we have – so very many of us – dug deeper and deeper, to find and

make our contributions towards healing and a fairer and safer world for all. Amongst so many other issues, throngs of determined and compassionate people, with refugee leaders at the centre, have mobilized to call for a strengthened humanitarian response to the Afghanistan crisis, rushed to assist on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response, and clamoured for an end to the scourge of gender-based, domestic and family violence.

It seems to me that all of those individual and collective contributions have amassed to become a great tide of compassion. And it is a tide which brings solace *cont on p2*



*cont from p1* and renewed strength to our sisters and brothers who are displaced and suffering, and which has the capacity to sway the minds and touch the hearts of decision-makers and those who influence them.

At the end of this volatile year I think many of us are fatigued, but together we are also powerful, and as such can feel emboldened and confident in the value of our diverse and complementary acts of solidarity. We can look forward with hope, and we can look back with pride.

As I think back on the year that was, I feel honoured to have shared it with such an exceptional community of people – this extended circle of JRS family and friends, many of whom I am yet to meet in person. And I so look forward to the day when that is possible, soon.

I feel immense gratitude to you all and pride in our collective achievements amidst a sustained and substantial escalation in need and in demand for the services and programs which JRS provides. And that escalation relates to the numbers of people whom we are called upon to serve as well as the complexities of their circumstances and the severity of their needs. The dimensions of that need, the resilience of those affected, and elements of our responses are illustrated in the articles that follow.

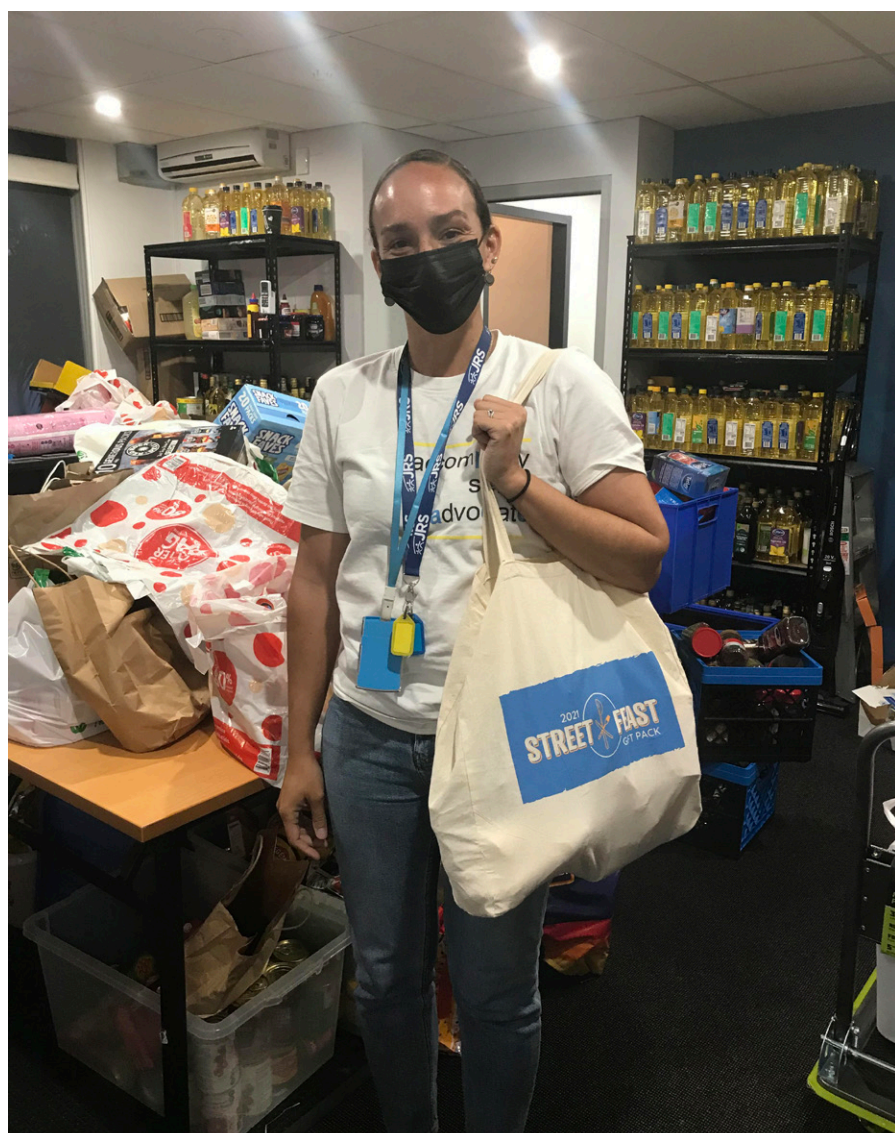
And so, as we look to the new year, we will be focusing our efforts upon sustainability; upon ensuring that the core and beating heart of the work that we do, stays strong and constant amidst the many pressures of these times. We will continue to draw effectively upon the wonderful supports which we are offered by you all, in ways that strengthen our capacity and heighten our collective impact.


