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## Commission on the Status of Women

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”

### **Statement submitted by Settlement Services International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

This statement has been prepared by Settlement Services International, a non-governmental organisation with ECOSOC special consultative status since 2017. Settlement Services International is driven by a commitment to providing support to and building the capacity of people who have experienced vulnerability, including refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants. This support aims to establish meaningful social and economic participation for both individuals and families, enabling them to achieve equity. As a close ally of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, Asia Pacific Network of Refugees, and a member of the international Council of Voluntary Agencies, Settlement Services International supports the work of grass roots refugee women across the Asia Pacific region.

Settlement Services International has been actively engaged with the Commission on the Status of Women with staff participating, holding parallel events, attended the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific conference as a delegate of Asia Pacific Women's Watch in 2019 and contributed to Australia's national civil society report on Beijing+ 25 in 2019.

Since its establishment, Settlement Services International has demonstrated its firm commitment to advancing gender equality, the empowerment of refugee and migrant women and girls, and the promotion and protection of their human rights. The organisation is committed to four priority pillars to guide its work on advancing gender equality and women and girls' empowerment at a local, national and international level. Linked to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Beijing Platform for Action the focus of the strategic pillars are: (1) Strengthening women and girls' leadership and participation in decision-making and peace-building (SDG 5, Beijing Platform for Action: Women in Leadership, Women in Decision-making, Education and Training); (2) Advancing women's economic empowerment (SDG 8, Beijing Platform for Action Women and the Economy); (3) Improving advocacy and diplomacy; and (4) Promoting the health, wellbeing and safety of refugee and migrant women and girls (Beijing Platform for Action: Violence Against Women and Women's Health).

Settlement Services International warmly welcomes the Commission on the Status of Women's focus on achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and its focus on the well-being of rural women. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly revealed the divide of access to technology, the need for skills development and the financial impact of using devices.

Settlement Services International's vision is guided by seven key values: social justice, diversity, compassion, respect, quality, ethics, innovation. The principles link closely to the Beijing Platform of Action on Gender Equality and its protection of rural women and girls. Settlement Services International settles migrants and refugee into rural Australia, based on the desires of government to rejuvenate rural Australia. Settlement Services International experiences the difficulties faced when settling into smaller communities with limited community support.

### **Women living in rural communities**

Settlement Services International recognizes that rural women's equal economic rights, economic empowerment and independence needs to be fostered in a targeted manner. Rural women's access to economic and productive resources is impacted by migration in general, but more so for rural women and girls. Access to full and productive employment and decent work, and equal pay for equal work or work of equal value, in both agricultural and non-agricultural activities in rural areas is also hard to come by. Work is often seasonal and low paid. Access to quality education,

public health, including health-care services, justice, technology and other resources are limited, but most importantly social interaction and a sense of belonging needs to be pro-actively fostered.

It is acknowledged that all rural women and girls often face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation, especially when a new community settles into a well-established town that has had little exposure to migrant communities. While all women and girls have the same human rights, rural women and girls in different contexts have specific needs and priorities, requiring appropriate responses.

### **Settling in rural communities**

Settlement Services International proactively settles refugees and other migrants into rural communities to rejuvenate rural towns who have seen a drain of its population to larger cities. Settlement into rural areas presents particular challenges, given that there is often no community infrastructure that support the cultural needs of a community; few language services, sometimes no infrastructure to practice religion and often little understanding of cultural diversity, for example, to effectively integrate children into schools. Community support has to be built in a strategic and targeted fashion. Our research also shows that refugee women have greater difficulties than men in forging connections with people from cultural backgrounds other than their own, which means a targeted approach is needed.

Women are often at the forefront of building connections as they are taking the children to school, access social groups and services. However, they often carry the responsibility of cultural maintenance, especially vis-a-vis their children, which is difficult with little community support. In such an environment, there are also heightened risks for domestic and family violence, as the family may be isolated and partners are concerned about the unknown of a world that is so foreign. Therefore, forms of coercive control can increase and the woman has little opportunity to speak to someone openly.

While acknowledging women bear disproportionate burdens when it comes to settlement and bringing up children, Settlement Services International recognises that women also play a critical role in crafting the solutions. Settlement Services International has demonstrated that women in leadership amongst diverse communities continue to advocate for the strengthening of grassroots participation at all levels. Women facilitate more gender action on the ground.

### **Settlement success**

To better understand the settling of a new community into a rural town and associated potential for discrimination, Settlement Services International commissioned a university to undertake research into the settlement of a very rural community from the middle east into a rural town in Australia. The research showed an increasing acceptance over time by the receiving community. However, initial feedback was centred on whether newcomers will fit in, whether they will subscribe to the same values and whether they will be active in the community.

Settlement Services International focused on early engagement with local government, local service providers but also the broader community that can facilitate connections. Importantly, engagement also focused on working with local Indigenous organisations to gain their support of settling people into the rural town. Settlement Services International worked with the newly arrived community to familiarise themselves with their surroundings and an understanding of Australian norms. Through consultations they made it clear that certain cultural infrastructure must be

in place for successful settlement, with the most important one to be able to practice their religion and have their religious needs satisfied.

Most of the arrivals were women from Ezidi background, who often were single mothers with little or no contact to their partner, or the partner was killed. Women focused on building a home and educating the children. Leaders among the women emerged in a natural fashion with those being more outspoken and/or having more English skills taking the lead, supported by settlement staff. Some years later women still struggle with their trauma from a war-torn country and the lack of a male head of the family, however the community has embraced the newly arrived community.

A key issue is still the lack of access of information and communication technology. Research that Settlement Services International conducted into belonging of refugee communities showed that women and girls have less access to devices and data download. Often there are not enough phones in the household for them to afford their own. The device is then invariably held by the head of household. During COVID-19 often the only large device in the family, was provided by the school for schoolwork. Smart phones, however, were more readily available, but mostly used primarily to contacting family overseas.

On the positive side, interaction over digital devices during the pandemic has meant that rural communities and community services staff have been able to interact on an equal footing to people living in cities. Settlement Services International women's leaders project then expanded to include a rural town as all learning circles and training events were held online, an opportunity that would not have occurred before the pandemic. Settlement Services International continues to hold online meetings to uphold the sense of equality.

In Australia, many essential services have moved to a digital platform interface which brings challenges such as language related barriers, not being able to operate complex systems and trusting in technology. It is recommended that service provider multi-interface options that are culturally appropriate including face-face and telephone.

In conclusion, Settlement Services International supports the agreed conclusions of the sixty-second Commission on the Status of Women and endeavours to apply these in enhancing gender and the empowerment of refugee and migrant women resettled in rural areas in Australia.

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