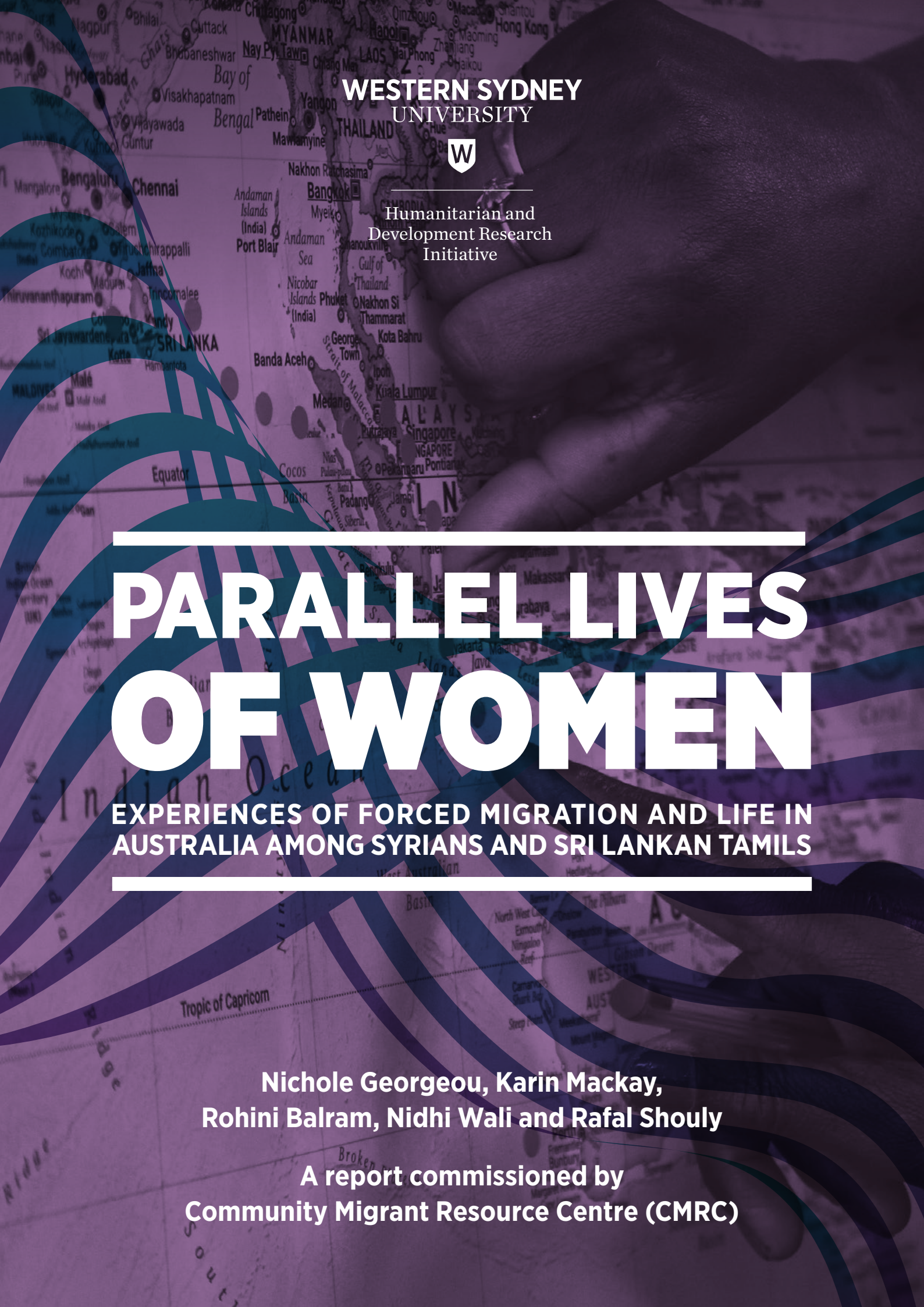

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY

Humanitarian and
Development Research
Initiative

PARALLEL LIVES OF WOMEN

EXPERIENCES OF FORCED MIGRATION AND LIFE IN AUSTRALIA AMONG SYRIANS AND SRI LANKAN TAMILS

**Nichole Georgeou, Karin Mackay,
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**A report commissioned by
Community Migrant Resource Centre (CMRC)**

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DEDICATION

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It has been a privilege to work with you.