To those whom it is our privilege to serve, we say thank you for your teachings and your trust. We learn from you daily, we miss seeing you in person, and we feel deeply your heartaches and your joys. And to our marvelous network of volunteers, staff, Board, donors, school and parish community supporters and sector partners and friends – my deepest abiding gratitude for all that you do in support of 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.



Wishing you all the very best as we enter the Christmas and New Year season.

In peace and solidarity,  
Tamara Domicelj



 Maeve Brown, Assistant Country Director organising food bank donations from Street Feast, an initiative from the Archdiocese of Sydney and the Diocese of Parramatta.

# Finding Safety: “I don’t want the relationship to end, I want the violence to stop”

On the 24th of November, in the lead up to the 16 Days of Activism campaign to eliminate violence against women, the JRS Australia Finding Safety team convened an online sector development webinar entitled “I don’t want the relationship to end, I want the violence to stop.”

Co-facilitated by Jessica Schulman, senior-solicitor at Immigration Advice and Rights Centre (IARC), the webinar addressed how to support women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) on temporary visas to create safety in complicated circumstances.

Attended by over 35 community workers, domestic and family violence specialists, legal professionals, advocates and volunteers, the webinar explored important and at times uncomfortable topics, prompting participants to reflect on the unique barriers faced by women survivors at the intersection of immigration policy and gender-based violence.

Finding Safety Project Officer Shatha Jajo began by offering up four case studies of women from different walks of life who, for one reason or another, were unable to or did not want to make the choice to leave a relationship with a person who chooses to use violence. This was followed with a reflection by specialist SGBV caseworker Chloe Tremblay-Goyette who explored two questions: “is there really a choice?” and “why doesn’t she just leave?”

A particularly poignant point that Chloe made was that “for women on temporary visas experiencing violence, the safety net often looks more like just a few strands barely




holding together.” Chloe made evident that there are still considerable gaps in knowledge, practical responses and resources addressing the complexity of SGBV for women on temporary visas or seeking asylum.

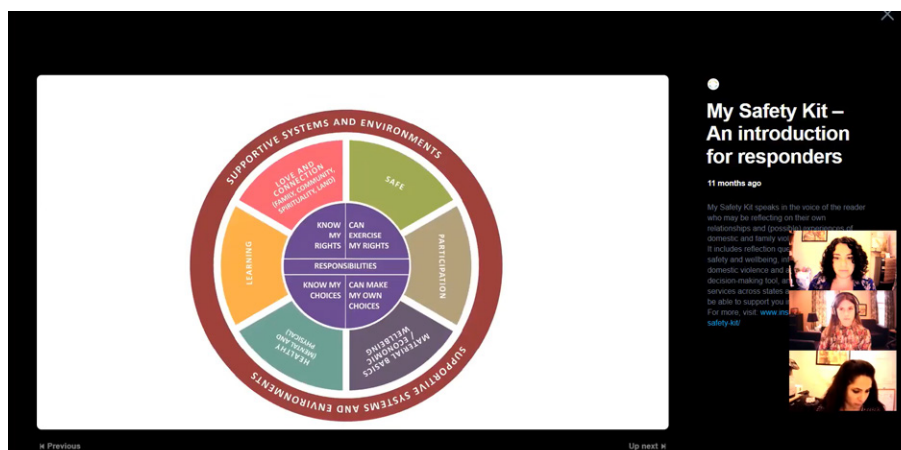
Following this, Jessica from IARC spoke about the legal challenges and supports available for women on temporary visas experiencing violence. Jessica identified the different justice and remedy pathways available to women depending on what visa they are on, and how immigration law and the justice system have a long way to go in adequately supporting women to create safety in these complicated situations.

