



“I’m not racist, but”

**Busting the Myths: Humanising Refugees &
Asylum Seekers**

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Introduction

Shelter SA is the peak body for housing in South Australia. Shelter SA's vision is for all people living in South Australia have access to a safe, affordable, appropriate and secure place to call home. Shelter SA conducts systems and policy advocacy and research, working to raise up the voices of minority groups and people living on low incomes.

'Busting the Myths' aims to debunk false assumptions and intervene in widespread negative opinion about refugees, which impacts on the ability of refugees and those from refugee backgrounds to access housing and ultimately can contribute to increases in the number of people who find themselves homelessness.

The two myths that this paper will address are: 1) refugees and asylum seekers get greater and preferential access to housing resources; and 2) refugees and asylum seekers make bad tenants. 'Busting the Myths' is an awareness-raising project that seeks to change the way that South Australian citizens think about, relate to, and provide housing opportunities to refugees and asylum seekers.

Housing for new arrivals has become an increasingly critical area that requires support and investment. The ABS' 'Counting the Homeless' report highlights that the growth in homelessness evidenced in the 2011 census was largely due to people who were born overseas and people living in overcrowded conditions. Anecdotally, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people are the next wave of homeless. In the context of a housing affordability crisis, decreasing public housing, the increasingly competitive private rental market and the politicisation of the protection of refugees, this is a critical issue.

The 'Busting the Myths' project was conceived in consultation with the Shelter SA 'Agencies Supporting Housing for Refugees and Asylum Seekers' (ASHRA) Network. ASHRA is a Shelter SA network of South Australian organisations and individuals working with new arrivals across a range of services that was developed, and continues to be supported, by Shelter SA. ASHRA comprises a larger network as well as a smaller group of committed members who meet regularly throughout the year. ASHRA responds to the distinct housing issues that refugees and asylum seekers face, including:

- A housing market where public housing stock is being systematically reduced;
- Competition in the private rental market;
- Lack of a rental history or rental references;
- Barriers around language and culture; and
- The politicisation of Australia's responsibility to protect refugees and asylum seekers.

Discrimination in the Private Rental Market

A lack of affordable housing means that all people, including refugees and asylum seekers, must compete in the highly competitive private rental market. In Adelaide there is a low vacancy rate and relatively high median rent, which means that the contest to obtain affordable housing can be fierce. Shelter SA has previously written about this phenomenon in a submission to the review of the Housing Improvement Act in 2012:

“An environment where housing is unaffordable, combined with a low rental vacancy rate and increased costs of living, creates a situation where the free market does not provide housing equitably for all South Australians. There has been a steady decrease in public housing over the last decade, in 1990-91 there were 62,027 occupied dwellings and in 2009-10 the number had reduced to 43,856 (McCann, 2011). Public housing policy now targets people with high and complex needs and this brings increased pressure on the lower end of the private rental market - the result is the “poorest and most vulnerable individuals and families in our community being funnelled into the bottom end of this private rental market” (Pennycock, 2011:2). The current situation results in a steady flow of large numbers of people seeking homelessness services.”

People from other cultures can experience an additional barrier of discrimination. In a 2012 submission to the Social Development Committee’s Inquiry into New Migrants, Shelter SA wrote that this discrimination is:

“The result of a complex confluence of factors that involves contestations over nationalism, marginalisation and insecurity perceived by the mainstream Australian population and the occurrence and framing of geo-political events and obligations (Bulbeck, 2004, Hage, 2003, McMaster, 2002, Spinney and Nethery, 2012, Every and Augoustinos, 2007). Discriminatory opinions and practices pervade private rental markets and appear in the guise of discourses about risk and are driven by selection of the ‘best’ (low risk, good rental history, capable of paying rent) tenant and landlord expectations and desires (Wallis Consulting Group, 2008).”

When people are living on low incomes, discrimination combined with language and cultural barriers invariably disadvantage refugees and asylum seekers in their pursuit of housing.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers and Intra-Vulnerable Group Discrimination

There is a common misconception that refugees and asylum seekers get more (money, opportunities etc.) than Australian citizens. This has been articulated on numerous occasions by Shelter SA stakeholders. Each year Shelter SA hosts the Homeless Connect Expo in partnership with the Adelaide City Council and Housing SA. An Expo attendee in 2012 said, “It’s hard to get a house because of all the migrants”. In research conducted with homeless people about the experience of homelessness, participants expressed concerns that the needs of refugees and asylum seekers were given higher priority than the needs of ‘Australians’ (Spinney and Nethery, 2012). The researchers reported that homeless participants were concerned that refugees and asylum seekers were ‘taking our houses’ (ibid.). One of the respondents is quoted (p. 6):

