

## Easter edition 2022



# Director's letter:

*Tamara Domicelj*

Dear friends of JRS and of all whom we serve,

I hope you are safe and well, amidst the tragedies to which we are all bearing witness here in Australia and overseas, with their devastating toll upon human lives, family unity, infrastructure and the environment.

Among such calamitous scenes and stories it can be easy – and normal – to feel overwhelmed and to feel pulled towards despair. We yearn to do more for those who are less safe than we are, and we can feel pained by our very human limitations.

And yet, we also continue to encounter everyday acts of generosity and courage and we perceive that these human acts, small and large, collectively are worthy beyond measure. Prams left at train stations for fleeing refugee

parents to retrieve. Algorithms developed to connect those with spare rooms with those who need them. Neighbours saving neighbours from rooftops, in tinnies, amidst raging brown waters and debris. Acts of proud defiance and resistance, as people speak truth to power. And we know that there is so much that we do not see, on our phones, and news bulletins, where cameras are no longer present, or never were, or from where footage cannot safely emerge. We honour the exceptional courage and resilience of diaspora leaders, across Australia, amongst JRS staff, who work with such tireless dignity to seek protection for their trapped and displaced kin, communities, and fellow refugees in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Yemen, Ukraine, Ethiopia and wherever they may be.

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cont from p1 We see all of this and we continue to call for faster, more predictable and far-reaching humanitarian responses, which are inclusive, above all else. Our governments, world-wide, must do much better, in ways in which 'we the people' already are.

Late last year, following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, and as Omicron flared, our wise and supportive Chairperson, Sr Annette Cunliffe, shared the following prayer with JRS staff. It resonated with us and so I share it with you.

### Lament, by Joel McKerrow

*This world is not an easy place to call home. It is not as friendly as we once hoped for, more broken than we were promised, it crumbles violent around the edges and I do not know what to do with this.*

*How do you hold in your hand that which is falling apart?*

*Lightly. The answer is lightly. You hold it like feather. Like nest. Like only the birds know. Like parchment. A white knuckled holding to the way we demand it to be shall only schism us further. And haven't we colonised enough already?*

*Instead, let us start with mourning. A weeping. To lament with those who suffer and not feel the need to qualify our non-involvement in the face of their sorrow.*

*The art of lament. The refusal to stay silent in the harsh reality of lost hope.*

*May lament find its voice inside you. May it break you open. The sorrow and the outrage. The loss. There is so much to be angry about so not deny the hot tears that stain the ground. Apathy is only ever born of passivity and entitlement. Lament forces us into a wider field. We call it empathy.*

And empathy is what you show time and time again and what we at JRS continue seeking to foster and grow. Empathy extends us and it unites us in our shared humanity. Empathy both hurts and rewards. It calls us to gratitude, and it reminds us of the precarity of all things; perhaps of all things except love. Empathy keeps us real and together it keeps us strong.

It is my privilege once again to extend to you our deep thanks for your support – your donations, volunteer hours, and advocacy - which can be life-changing, indeed life-saving, and which warms our hearts and steels our resolve as we work determinedly, through escalating challenges, to strengthen the protection of refugees, people seeking asylum, and migrants in situations of vulnerability.



I hope you find inspiration in the stories that follow.

Warmest wishes,  
Tamara Domicelj  
Country Director

## Caseworker Reflection

Homelessness and finding safe and affordable housing is a daily struggle for people seeking asylum in Australia. This was reflected in JRS Australia's *A Place to Call Home* report, which indicated that a high number of our client group experienced some form of homelessness since arriving in Australia.

People seeking asylum in Australia face immense barriers in finding safe and affordable housing. Given their visa status, many of our clients are denied Federal Government-funded income support and are often left homeless, couch surfing or dependent on community members and charities for help. For many of our clients, this is a constant and recurring cycle with no light at the end of the tunnel. COVID-19 has been particularly difficult for our clients as they do not have access to JobKeeper or JobSeeker, and did not have access to pandemic relief payments throughout 2020. In addition, homelessness services in Sydney are very stretched with most services catered only for Australian citizens and permanent residents.

At JRS Australia, we do our best to support individuals and families who are at risk or experiencing homelessness. We provide financial assistance to individuals and families to cover rent, outstanding bills, rental arrears and secure bonds in low-cost accommodation, and in emergencies, we also provide payments for crisis accommodation.

We also offer longer-term casework support through our foodbank, employment and specialist casework to ensure they are supported in other aspects of their life as homelessness often brings about multiple hardships.

Despite the housing shortage and lack of funding to support refugees and people seeking asylum, JRS Australia works closely with partner organisations, homeless shelters and volunteers in trying to source safe and affordable accommodation for clients. There have been some positive examples of local charities and community volunteers reaching out and providing medium to long-term accommodation for clients. As caseworkers, we have seen the positive impact that finding stable and safe accommodation brings to clients. Clients not only feel relieved, but also feel like their dignity has been restored and that they can plan again for the future.

There is plenty of goodwill within the Australian community. We hope at JRS Australia we can continue to advocate and raise awareness about homelessness among people seeking asylum, and to ensure their basic rights are met and addressed. We thank our clients for their resilience, and our partners, community members, stakeholders and advocates for their continued support in what has been a challenging time.