In the final part of the webinar, Josephine Rechichi, Finding Safety Project Coordinator, shared a resource and video called “My Safety Kit” from Insight Exchange, a partner organisation. Josephine explored ways that practitioners across the social, community, and legal services sectors can improve the way violence experienced by women on temporary visas is understood, and how the community can better recognise the many ways that a woman can create safety in her own life.

Participants were then encouraged to share learnings, expertise, and direct questions to the panelists which also opened up discussions about honour-based violence, dowry abuse, and modern forms of slavery and trafficking.

The JRS Australia Finding Safety team thanks all who participated and looks forward to continuing our work building collaboration, increasing whole-of-community awareness, and improving the capacity to respond to these vital issues.

 The Finding Safety team showcasing the ways services across the entire sector can provide support to women on temporary visas.





# A Place to Call Home

In early 2020 JRS Australia received funding from the Mercy Foundation under their End Homelessness program and Life Without Barriers to conduct research on the experiences of homelessness and housing exclusion of people seeking asylum in Greater Sydney.

A Place to Call Home is an action-research project conducted in partnership between JRS Australia and Dr. Elizabeth Conroy from the Translational Health Research Institute (THRI) at Western Sydney University.

While the topic of homelessness and housing affordability is relatively well researched, there is no recent research that focuses specifically on people seeking asylum. This gap in understanding is significant, as people seeking asylum experiencing homelessness face a number of unique barriers to living safe and independent lives.

People seeking asylum are ineligible for social security except in very limited circumstances where they may be able to obtain a payment worth 89% of the Job Seeker allowance. Some also do not have the right to work. People seeking asylum are also generally ineligible for NSW Government Homelessness and Housing Services, even where the requirement for Australian permanent residency or citizenship is overlooked.

The research aimed to:

- understand the experiences of homelessness and housing pathways of people seeking asylum in Sydney, including during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- develop an evidence base to more effectively assess and support those at risk of homelessness and,
- develop an evidence base to advocate for changes to policy aimed at reducing the risks of homelessness for people seeking asylum.

The project conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 participants about their housing journeys including experiences of homelessness. The



project highlighted experiences of those at the post-review stage and included those primary and review stages of the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process, and a mix of women, men, and families. A companion report to this study based on an online survey of 101 people can be found on the JRS website.

All participants had experienced forms of housing exclusion while waiting for their claim for asylum to be determined. Most participants experienced inadequacy in their housing in the form of insecurity related to financial unaffordability. As a result most participants were in shared housing arrangements, which had impacts on privacy, safety and freedom for all participants, but especially for single women and families.

Situations of homelessness, such as sleeping rough or in cars, were rare. NGOs, community groups, and faith communities supported individuals to find temporary shelter, but these were not long term solutions.

Ultimately, the protracted duration of the RSD process, and the constraints placed on the fundamental economic and social rights of people navigating this process had a significant direct impact on their housing, especially at the so-called 'post-review' stage of the process.

One of the participants, Hanif\*, mentioned the lack of awareness in the community about the mere existence of people like him, and their experiences of not having the right to work.

*"They say, 'How can you [have] no work rights? If you [have] no work, how [do you] to eat, who give you the food?' They laugh like this. Some people don't believe even. They say 'Impossible. They ask you to stay Australia, but they say don't work, so they supply you food? They [pay your] expenses all?'"*

Participants appreciated the financial support provided by organisations like JRS Australia.

One participant explained that part of the reason why this support was

# Pulling together for change

It has been over four months since the world watched the challenging images of the Taliban taking control of Kabul. The devastation was deep for our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan and those in Australia. In the same week, hope and energy from the wider community grew and so many people reached out to see how they could help.

