



AASW

.....
**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

***Scope of Social Work Practice
with Refugees and Asylum
Seekers***

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Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) 'Scope of Social Work Practice with Refugees and Asylum Seekers' document provides an overview of the role, scope, contribution and evidence-base of social work practice in this field. The aim of this document is to highlight in a concise, accessible and informative manner the crucial role and services that social workers provide and that employers and clients can expect. Social workers, policy makers, managers and academics can use this scope of practice to articulate and promote the role of professional social workers in this field.

Australia has a long history of helping refugees and other survivors of human rights abuses. Since World War II approximately 700,000 refugees have settled here. Currently, about 13,000 humanitarian entrants settle in Australia each year. In addition in 2015, the Australian government committed to settling an additional 12,000 refugees and humanitarian entrants as a result of the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

The task of resettling in a new country after having fled a war zone or having experienced human rights abuses is a complex process. In Australia, the situation is further complicated by policies that have seen large numbers of people seeking asylum, who have arrived by boat, spending long periods in immigration detention both onshore and offshore.

Social work as a profession has much to offer in services for refugees and asylum seekers. Using a human rights framework, social workers respond to the complex needs of refugees and asylum seekers with an understanding of the wider context of family relationships and social institutions. They have a skill base that integrates intra-personal and inter-personal helping with the practicalities of assisting people to negotiate their way around the social welfare system.

The social work profession

The social work profession is committed to maximising the wellbeing of individuals and society. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing is underpinned by socially inclusive communities that emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights, including the right to be part of a caring and understanding family.

The social work profession supports and enacts the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child*.

Drawing on knowledge of social work practice, social sciences, humanities and cultural knowledge, social workers focus on the interface between the individual, their family and the environment. They recognise the impact of social, economic, political, spiritual and cultural factors on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing and identifying and addressing any external issues that may impact on wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. The AASW is the key professional body representing social workers in Australia and is responsible for the accreditation of university social work programs. The academic qualifications that applicants to the AASW are required to hold are: a Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Social Work with Honours, or a Social Work qualifying Master's degree.

The curriculum provides entry-level professional social work education addressing the knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across the diverse range of practice settings, fields of practice and methods of social work practice, and includes an extensive period of field education.

Role of social work with refugees and asylum seekers

The Australian response to refugees and asylum seekers has become increasingly politicised this century. As a result the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers coming to Australia have at times been ignored or abused. Social workers affirm that refugees, persons who have fled their own country and cannot return due to persecution and who have been given refugee status, are entitled to respect and full human rights under the various UN Conventions. Similarly, asylum seekers who are making claims for refugee status, even though such claims have not been verified, also have a claim on basic human rights under the UN conventions. Social workers affirm that it is not illegal to claim asylum in Australia irrespective of how one arrives and it is a specific right under article 14 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Social workers are aware of the extra pressures on asylum seekers caused by the extraordinarily long periods taken to make decisions on their status.

Refugees arriving as permanent residents receive support when they arrive and have much greater access to services and financial support than do asylum seekers. Refugees are not subject to the punitive and excluding policies to which asylum seekers (especially those who arrived by boat) are subject. They experience basic safety in Australia. So, in broad terms, social work practice with refugees tends to focus on areas of 'second generation' rights (education, health etc.). The idea of 'socially inclusive communities that emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights' as stated previously is less contentious in practice with refugees. The social worker works to improve the clients' situations and access to entitlements etc. and refugees are recognised as belonging to the community by virtue of their refugee status.

Working with asylum seekers is quite different. Here, the social worker is having to try to attain

first generation human rights (fundamental political rights) for clients, in a context where these rights are denied by the government itself. In particular, asylum seekers who arrived by boat are quite intentionally excluded at every opportunity. Social workers must therefore work directly against the dominant oppressive system that is represented by the government and some government departments. There may be some work with second generation rights but a core aspect of work with persons classified by the government as Irregular Maritime Arrivals (IMAs) is attempting to confront and change systems and policies. This is a more political and advocacy-based area of work. It also changes the nature of therapeutic work that needs to respond to trauma caused by mandatory detention and long periods of uncertainty.)

