

LINK Newsletter - Spring Edition 2024



📷 JRS Australia colleagues Rose and Magdalene at our “Free Together” event in July 2024.

LETTER FROM OUR ACTING COUNTRY DIRECTOR

Dear friends,

It brings me great pleasure to open this new edition of our LINK newsletter as the Acting Country Director of JRS Australia.

I assumed the role upon the completion of our former Country Director Tamara Domicelj’s tenure. I want to thank Tamara for her leadership and dedication to JRS Australia’s values and mission over the years.

My name is Josephine. I have been part of the JRS family for 4 years – joining the team as the Finding Safety Project Coordinator back in 2020.

Coming to JRS Australia after a career break to have my first child Remy, and then navigating the COVID pandemic, I felt immediately embraced and welcomed in a way I had never felt in my 15 years in the sector.

I was anxious about leaving my small child, and nervous about finding the balance between work and home life. I was entering a new workplace with a new area of focus, a new approach, and new challenges.

In many ways this is not so different to the experiences of our clients, who come to Australia both trepidatious and hopeful – and whose journey, no matter how fraught, is made easier by the knowledge that there are people in their corner.

As you may know, JRS is founded on three objectives: Accompaniment, Service, and Advocacy, alongside refugees, people seeking asylum, and migrants in situations of vulnerability.

This unique approach is something that has resonated with me from my first day here, and continues to as I have moved to my new role of Assistant Country Director and Head of Accompaniment and Service.

For me, it is this accompaniment piece that truly inspires me to lead our dedicated and highly specialised team.



📷 Members of the JRS Australia team at our “Free Together” Event in July.

We walk alongside the people we serve through the best and the worst of times:

- the tears of relief when an asylum application is approved after years of uncertainty;
- the loneliness of being far away from family, of missing birthdays, or not being able to say a final goodbye;
- or as we witness the strength required to confront hardship after hardship, and still hope for a better future.

Our work is to stand alongside the people we serve through these triumphs and hardships – and do what we can to make the journey easier.

In this Spring LINK for 2024, you can journey with us to learn more about this important work, in our Refugee Leadership Program, our engagement with Schools and Community, and our Finding Safety Project for women who have experienced gender-based violence.

I am deeply inspired by the steadfast support of our generous community, who accompany us in everything we do.

Just as Jesus accompanies us, we are called to walk side by side with one another. When we do this, we do not see rich or poor, healthy or ill, young or old. We see ourselves in one another. We see our shared humanity. We all belong.

JRS is a place of belonging. We are a home where there may not be a home. We are a family when family may be so far away. We are a team, when someone feels they've taken to the field alone.

This is what I invite all of you who make up the JRS community to remember as you read this edition of our LINK.

You are an essential part of our shared story.

So, thank you – from the bottom of our hearts – for your ongoing support, your solidarity, and for continuing to walk side by side with refugees and people seeking asylum over these many years.

In faith and in solidarity,

Josephine



CLOSING GAPS AND UPLIFTING VOICES

Our Finding Safety Project hosts inaugural forum centring the needs of women seeking asylum who have experienced gender-based violence.

On Thursday 29 August, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia's "Finding Safety Project" held its inaugural, in-person Insights Forum.

The Forum aimed to educate the sector and uplift the voices of women seeking asylum and women on temporary visas, who have experienced gender-based violence.

Attended by over 80 community workers, advocates, government sector partners and supporters, the event was a great success.

A core message concerned the need for specialised support for women at the intersection of (and often the service gaps in between) gender-based violence and immigration.

Government contributions

The event featured opening remarks from NSW Minister for Women and the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Jodie Harrison MP, who championed our collaborative approach to ending violence against women and children.

Recognising that there are gaps in our responses to women who are vulnerable, isolated and marginalised, Minister Harrison restated the NSW Government's commitment to being at the table with the community, with services and with the Federal Government.

It is so important to continue to invest in evidence-based services across the continuum of support (prevention, response and recovery).

NSW MP Donna Davis highlighted the urgent need for support for women on temporary visas who are experiencing domestic violence. She praised the work of JRS Australia and expressed that by working together, we can close gaps in the system.