As part of a cross-sector civil society response to the unfolding crisis, 550 Catholic leaders including nuns, priests, congregational leaders, CEOs, Principals, teachers, and parish representatives signed onto letters written to key parliamentarians asking the Australian Government to do more to protect people from Afghanistan. Specifically, leaders called for immediate pathways for family reunion, granting permanent protection for refugees currently on temporary visas here in Australia, and committing to an additional intake of 20,000 humanitarian visas for people in need.

Over the last month, community groups have met with John Alexander (Bennelong), Paul Fletcher

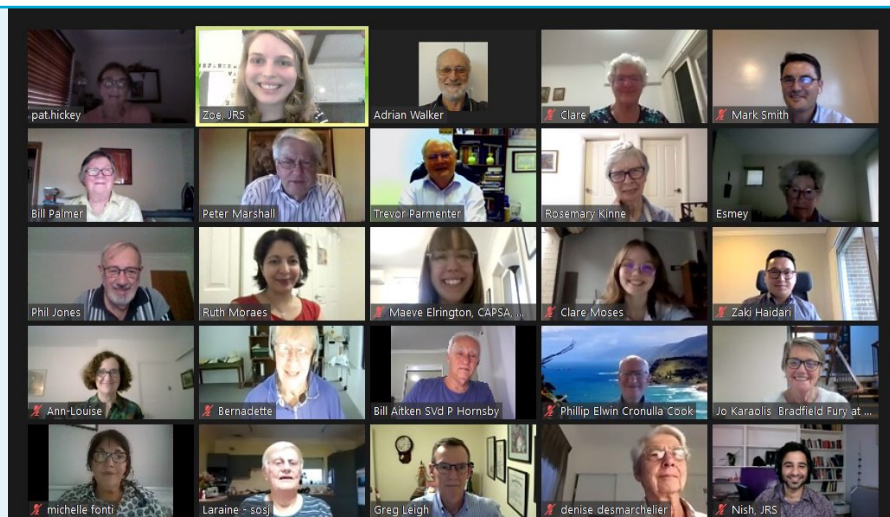


Image: Over 30 Catholic leaders join a reflection night to share their experiences of meeting with key parliamentarians.

(Bradfield), Trent Zimmerman (North Sydney), Fiona Martin (Reid), and David Coleman (Banks), with further meetings scheduled with Julian Leaser (Berowra) and Jason Falinski (Mackellar). Further afield, the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA), which JRS Australia co-convenes with Jesuit Social Services is organising delegations with parliamentarians in Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, and Western Australia.

Olivia Bortolussi, Year 11 student from Brigidine College reflects on her meeting with Paul Fletcher MP:

*Attending a school of 1000 girls, what really concerns me is seeing girls being denied their basic human rights of safety and education under Taliban rule in Afghanistan. It is both appalling and heartbreaking. I was determined to do what I can to help and hence joined this meeting.*

*After the introductions, Dani and I were the first narrators in charge of reading the script regarding Catholic involvement in the Afghanistan crisis. I felt everyone spoke clearly and concisely in the meeting and did a great job. I felt that as a whole, it was a well organised and influential meeting.*

*What I've learnt from the meeting is that taking action to help can only make a positive difference. With several other meetings just like ours taking place in other regions of Sydney we hope this expresses the strong support for Afghanistan. Whilst there were only 10 of us in the meeting, we were representing the majority of the Catholic population be it schools, parishes or organisations who have a strong sense for social justice. I would love to continue being involved in this and enjoyed being able to help!*

valuable was that it was provided without judgement.

*But you see who help me here? My god, my Allah, and ... like House of Welcome, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), they helping to people, without [asking] who are you. This I love to appreciate it to this organisation. They just see you are human being, you have two legs, two eyes. So, they just help for the person."*

This research represents an initial step in developing a more appropriate response to the homelessness and housing exclusion faced by people seeking asylum in Australia. The

findings indicate the need for better access to income support as a means to securing adequate housing. This includes providing people seeking asylum the legal right to work and ongoing financial assistance to those who cannot work.