“You get all these refugees moved in, and they’re taking all the housing, the public housing and stuff like that. I’m not racist, but it’s just not fair on us. You know, if you’re going to let

people into our country at least make sure they've got homes to stay with or something. Don't move them all into our place and take all our places where we could be living"

Racist views are expressed at points where access to rights and resources is in contention and as a means to contest and justify claims over rights and resources. Competition for scarce resources, such as housing, contributes to divisiveness in communities (Crow, 2006) and fuels racism. An example of the racism experienced by refugees is illustrated in the following quote:

"I remember her telling me in one of our meetings that she and her children were shopping one day and a person spat in her direction and said something like "go back to where you came from, your kind are not wanted here".

It has been suggested that such hostility stems from a deeply embedded insecurity amongst the Australian population that is inherent to historical and contemporary policy approaches such as the White Australia Policy and mandatory detention (McMaster, 2002, Spinney and Nethery, 2012).¹ An article published by Adelaide Now on October 18th 2012 about enacting Adelaide City Council by-laws to move people on from the Park Lands sparked all-too-familiar comments, including the below:

'Lets [sic] all chip in and buy them a boat stick them in it send it out to sea and come back as illegal imigrants [sic] bingo free food free housing no electricity bills no bills period problem solved. NEXT.'

Discrimination and misinformed, racist views are particularly disturbing and have been described to Shelter SA by a service provider who works with refugees and asylum seekers as *"frustrating"* and *"disappointing"*. Refugees and asylum seekers do not get preferential access to housing, nor do they make bad tenants.

Language

At Shelter SA we have changed the way that we speak about vulnerable groups of people to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes. George Lakoff² says that '...when you are arguing against the other side: Do not use their language. Their language picks out a frame-and it won't be the frame you want.' Frames are worldviews that are evoked by language and when you use language that belongs to the side that you are arguing against you unwittingly reinforce their worldview. Lakoff says that reframing, which requires you to speak differently, can change the way that people see the world- using different language can create social change. It is challenging to bust a myth without using the language of that myth. Shelter SA aims to humanise refugees and asylum seekers and appeal to the compassion of the general public, asking them to replace their fears about people who seem different with compassion.

Myth 1 - Refugees Get Preferential Access to Housing

"You get all these refugees moved in, and they're taking all the housing, the public housing and stuff like that." (Quoted in Spinney and Nethery, 2012:6)

¹ From Shelter SA's submission to the HREOC's National Anti-Racism Strategy.

² George Lakoff is an American cognitive linguist. His book that I'm referring to is *Don't Think of an Elephant!* – a book about the 2004 American election, during which he acted as an advisor to the Democratic Party.

There is a common misconception that humanitarian entrants into Australia get preferential access to public and affordable housing. This is usually coupled with the disturbing assumption that people who have been born in Australia are more deserving of access to this housing than those people that the nation of Australia is (rightly) obliged to protect from war, terror and torture.

Refugees and asylum seekers *do not* get preferential access to housing. Humanitarian entrants who have been granted protection visas (a total of 13,759 were granted in 2011-2012 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012)) are assisted to settle in the Australian community with the provision of low-cost housing only for the first 6 months after their arrival. In cases where people are facing complex issues they may be granted an additional 6 month tenancy.

This is an incredibly difficult time for humanitarian entrants. They must learn to negotiate an alien culture, language and systems, attempt to establish new relationships, find work and/or engage in study while coming to terms with the traumatic circumstances that have led to their seeking protection. The death and separation of family members is an added distress.

At the end of the 6 month lease period, humanitarian entrants must find new housing in the private rental market. While they are entitled to apply for social (public and community) housing, refugees are subject to the same eligibility criteria (income, asset and housing need tests) as every other Australian seeking subsidised housing. Nor do refugees get greater financial assistance. They have access to the same financial assistance (e.g. Newstart) as everyone else, even though they face additional barriers (such as language) to supporting themselves and their families through study and education. In fact, an ASHRA member providing services to refugees noted that his client "...wants to pay tax so that she can give money back to the Australian Government". This is a common sentiment amongst refugees who do not wish to receive assistance, but eagerly look for ways to support themselves and contribute positively to the Australian community and economy, often with excellent outcomes (see Hugo, 2011).