Expert insights from across the sector

Attendees at the Forum heard from a range of experts across the sector, united in their advocacy for women who have experienced gender-based violence and concerned about a lack of support for women on temporary visas.

Immigration system reform

Dr Marie Segrave presented current research into the way that the immigration system limits access to safety and justice - identifying that piece-meal solutions have led to a system that allows perpetrators to act with impunity.

Dr Segrave highlighted the need for immigration law reform, to ensure women on temporary visas are offered pathways to permanency that allow them to remain in country, pursue justice, and navigate healing and recovery here in Australia.


Homelessness services

Tanya Smith from Parramatta Women's Shelter spoke of the desperate need for a new system to enable access to safe, supported accommodation.

Tanya addressed the injustice in resourcing and regulation, which often means the shelter has no choice but to turn women away when they have no income, and no "exit pathway".

Women seeking asylum or on temporary visas often do not have work rights and are ineligible for income support through Centrelink.



 Jodie Harrison MP, speaking at our Finding Safety Insights Forum on 29 August 2024.

Under current practices, this means women seeking asylum can rarely secure safe accommodation through shelters.

SGBV and seeking asylum

Nabilah Reza, a senior solicitor from Refugee and Casework Service (RACS), spoke about the complicated process of seeking asylum and how experiences of violence and trauma can impact on a person's ability to recall details and provide the evidence needed for a successful outcome.

Nabilah highlighted how important access to specialist and trauma-informed legal advice is, to support the women we serve.

To this end, RACS runs the Women at Risk Legal Clinic every Thursday at the Women's Space, in partnership with JRS Australia.

Finding Safety amid cultural complexity

Finding Safety Project Manager Sara Muzamil also explored complex forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and how we can better identify and respond to these often-hidden forms of violence.

Sara shared that women on temporary visas, including women seeking asylum, come from diverse backgrounds and often bear the heavy burden of family honour.

“Without a broad understanding of the cultural dynamics involved, efforts to address their needs will fall short.”

Sara shared this, emphasising the importance of raising awareness and establishing culturally informed services, like the Finding Safety Project.

Lived experience at the centre

Finding Safety Project Officer Magdalene Konneh, who is a journalist and women’s rights advocate from Sierra Leone, shared her own experience of homelessness while she was seeking asylum in Australia. Maggie emphasised the need for reform so that women on temporary visas are not excluded from refuges and shelters because they have no source of income.

“We need safe, flexible, supported accommodation, and an accompanying service system that is resourced to respond appropriately,” Magdalene advocated.

A panel of women with lived experience also shared their stories. The panel discussed what life was like before receiving support from the Finding Safety Project - which operates from the Women’s Space and offers casework as well as community wellbeing programs.

The women on the panel expressed how much the support they received through the Finding Safety Project had changed their lives.

*“After getting support, I got back my **self-esteem**. I became **energised** knowing that there are **people who support** me in times of my difficulty. Whenever I go to the Women’s Space, I see other women who became my **friends**. We **share our stories** together, have **lunch** together and **laugh** together. We **support and help each other**, because we know, even if we are in a situation like this, we know **we are not alone**. Coming to the Women’s Space has created an **opportunity for us to repurpose our life**.*

In the absence of access to mainstream support, vulnerable women seeking asylum or on temporary visas, often have nowhere else to go.

More needs to be done, to ensure women at these intersections receive equal access to support services at the State and Federal level, and that these services are trauma-informed and equipped to provide the support required for women who have experienced violence.

This Forum is just the beginning...

Building from the Insights Forum, the Finding Safety Project has received a funding extension to mid-2025, where we will be developing an increased focus on targeted advocacy for an improved service sector, policy and systems response.

Ending violence against women within a generation cannot happen if women on temporary visas are invisible. By centring their experience, and allowing their voices to be heard, we hope that a better tomorrow is just around the corner.

Our Finding Safety Project is a specialist project, based in our Women’s Space, for women and their children who have experienced gender-based violence. We offer casework, emergency relief, community wellbeing, referrals for services, leadership opportunities and pathways to self-empowerment.