*Written by Shaheen Whyte, Caseworker, with contributions from the Casework team.*



# Booster clinic and vaccine equity

JRS Australia recently ran two booster COVID-19 vaccine clinics for refugees, people seeking asylum, and other migrants in vulnerable situations in Western Sydney. 80 people received their third vaccine dose, with many recipients among the 250 people who received first and second doses in clinics organised by JRS Australia in 2021.

As with earlier initiatives, these clinics were organised in partnership with NSW Health and the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta.

JRS Australia's Assistant Country Director Maeve Brown highlighted the importance of hosting clinics for refugees and people seeking asylum. "JRS Australia is delighted to work with NSW Health and the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta to ensure that refugees and people seeking asylum are able to access vaccines in safe and familiar environments," Ms. Brown said.

"Not only does everyone in the community have the right to be vaccinated, it is also an obvious public health imperative at the moment."

JRS has been working with UN and NGO partners around the world to ensure that refugees and other forcibly displaced people have access to vaccines and information about the importance of being vaccinated:

- JRS has collaborated with the UNHCR to administer vaccines for refugees in Angola, and other parts of Southern Africa;




- JRS is sharing information through public awareness campaigns to encourage greater vaccination rates among Yazidi refugees in the northern Kurdistan region of Iraq;
- JRS has partnered with local health services and negotiated with them to permit refugees and people seeking asylum without regular visa status to be vaccinated in South Africa.

Since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, JRS has expressed strong support for vaccine equity and called on global leaders to ensure that COVID-19 vaccine efforts prioritise all countries equally and include refugees and other forcibly displaced people in each country's vaccine distribution plans.

JRS International Director, Fr. Tom Smolich SJ said "equal access to vaccinations is necessary to ensure public health for all in society. We cannot heal and move forward until all of us, including forcibly displaced people, are vaccinated."

Key to this global call is a strong push for additional investments in the Global COVAX facility in order to vaccine the entire globe sooner. Not only is this a matter of justice and treating every human being with dignity, it is imperative for the collective wellbeing of humanity.

 Images: Staff, volunteers, and families at one of the COVID-19 Booster clinics that ran earlier this year.



# A place to call home for women on temporary visas experiencing violence

Women have the right to feel safe and respected, regardless of their visa status. We all have the right to live free from violence, yet, systemic obstacles make it much harder for women on temporary visas including women seeking asylum to access services that would enable them to leave violence and uphold their dignity.

– Chloé Tremblay-Goyette, SGBV Caseworker



Figures released by UN Women earlier this year reveal the devastating prevalence of violence against women today. According to the figures, 1 in 3 women, around 736 million, are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner. Many more women are subjected to physical, psychological, financial, and sexual abuse.

Australia too is in the grips of a sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) crisis. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) estimates that 1 in 3 women in Australia have experienced physical abuse since the age of 15. Research also shows that at least 1 in 5 women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15. The Australian Human Rights Commission (2018) finds that 85% of women who are 15 years and older, have been sexually harassed at some point in their lives.

There is very little written about the experiences of women on temporary visas, including those seeking asylum, who have faced or are at risk of SGBV. In 2018, JRS Australia conducted qualitative research with women in these situations to understand their unique experiences.

That report revealed that the limitations on access to fundamental rights and services that come with being a temporary visa holder have serious impacts on a woman's ability to access safety and support whilst experiencing SGBV in Australia. It has become clear that the level of understanding and knowledge about the circumstances of women on temporary visas outside specific diaspora communities, and specialist asylum support agencies, was limited.

In response, JRS Australia developed the Finding Safety project. Finding Safety addresses these drivers of violence and their unique impacts on the lives of women seeking asylum/on temporary visas in Australia. This project provides women experiencing violence or at risk of experiencing violence with the tools and supports to empower themselves and their communities. We do this by offering a range of services from skills development and leadership workshops to psycho-social support groups, and community-building events.

Finding Safety also provides women experiencing violence with specialist, strengths-based casework, assisting women to take the lead in creating safe environments for themselves and their

children. This is often the first time that these women have exercised agency and self-determination, an important ingredient in effectively preventing further violence.

The Finding Safety Project currently works with over 200 women with lived experience of migration, asylum seeking and temporary visa status, and has worked with over a thousand women in the last two years. Most of the women we support are not on partner visa pathways, which means they are currently ineligible for Department of Home Affairs Family Violence Provisions. This includes women on student visas or spousal student visas, women seeking asylum on protection visa pathways and women on medical visa pathways. Many of the women we support are partners of Australian citizens/residents and are the primary carers of Australian children.

Although JRS Australia, as a member of the National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence, is advocating with the Federal Government for these survivors to be given a new visa pathway to remain in Australia, there are more immediate advocacy priorities at hand.

Women seeking asylum are less likely



to be financially independent and therefore more likely to remain in violent situations. They face unique barriers to independence imposed by Federal Government policy settings, including:

- being a 'member of the family unit' for the purposes of their protection visa application, tying their visa status to that of the perpetrator;
- not having work rights or face added disadvantages in the labour market;
- not having access to any form of income security or to the childcare subsidy.