Federal and local governments should also ensure that there is adequate availability of social housing, crisis accommodation, and housing and homelessness services for people seeking asylum who are at risk of homelessness. People seeking asylum should also be afforded ongoing

financial support in response to public health orders requiring lockdowns and other crisis related measures.

The report also concludes that women seeking asylum who face or are at risk of facing domestic and family violence must have ongoing financial assistance to ensure that they have a means to leave violent or unsafe situations.

*\*Participant's name has been changed for confidentiality.*

*A Place to Call Home: A Report on the Experiences of Homelessness of People Seeking Asylum in Greater Sydney can be found on our website.*



# Working towards safety and independence



Thanks to the PAYCE Foundation's generous support, the JRS Australia Employment Program is supporting refugees and people seeking asylum to find meaningful work and thereby participate in NSW's post-lockdown economic recovery.

*"After I met Tamana [Mirzada] and Zaki [Haidari] from the JRS Australia Employment Program, things really turned around.*

*Their attitude, humbleness and kindness gave me great direction."*

including resume and cover letter building, job search support, interview preparation, and facilitating a strong awareness of employment rights and responsibilities.

The program has assisted more than 114 people seeking asylum, many with families, to prepare for and navigate the current job market since January 2021, including through four months of city-wide lockdown.

Assistance includes equipping participants with work readiness skills,

During lockdown, the Program has adapted to an online working model, and organised a successful laptop drive to ensure that participants were digitally connected.

50 participants have found meaningful work thus far, and a significant majority feel more confident and better equipped to find jobs on their own.

Ashwini\* is one of these participants. Ashwini is a Tamil woman seeking asylum who has gone through very tough situations in life.

*"Looking back at the first time I came to JRS Australia, I was so different. I felt like I was in a well. A very dark and deep well. Mentally I was doing so badly," Ashwini says.*

*"My English was not the best. I was very worried my English was not good enough for interviews. I was self-conscious. The thought of making a CV was intimidating. I know that in Australia, your CV and cover letter are important to get a job. I was scared knowing that many people were looking for jobs and the competition was high."*

Since engaging with the JRS Australia Employment

Program, Ashwini has opened up as a person and has become more confident in herself.

*"After I met Tamana [Mirzada] and Zaki [Haidari] from the JRS Australia Employment Program, things really turned around. Their attitude, humbleness and kindness gave me great direction. I was always afraid of not being able to get a job but having someone to help and guide me was encouraging. It made me want to try harder and achieve my goals,"* Ashwini continues.

*"So much of my past affected my nature, but their help reminded me of the person I used to be."*

Speaking again about the support she received, Ashwini says, *"the JRS Australia Employment Program team gave me great support, answered all my questions, were truthful, and made me feel accountable. I had help from the team to write my own CV and cover letter, something that I didn't think I would be able to do. The team also shared so much knowledge about working in Australia and my rights at work."*

*"More than that, engaging with the JRS Australia Employment Program really boosted my confidence. I have come so far and now I can look for a job myself. The experience has reminded me that I am capable and I can achieve things,"* she reflects.

Ashwini has previous warehouse working experience however since the COVID-19 pandemic began, her work has slowed down. She also made the decision to stay at

home so as not to put herself and her household at risk.

Since restrictions have eased, Ashwini has had several interviews which were successful and resulted in job offers. Asked about pointers she would give others in her situation, Ashwini said,

*"If there is any advice I can give, it is that you need to believe in yourself regardless of your age or the way you think about yourself."*

*"I suggest trying to find any job at first, to get some experience and to build your confidence."*

*Learn, study, and practice your English skills. Community hubs and volunteering are great ways to improve your English and to find a sense of belonging. Meditation and counselling also really improved my confidence and my outlook on life which has played a big part in my job search."*

Ashwini now has a new job at a warehouse and is continuing her journey towards safety and independence in Australia.

*\*The individual's name has been changed to protect their identity*


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 Tamana Mirzada and Zaki Haidari from the JRS Australia Employment Program in the Parramatta office before lockdown restrictions.







 Image: Wayne, JRS volunteer loads up his ute with donations from Dandelion Support Network. These items will go to a refugee family with a new baby, just in time for Christmas.

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### 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  
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