 Finding Safety Project Coordinator Sara Muzamil speaking at our 2024 Insights Forum.

“THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EDUCATION”

Our Schools Engagement Coordinator reflects on one year at JRS Australia!



 Vin Gajanayake, our Schools Engagement Coordinator, with students from St Aloysius College at the launch of the school's Food Drive for JRS Australia's Foodbank.

Vin Gajanayake is our fantastic Schools Engagement Coordinator, helping us reach out to students, teachers and community to share stories and build support for refugees and people seeking asylum. After one year at JRS, Vin has reflected on how special her role is, and her belief in the transformative power of education:

The JRS Schools Engagement Program seeks to harness the power of our shared humanity and collective voice to accompany, serve and advocate for refugees and people seeking asylum.

In a world that can feel plagued by ignorance, vitriol and apathy, the Schools Engagement Program is centered around a process of **reflection, compassion and action**. This means reflection on one's own values, compassion for our speakers with lived experience and the multitudes of people around the world who share similar stories, and action to counter the oppression and discrimination faced by the people we serve.

I commenced my role almost exactly one year ago. Since then, we have been lucky enough to speak with **over 50 schools and over 10,000 staff and students, from across Australia.**

As the Schools Engagement Officer, the opportunity to work with communities so passionate, empathetic and motivated to take action is nothing short of a privilege.

A core theme of this work is the humanisation of the refugee landscape. While young people are often inundated with statistics and the cold rhetoric of policy debates, they rarely have the opportunity to connect with the personal stories that reveal the true impact of these issues. The connection formed through these stories is profound.

It would take hours to recount each and every example of this, so I will provide three examples close to my heart - about leadership, volunteering and art!

Firstly – connection to leaders.

One of our leaders with lived experience, Maggie, visited staff and students at Loreto Normanhurst last year. They were so moved by this experience that when we revisited the school this year (without Maggie) we were inundated with questions about her status and how she is going.

We were thrilled to share that Maggie has had her request for asylum granted, and she is also a valued member of our staff – as the Finding Safety Project Officer at JRS Australia where Maggie supports women who have experienced violence.

Secondly – service and volunteering.

Staff at St Angela’s Primary School in Castle Hill have been volunteering at JRS weekly after their busy days at school, supporting our volunteers to pack items for Foodbank. We also had the pleasure of hosting three students from St Ignatius’ College, Riverview, who volunteered with us during their school holidays to learn more about our work so they could share it with their peers! You can read their incredible speech to the school assembly [on our website](#).

Finally - advocacy and art.

We received almost 100 incredible submissions to our inaugural art and writing competition, which we ran to commemorate Refugee Week 2024. The theme was ‘In the Arms of Family’, and I was personally so inspired and moved to see how much thought and compassion the schools and students we worked with had put in to use their voices to support our clients and speakers with lived experience.

We were able to showcase the art at an event during Refugee Week, where we presented awards to the competition winners.

These instances demonstrate the genuine care and empathy our engagements inspire, transforming abstract concepts into tangible realities for the next generation.

Coming into this role, my background was in both law and teaching, and I believed in the transformative power of education to break social barriers and facilitate change. **I am lucky enough to witness this belief in action every day - so thank you, to everyone who has been and continues to be part of this journey.**



📷 Our Casework and Emergency Relief Manager Rose, reading submissions to the “In the Arms of Family” Student Art competition.

FREE, TOGETHER.

Our Refugee Leadership Program amplifies the voices of people seeking asylum and reminds us that we are all one family.

On the 19th of July 2024 JRS Australia hosted an event, alongside the Diocese of Parramatta, called ‘Free Together’. This was a showcase of participants from JRS Australia’s Refugee Leadership Program, reflecting on this year’s Refugee Week theme: “Finding Freedom: Family”.

Leaders with lived experience of forced displacement shared their stories, contemplating the ways in which family is such a key part of the refugee journey. An amazing group of people came together to share in this moving event; staff, volunteers, local school students, JRS clients, members of the local community, all gathered together in unity and welcome.