Those who do manage to leave violent relationships, often with the support of specialist agencies, are then excluded from all mainstream emergency

response and long-term recovery support services offered to citizens and permanent residents. For example, women seeking asylum experiencing DFV are effectively excluded from DFV refuges and specialist housing services, and are excluded from the NSW Government's Rent Choice Start Safely program.

Demand for beds in mainstream emergency or transitional accommodation far outweighs available supply, and ultimately, systemic reform requires a significant increase in the number of DFV refuges and transitional accommodation facilities across the state.


The intractability and intensity of the crisis was also heightened by the COVID-19 lockdown, which restricted

mobility and placed victims in close proximity with perpetrators at all times. COVID-19 border restrictions also meant that, in some cases, those victims who want to return to countries of origin cannot do so.

JRS Australia is currently working hard with diaspora leaders, sector partners, and allies to advocate with Federal, State, and Local Governments to enable access to fundamental services for women on temporary visas, so that they have the financial independence to leave situations of acute, and sometimes, life-threatening violence.

In the meantime, we rely on your support to pay rent, buy food, clothing, and other essentials, and provide specialist assistance to these women.



 Images: The Finding Safety team celebrated International Women's Day on 18 March. This was the first event since the pandemic where clients from the Women's Space were able to physically spend time together to celebrate and reflect on such a challenging year. The event hosted over 24 people and had speakers from partner organisations such as Immigration Advice and Rights Centre (IARC) and Salvation Army.



# Action For Afghanistan



Over 3,000 people gathered at Parliament House in Canberra in February for the first gathering of temporary visa holders from Afghanistan.

It's been over 7 months since Kabul fell to the Taliban. People in Afghanistan continue to confront one of the world's most dire humanitarian crises.

Since August 2021, the Taliban has banned girls from attending high school, has systematically targeted former government and army officials, women's rights activists, and journalists, and is persecuting both ethnic and religious minorities.

According to a recent UNHCR update, "half of the population face acute hunger, over 9 million people are displaced...farmers and herders are struggling amidst the worst drought in decades, and the economy is in freefall."

The recent Federal Government announcement of 10,000 places from the refugee and humanitarian program and 5,000 places from the family stream of the migration program, over four

years for people fleeing Afghanistan comes from within Australia's annual humanitarian intake of 13,750 places. Furthermore, according to the Refugee Council of Australia, those who have already been evacuated and apply for protection visas onshore will be counted within this intake, leaving less than 5,000 humanitarian visa places remaining for over 150,000 individuals applicants from Afghanistan.





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This is an inadequate response that does not address the dire needs of this crisis.

JRS Australia and the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA) have repeatedly called on the Australian Government to introduce a special, additional humanitarian intake of at least 20,000 visa places for vulnerable people from Afghanistan, to ensure permanence for refugees from Afghanistan on temporary visas, and to enable cheaper, quicker, and simpler pathways to family reunion.

To this day, these calls for more compassionate action – heard as far as The Vatican – are yet to be heeded in Canberra.

While we continue to urge the Australian Government for direct action for Afghanistan, JRS Australia remains steadfast in our mission to accompany, serve, and advocate for the rights of forcibly displaced people from Afghanistan.

Our multi-faceted approach to helping those most impacted by this crisis starts locally.

In the last few months, JRS Australia's Employment Program has supported sixteen newly arrived refugees from Afghanistan in upskilling and finding pathways to meaningful work. In the last month, the Employment Program has assisted eight tradespeople obtain forklift licenses and White Card qualifications to work in the construction industry. We have also engaged others to attend barista training workshops which will be happening later this year.

Our Finding Safety Project has recently supported two women from Afghanistan who were at risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) with specialist and trauma informed casework.

JRS Australia's advocacy efforts continue to reach and engage the wider community. Our Leadership Coordinator, Zaki Haidari, co-organised the first gathering of temporary visa holders from Afghanistan at Parliament House in Canberra last month. More than 3,000 people from around Australia attended in solidarity, calling for safety, certainty, a chance to contribute to Australian society, and

for the opportunity to be reunited with family members.

In collaboration with CAPSA as co-convenors, we are continuing to work and engage with Catholic leaders in communities across Australia. Following a series of community-led meetings with Government and Opposition parliamentarians before Christmas, JRS Australia, Jesuit Social Services, and CAPSA have met more parliamentarians so far this year. We also continue our partnership with Christians United for Afghanistan along with other organisations such as St Vincent de Paul by supporting a delegation of diaspora, faith, and veteran leaders that visited Canberra earlier this year to reaffirm the disappointment of many in Australia towards the Federal Government's inaction so far.

The year so far has brought with it intense challenges that have unfolded from around the globe and the scale and severity of the Afghanistan crisis increases every day. JRS Australia remains ready at the frontlines to assist and advocate for and with those who are most impacted.



Images: Newly arrived refugees and people seeking asylum at a White Card training workshop organised by the JRS Australia Employment Program.





 The JRS Australia team at Parramatta Cathedral after a full day of operational planning, brainstorming, and reflection for the year ahead.

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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)

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