The housing situation for asylum seekers who are living in the community who have not been granted protection visas is much more dire. They are housed for a short period (up to 6 weeks) before they are required to find their own lodgings. Bridging visas do not carry the legal entitlements of protection visas and people living in the Australian community on the former visa class are not entitled to public housing or most other assistance (apart from bond and rent in advance assistance). They also survive on 89% of the relevant Centrelink benefit that they would otherwise be entitled to (funded by Department of Immigration and Citizenship). This is most commonly Newstart, and is equivalent to approximately \$440 a fortnight.

People on bridging visas are also not allowed to work since the Federal decision to restrict work rights as a disincentive to people seeking asylum in Australia and are also required to pay full fees as though they were international students or visitors. This places homelessness services under increased pressure. The assumption that humanitarian entrants get preferential access to housing is a myth, and speaks more to the conflicts that are created when different groups of people are competing for scarce resources (affordable housing), rather than any unfairness or actual bias.

Myth 2 - Refugees are not good tenants

"I think it a shame that from my experience many families like Jasmynes³ [a refugee family from Ethiopia] appear to be discriminated against in the private rental market. Whether this is because they don't have a private rental history or agents have concerns about them for other reasons I cannot be sure. What I can be sure of is that Agents that do this are depriving themselves and their landlords of excellent tenants."

The above quote comes from an ASHRA member who is a case worker for refugees. He is highlighting a common issue faced in the private rental market by refugees—that they are discriminated against because of language and cultural barriers, the unfavourable political climate, the time constraints placed on property managers and assumptions by some property managers and landowners that refugees are risky tenants.

The case of Jasmin—an Ethiopian woman—challenges assumptions that people from other cultures cannot maintain a house in the expected Western custom. The ASHRA member, Jasmin's case worker, talked about how her initial 6 month tenancy was coming to end and that her family would shortly become homeless:

"One day she...was sitting at a bus stop and was crying through fear, anxiety and whole host of emotions concerning an uncertain fast approaching future for her and her family. I remember vividly a very scared, humble person who told me that she had not slept properly for some time as quite understandably she was fearful of the future for her children."

The same case worker noted that, after helping Jasmin to secure a tenancy, she had proven to be an excellent tenant and was eager to contribute to the Australian community and economy:

"[Jasmin has] proven to be a wonderful tenant. Her rent is always paid on time, her house is presented immaculately and she never misses an appointment. Something she said to me has stayed with me and that is she not only wants to provide a good example to her children by working hard but also she wants to pay tax so that she can give money back to the Australian Government! If I had a house to rent I would definitely rent to Jasmin and her family. I would not have to worry about rent being paid or any damage being done to my property and not only would I have the best tenant, I would also be providing assistance to a family that would enable them to reach their goals in life."

Another example provided by a case worker is of a Somalian lady named Ishra⁴. The service provider said that:

"If I had a suitable property to rent I would have no hesitation in renting to Ishra. She will achieve the goals she has in life, her family will reunite and she will be an excellent Australian citizen. Ishra has good sense of humour, has taught me a good deal about her culture and has demonstrated resilience, patience and acceptance wonderfully well."

These stories highlight that giving refugees a chance as tenants can be an incredibly rewarding experience and creates a solid base from which they can realise their potential and become valuable community members.

³ Not her real name

⁴ Not her real name

Another ASHRA member highlighted how they had become friends with their Iranian refugee neighbours and noted the pride that they displayed in their rental property:

“The family...seemed to waste no time making the house cosy with rugs and pictures on the pre-existing hooks. To us it's clear that they value their home immensely. One day I noted that an unopened packet of wall-stickers lay in the daughter's bedroom. I asked the mother, Somaya⁵ why she hadn't put the stickers up for her daughter. She said that she realised they might leave a mark on the walls and she didn't want to cause damage to the property.”

There are countless stories from housing providers of refugees and asylum seekers being excellent tenants, including the below:

“Each routine inspection has been fantastic and direct debit takes care of their rent. The family are loving their new home and have just been offered a further 12 month agreement...We look forward to having a long and healthy working relationship with this family in the future.”

“He has always paid his rent on time and always kept the unit clean...He is now in the process of moving into the open rental market.”

It is unfortunate that refugees are discriminated against in the private rental market, especially when the stories above demonstrate that they can be excellent tenants, and that providing a stable tenancy contributes to the ability of refugees to become valuable community members. Australia is a country that has a strong foundation in migration. If it were not for the hard work of immigrants over the years Australia would not be the vibrant place that it is. You can find out more about the work of Shelter SA www.sheltersa.asn.au.