Asylum seekers and refugees are in an extremely vulnerable position. If it were safe in their country of origin, most people in this position would prefer to return. Unfortunately, during recent conflicts and for those fleeing persecution this has largely been impossible and refugees and asylum seekers have had to negotiate a place in a new land. In this context the core social work value of 'respect for persons' as outlined in the AASW Code of Ethics gives guidance to the social work approach in this field that:

- respects the inherent dignity, worth and autonomy of every person
- respects the human rights of individuals and groups
- provides humane service, mindful of fulfilling duty of care, and duty to avoid doing harm to others
- fosters individual wellbeing, autonomy, justice and personal/social responsibility, with due consideration for the rights of others
- recognises and respects group identity, interdependence, reciprocity and the collective needs¹

¹ AASW (2010). Code of Ethics. p. 12. Available at <http://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/1201>

The AASW Practice Standards 2013 further directs that social workers have adequate understanding and knowledge of cultural diversity in order to work in a culturally responsive and inclusive way. This means they will work respectfully and inclusively with cultural difference and diversity.²

With regard to work with asylum seekers, the AASW Code of Ethics on Social Justice is particularly pertinent when it notes that 'Social workers will meet their responsibilities to society by engaging in action to promote societal and environmental wellbeing, advocate for equitable distribution of resources and effect positive social change in the interest of social justice.'³

As individuals and families move through the various statuses of asylum seeker, refugee, permanent resident and citizen, new challenges and opportunities arise. Legal and social contexts change, individuals continue to grow, and the passing of time itself offers new perspectives. Additionally the wide variety of different cultural groups seeking refuge in Australia adds further complexity to the social work response. Using a social justice framework as a guide, settlement and integration includes physical, social, economic and cultural integration. Social workers bring these elements together through a multisystem⁴ and rights-based approach while considering structural and individual barriers. At times this will mean challenging government, bureaucratic and cultural norms and rules where these norms and rules violate basic human rights.

Practically, social work seeks to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are afforded the highest level of protection possible under Australian law. Without such protection, other forms of assistance can be compromised. Social workers are particularly alert to those

with the very least support, for example, unaccompanied minors.

Ongoing assistance involves a combination of practical assistance within a culturally responsive and inclusive practice framework that acknowledges the impact of previous trauma. It also acknowledges the importance of family and seeks to utilise the strengths of individuals, families and communities and the supportive networks that already exist.

To undertake such complex work, social workers should be providing and receiving appropriate social work supervision that encourages reflective practice and ongoing professional development.

The **various settings and fields of practice** include:

- Commonwealth departments of Human Services: Immigration and Border Protection: and Social Services
- Refugee resettlement services and Migrant Resource Centres
- Services for the treatment and rehabilitation of torture and trauma survivors
- Services for asylum seekers living in the community
- Advocacy services for refugees and asylum seekers
- Services for refugees and asylum seekers in detention both onshore and offshore
- Health, education, legal and family support services
- Policy and program officer roles within state government departmental multicultural units
- Research and academia and teaching

² AASW (2013). Practice Standards. p. 11. Available at <http://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/4551>

³ AASW (2010). Code of Ethics. p. 20.

⁴ Aroche J., & Coella M. (1994). Towards a systemic approach for the treatment and rehabilitation of torture and trauma survivors: The experience of STARTTS in Australia. Available at <http://goo.gl/Yqcu8p>. A good example of this approach that is used in Australia.

Scope of social work practice with refugees and asylum seekers

Social workers draw on a broad range of theories, knowledge, research and skills to ensure comprehensive and holistic analysis of the client's circumstances. Social work assessments range from targeted and brief specific-needs analyses through to comprehensive holistic psychosocial and risk assessments of the full range of social and psychological needs, strengths and stressors. These assessments underpin targeted interventions to address the psychosocial and emotional issues that are impacting on the individual's health, development and wellbeing.