📷 (Left to right) Leaders Zainab, Maggie and Thanush, with JRS Australia’s Acting Head of Policy, Advocacy and Communications, Amelia Savage.

Acting Head of Policy, Advocacy and Communications, Amelia Savage, who manages our Refugee Leadership Program, welcomed the audience to the event:


“Tonight, we are free together, despite the diversity of lives, backgrounds, and stories in this room, we are united through the shared experience of this sacred concept of family.”

Leaders shared their stories through poetry, storytelling, and film, intertwined with beautiful musical performances from Mark, the son of one of our incredible leaders, Dindo.

Dindo shared a poem titled “Unshakeable in Crisis” - describing the role family plays in his life:

*“My journey is a messy canvas, not of riches and glory,
Suffering is the beating heart of my family’s story,
But pity and tears are not what I wish to seek,
It is unity in family in the community I seek.”*



 Dindo presenting his poetry at JRS Australia’s “Free Together” Event, held for Refugee Week, alongside the Diocese of Parramatta, on the 19th of July this year.

A newer leader in our Program, **Zainab**, who works to **amplify the voices of the Hazara women**, shared a moving speech about the role of motherhood and how this inspires and underpins her advocacy.

*“My relationship with my son [...] means the world to me. **He’s not just my child; he’s my anchor and my inspiration.** [...] we’ve shared every step of this journey, supporting each other along the way. **Being a mother has deeply influenced my leadership in the community.** It’s taught me empathy, resilience, and the importance of nurturing a supportive environment for everyone, just as I do for my son.”*

Idrissa, a seasoned leader who has spoken at many of our schools and community events, used his speech to advocate for **better pathways to family reunification**:

*“We still hope for asylum seekers and refugees to achieve full family reunification. Being together with loved ones remains a fundamental need. We seek policies that prioritise and expedite family reunification. [...] **Our ultimate goal is a future where all families can be together, safe and secure.**”*

Another new leader, Sultana, spoke publicly for the very first time at this event, about her experiences of JRS Australia’s Finding Safety Project.

*“One day, by chance, I saw the JRS office and went in. **They welcomed me with love and accepted me.** They feel like the affection of family. I really loved the day I came here. Then I met Sara the manager of the Women’s Space at JRS. **She was my refuge and to this day is my big sister.**”*

Our Finding Safety Project Officer Maggie also interviewed Thanush, another active leader in our Program, about his experience living through indefinite detention and the ongoing limbo of an unresolved asylum application. An excerpt was shown at the event and we hope to share the full film with our community very soon.

Following the story-telling, leaders and attendees shared in a delicious meal, and the feeling of togetherness and family was palpable.

Reflecting on the event, Amelia shared how special it was to showcase the experiences and perspectives of refugees and people seeking asylum, on such a universal issue: “I was so proud and inspired to see the leaders sharing their thoughts and insights on an issue of such profound importance as family,” Amelia shared.

*“It was so heartwarming that emerging leaders had their first opportunity to speak publicly at this event. For some this was the first time speaking publicly ever, which is a huge step. **It is such an encouraging part of the work that we do at JRS to uplift and provide a platform for the voices of people with lived experience.**”*

In the last year the Refugee Leadership Program has enabled leaders with lived experience to engage in over 50 paid speaking engagements, representing valuable income for leaders, and a reach of almost 10,000 people. **This underscores the impact and visibility of this program, and the benefit to leaders, who thrive with a platform to advocate for themselves - and a community of people who are ready to listen.**

[Thank you to everyone who supports JRS Australia’s leadership program, and enables us to continue this powerful and uplifting work.](#)



Please consider donating to JRS Australia:



donate here



What We Do

JRS Australia accompanies, serves, and advocates for the rights of people seeking asylum, refugees, and migrants in vulnerable situations. JRS Australia advocates for policies of welcome and protection at all tiers of government and offers casework, employment, leadership and emergency assistance services.

How your donation will help

Your donation allows us to support people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations who have **nowhere else to go**. The people we serve rely on us for safe, specialist casework, training and employment assistance, crisis support and payments, programs for survivors of violence, as well as food and toiletries available through our Foodbank.

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