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⁵ Not her real name

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Positive Stories

Somaya

"We are friends with an Iranian couple and their two children who arrived in Australia as refugee claimants. We've known them for almost a year and they regularly invite us to their place for dinner and weekend lunches. What is always clear to us is the pride they take in the presentation of their home, and their garden. At first they had very long grass in their front yard because they didn't have a lawn mower. Luckily a neighbour offered to share hers with the family and Ahmed (not his real name) now keeps the lawn perpetually clipped short. The family also seemed to waste no time making the house cosy with rugs and pictures on the pre-existing hooks. To us it's clear that they value their home immensely. One day I noted that an unopened packet of wall-stickers lay in the daughter's bedroom. I asked the mother, Somaya (not her real name), why she hadn't put the stickers up for her daughter. She said that she realised they might leave a mark on the walls and she didn't want to cause damage to the property. It also strikes me that although Somaya is a vivacious cook, she is equally meticulous about scrubbing down the kitchen almost immediately after each meal. Both Ahmed and Somaya often take advantage of opportunities to ask my family about how things are done in Australia. They are really eager to learn how to navigate our systems with a minimum of fuss. In the meantime they've become very well informed about how the private rental sector works here!"

Somalian Family

"I had a large Somalian family who was living in a short term rental approach us with their support worker back in July 2011 for affordable accommodation. The family spoke very little English but the transition was quite smooth as they were able to use their son as an interpreter and also some help from their support worker. After viewing the property we managed to get them into a brand new townhouse within three weeks. Each routine inspection has been fantastic and direct debit takes care of their rent. The family are loving their new home and have just been offered a further 12 month agreement. We have had no complaints from any of the neighbours, tenants and owner occupiers alike. We look forward to having a long and healthy working relationship with this family in the future."

Moving on to Employment

"Mr A was a 40 year old refugee from east Africa. He was referred to community housing 2 years ago and has been housed by us ever since. He had previously been moving amongst various people in the African community but had found it difficult to obtain sustainable housing of his own."

Mr A received bond assistance from Housing SA and a support agency helped him with moving in. Mr A has since been an excellent tenant. He has always paid his rent on time and always kept the unit clean and tidy. Last year Mr A's wife came to Australia on a refugee program and they now have a baby. Mr A was working part time, and has recently managed to find a full time job and is no longer dependent on Centrelink. He is now in the process of moving into the open rental market."

Mr A is just 1 of several dozen refugees whose properties I manage and I have invariably found them to be good tenants who have fitted well into the Community Housing environment."

Jasmin

“Jasmin is a 50 year old lady from Ethiopia who has 6 children all under the age of 17. Jasmin was a refugee who first came to Australia in Dec 2010. She became separated from her husband in a refugee camp and does not know what had happened to him. She thinks he may have been the victim of a crime in the camp or suffered political persecution. Prior to arriving in Adelaide as a “legitimate” refugee by plane, she had not heard of our city. She could not speak any English at all. She and her family were placed in emergency refugee housing and was told this was for a maximum of 12 months. She said that she had a worker but no progress was made on finding alternate, safe and secure accommodation. The 12 months quickly went by and Jasmin and her family did not have any suitable alternative accommodation and were told that they would have to vacate by a particular fast approaching date.

Jasmin told me that one day she had taken one of her children to school in the city and was sitting at a bus stop and was crying through fear, anxiety and whole host of emotions concerning an uncertain fast approaching future for her and her family. She said that a person who could speak some of her language heard her, provided some comfort and she had knowledge of our service. She offered to bring Jasmin to our service and subsequently did so.

Jasmin saw our duty team and was immediately assessed as being in urgent need of housing. They made the usual representation to housing providers but without success. As circumstances would have it a vacancy came up in one of our transitional houses and I subsequently interviewed Jasmin via interpreter services. I remember vividly a very scared, humble person who told me that she had not slept properly for some time as quite understandably she was fearful of the future for her children. At no time did I sense any anger from her at her family being in this position but I can remember being personally frustrated and disappointed that as a Nation we invite people in need to our county and then in some cases not provide adequately for them.