The **scope of social work practice with refugees and asylum seekers** includes:

- Strengths-based comprehensive psychosocial assessments
- Strengths-based community assessments
- Building empathic relationships and working with refugees and asylum seekers in an ethical, respectful, client-centred and strengths-focused manner
- Working with groups, organisations and communities to respond to shared goals
- Linking of individuals and families to community networks
- Facilitating coordination and cooperation across health, welfare and other systems to ensure good outcomes and assist client aspirations
- Advocacy for services and education within the Australian welfare and health systems
- Socio-legal and ethical decision making within complex legal frameworks
- Advocacy in relation to the rights of refugees and asylum seekers
- Utilising advanced interpersonal skills that involve professional use of interpreters and a respectful inquisitiveness as well as having an awareness of the broader historical and political context

- Specialist culturally sensitive counselling with regard to loss and grief, torture and trauma, and in suicide prevention
- Addressing the particular psychosocial needs of asylum seekers who typically experience long periods of uncertainty and may eventually not be deemed to be refugees
- Educating other service providers and professionals about the cultural, ethnic, and faith-based gender issues specific to the individual or group
- Developing policy and programs for refugees and asylum seekers
- Engaging in research and publishing in peer reviewed journals.

Contribution of social work

Increasing numbers of social workers work with refugees and asylum seekers in various settings and in a range of roles including direct case work, community work, management and policy. Social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution in providing appropriate and targeted interventions as well as facilitating referral pathways that ensure the linking of services, access and equity. The contribution of social work is particularly valued with regard to the planning and management of complex cases and its ability to engage in both individual and systemic issues and advocacy.

Social workers contribute at an organisational level:

Within the Commonwealth departments of Human Services, Immigration and Border Protection and Social Services by:

- Promoting the safety and rights of refugees and asylum seekers.
- Facilitating the collaboration of the wide variety of agencies concerned with assisting refugees and asylum seekers
- Contributing to good policy development

Within refugee resettlement services by:

- Providing professional assessments and interventions
- Providing case management services that link individuals and families to community networks
- Providing culturally responsive and inclusive support services that help individuals and families resettle in Australian society
- Advocating for services within the Australian welfare and health services
- Empowering individuals and families to explore and use services available within the Australian context
- Providing specialist child and adolescent services and services for women
- Providing general mental health services
- Working with groups, organisations and communities to respond to shared goals

Within specialist counselling services by providing:

- Group work interventions
- Individual and Family counselling and therapy
- Client and system advocacy
- Community development to address the collective impact of trauma
- Mental health promotion

Within advocacy settings by

- Advocating for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers
- Developing policy position papers and making submissions

Within diverse multicultural communities by:

- Encouraging an openness to different world views and developing skills in culturally inclusive and responsive interventions including listening to and working with community elders
- Encouraging and supporting young people who are often at the forefront of families resettling into a new country
- Advocating for clients and for system change

Conclusion

With their human rights based practice and multi-systemic approach that integrates the physical, social, political, economic, spiritual and cultural, social workers offer a unique role when working with refugees and asylum seekers.

They make valuable contributions by directly assisting refugees and asylum seekers in the task of negotiating new and complex systems, dealing with grief and loss and the effects of torture and trauma, and resettling into a new society. Due to their skills in communication and advocacy social workers are often valued as key educators of other service providers about refugees and asylum seeker needs. Furthermore, their community development expertise helps ensure the needs and strengths of asylum seekers and refugees are understood in a communal context.

Accordingly, social work is playing an increasing role in work with refugees and asylum seekers.

Evidence informing practice

Key journals

Australian Social Work

Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work

Journal of Refugee Studies

International Social Work

Australian Journal of Human Rights

Refugee Studies

Key articles/chapters

Alston, M. (2009). *Innovative human services practice: Australia's changing landscape*, Palgrave Macmillan, South Yarra. See chapter 11: Working with refugees and asylum seekers in rural areas.

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Briskman, L. (2012). Integrating migrants and refugees in rural settings, in J. Maidment & U. Bay (Eds), *Social work in rural Australia: Enabling practice*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, pp. 146-160.

Kenny, M. & Fiske, L. (2014). Refugees and asylum seekers: Social work practice with refugees and asylum seekers, in S. Rice & A. Day (Eds), *In the shadow of the law: The legal context of social work practice*, 4th edn, The Federation Press, Leichhardt, NSW, pp. 322-342.

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