

Women's voice blocked by asylum seeking process -- study reveals

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Women refugees are not being processed fairly according to a University of Melbourne led study.

The study suggests Australia can do better in how it processes [women refugees](#) applying for [asylum](#). Researchers say gender-based persecution issues such as [rape](#), [trafficking](#), female genital mutilation, denial of education, [domestic abuse](#) and imprisonment need to be taken into account in the processing of women refugees.

The study was published in the Journal of Refugee Studies in May 2011 and involved researchers from the University of Melbourne, Ballarat University, Rutgers University, the Refugee Advice and Casework Service, and Princeton University.

The findings are based on information gathered from various sources, including interviews with 17 Australian asylum lawyers and a written response from Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). The study indicated that although Australia has acknowledged women's unique protection needs through policy documents, such policies are not consistently translating into practice.

This research identified two barriers to women's claims: women were not always able to articulate and identify their gender-specific suffering as a criterion for refugee status; and some decision makers refused to believe women's experiences of gender-based persecution, or did not see these as important enough to warrant asylum.

Postdoctoral Research Fellow of Psychological Sciences at the University of Melbourne, Dr Dean Lusher said Australia's Immigration system is lacking. "Women's experiences of violence often remain invisible or discounted when processing refugee application status in Australia," he said.

Dr Leah Horowitz from Rutgers University and Dr Yuri Saalman from Princeton University, who started the research at the University of Melbourne believe women may feel uncomfortable disclosing difficult information to male case officers, interviewers or interpreters during the asylum seeking process.

"Because Immigration staff cannot know in advance whether suffering has occurred, they should automatically assign female case officers, interviewers and interpreters to women seeking asylum. This is not currently the case," Dr Horowitz said.

The results also suggest that female asylum seekers in Australia should be given fundamental information and advice on making claims, during the assessment process.

Dr Lusher said, "We remain critical about the asylum seeker application process itself, which still does not appear to recognize that women are unlikely to make claims without clear signposts, information about the procedure, or opportunities for doing so."

Provided by University of Melbourne

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