Within 2 weeks we were able to move the family into our property. She immediately said that she felt a weight removed from her mind and was so thankful. Subsequently Jasmin has been in our property for over seven months. During this time she has proven to be a wonderful tenant. Her rent is always paid on time, her house is presented immaculately and she never misses an appointment. She is always polite, engaging and extremely motivated. She has been attending English classes and her English has improved so quickly that we now do not need to utilise an interpreter. She is learning how to drive and wants to undertake study so that she can work in the aged care industry. Something she said to me has stayed with me and that is she not only wants to provide a good example to her children by working hard but also she wants to pay tax so that she can give money back to the Australian Government! On a lighter note Jasmin makes the best coffee I have ever had!

I have been working for some 36 years and I can say without any trepidation that I have never had a person treat me with more respect and who has been so inspiring. Jasmin has taught me much about the human spirit.

If I had a house to rent I would definitely rent to Jasmin and her family. I would not have to worry about rent being paid or any damage being done to my property and not only would I have the best tenant, I would also be providing assistance to a family that would enable them to reach their goals in life.

Jasmin's children also have goals in life. Two sons want to be doctors, a daughter wants to be a fashion designer and a younger son wants to be a policeman! I have no doubt after working with this wonderful family closely that they will also achieve their goals. Their Academic achievements to date, demonstrates not only their abilities but also the motivation they possess.

I think it a shame that from my experience many families like Jasmin appear to be discriminated against in the private rental market. Whether this is because they don't have a private rental history or agents have concerns about them for other reasons I cannot be sure. What I can be sure of is that Agents that do this are depriving themselves and their landlords of excellent tenants. We currently have a number of clients from a refugee background who like Jasmin would be an asset to any landlord.

Jasmin and her family are an excellent asset to Australia."

Ishra

"Ishra is a 35 year old mother of 2 who originally hails from Somalia. She was a refugee who left her country some 5 years ago and for reasons unknown was settled in another country other than Australia even though she had family here. She arrived in Adelaide a couple of years ago via Melbourne. She does have a husband but he is in England and has been for some years. The plan is for him to relocate to be with his family as soon as the system allows.

Ishra became known to our service as family members of hers were housed by us last year. Ishra speaks very good English and is well educated. She has completed a child care course and had part-time temporary work within the industry. Ishra acted as an interpreter for the family I was working with and general discussion led me to discover that Ishra and her family were in fact homeless. I was bewildered! I could not comprehend how someone who was so well presented, educated and resourceful could be in this situation.

She told me that for the last 18months she had been staying with friends within her cultural community and basically was shifting from house to house roughly every month. I could not imagine what this must have been like for her and her children. It was hard enough for them that there husband and father was in another country but also to not have a home and have to rely on the generosity of others beggars belief. I could not fathom how disruptive it must have been, particularly for the children. Discussions also lead me to discover that Ishra spent a lot of her spare time helping other members of her cultural community in practical ways e.g. help with forms, interpreting etc.

I advised her to go to our office and see our crisis duty team. She subsequently did this and they did the usual representation to housing providers but without any joy. Subsequently, a vacancy came up in one of our transitional houses and I completed an assessment. Normally this is a relatively straight forward process, but you guessed it, not in Ishra's case! Her situation is complicated by the fact that she was not eligible for full Centrelink payments as she was a citizen of another country that meant there was a lengthy qualifying period for full payments in Australia. So to some degree we had take a little risk in that should Ishra not be able to maintain employment she would struggle to pay the rent as a consequence of the reduced Government assistance she would receive. In any case we subsequently moved Ishra into one of our properties late last year.

I remember Ishra telling me in one of our meetings that she and her children were shopping one day and a person spat in her direction and said something like "go back to where you came from, your

kind are not wanted here". When she told me this she also followed up with, that this happened because of people's ignorance. It did upset her but she did not let this affect her in any great way. I wish I was as understanding. Nobody should have to put up with ignorance and dare I say arrogance such as this.

Ishra has been a wonderful tenant. She always paid her rent on time, presented her home immaculately for all formal inspections and every other visit I made. She engaged with case management as required, undertook a further Child Care course and maintained part-time employment.

Her tenancy was so successful that we regularly advocated with Housing Providers and subsequently a Community Housing Organisation we have a close affiliation with offered her housing and she recently relocated to this long term housing. As further evidence of Ishra's excellent tenancy and generally her basic personality I was taken a little aback when we did the outward inspection at the wonderful presentation of the property. Not only was it spotlessly clean and free of any damage, you could see where she had made extra effort.

If I had a suitable property to rent I would have no hesitation in renting to Ishra. She will achieve the goals she has in life, her family will reunite and she will be an excellent Australian citizen. Ishra has good sense of humour, has taught me a good deal about her culture and has demonstrated resilience, patience and acceptance wonderfully well."