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PREFACE

Australian society is composed of many elements. It is a diverse tapestry of histories and cultures. Yet despite official multiculturalism seldom does the mainstream society intersect with marginalised migrant groups, and we know little of the struggles, aspirations and achievement of other women's lives. In this respect we exist parallel to each other, rarely coming together in meaningful ways.

The Community Migrant Resource Centre and Sydwest Multicultural Services have fearlessly championed the rights of women for decades. These two organisations are committed to supporting all women who strive for inclusion and social mobility.

Both organisations operate in cosmopolitan Greater Western Sydney (GWS), which is a success story of multicultural Australia. It is a place where opportunity abounds and diversity is embraced, but in the suburbs of GWS there are Sri Lankan Tamil women dreaming of a future as Australian citizens who are desperate to secure a life of freedom for their children in a place where they can access education, sustainable employment, express themselves, build their skills and aspire to a life grounded in dignity and meaning. Yet because they came by boat, such things are denied to them.

Early in 2020, the Community Migrant Resource Centre decided to respond to these hidden stories of vulnerability, despair and blocked mobility. CMRC commissioned Western Sydney University's Humanitarian and Development Research Initiative (HADRI) to compare and contrast the health and well-being outcomes of two groups of women who face significant barriers to settlement in GWS. One of these is the Sri Lankan Tamil women who live with the constant uncertainty of temporary visa status. The other group is Syrian women who arrived within the last five years through the humanitarian settlement program. So was born **The Parallel Lives of Women** project.

This report is a revelation. It makes fascinating reading but is also challenging as it delves into the policy issues that frame the living conditions of refugee and asylum seeker women in GWS. Of particular note is that many of these women toil silently in the hidden economic engine of the essential services sector that has provided a lifeline during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. supermarkets, aged care, disability services, cleaning), yet some live without the certainty that they will be permitted to remain in Australia.

CMRC believes that immeasurable benefits derive from allowing people to achieve citizenship, to plant their roots in Australia, and to work hard for a future of permanency in this land of plenty.

MRS PRISCELLA MABOR
Inclusion Strategy and Innovations Manager
Community Migrant Resource Centre

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Parallel Lives of Women (TPLW) research project is a collaboration between researchers from Western Sydney University's Humanitarian and Development Research Initiative (HADRI), the Community Migrant Resource Centre (CMRC) and SydWest Multicultural Services (SydWest). The focus of the study was to understand how immigration policy intersects with the different policy areas of migration, housing, education, and health to affect the cultural well-being of two cohorts of women who are subject to vastly different visa conditions while living in Australia.

The study compared and contrasted the experiences of two cohorts, each of 17 women living in Greater Western Sydney (GWS):

1. Sri Lankan Tamil Women who came to Australia by boat on or after 13 August 2012 and before 1 January 2014, and who have asked for Australia's protection.
2. Syrian women who arrived in Australia within the last three years (2017-2020) as refugees from the Syrian conflict.

These two cohorts were selected to explore the implications of different political treatment of women fleeing persecution and violence in their home country on their settlement experience in Greater Western Sydney (GWS), Australia. Specifically we focus on how the various types of visa category, and the different government services and entitlements that can be accessed, affect women living in Australia.

The study adopted a cultural well-being approach to understand the women's experiences as it provides a rich conceptual framework that illuminates the interconnectedness of past and present, as well as physical, political, social, economic, cultural, emotional and spiritual factors that impact well-being.

The research design was developed by HADRI researchers in collaboration with the CMRC community facilitator for the Sri Lankan Tamil women's group, and the SydWest Multicultural Services community facilitator for the Syrian women's group, to ensure the cultural appropriateness of the research approach. As part of its cultural well-being approach, this research employed an arts-based research (ABR) approach that included creative expression workshops, ethnographic observation and one-on-one storytelling interviews. The use of creative expression workshops provided mechanisms for women from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, not all of whom spoke English well, to speak in their own languages (Arabic/Tamil) and share intimate knowledge through artistic/creative expression.

Workshops and interviews dealt with complex topics such as the individual experiences of forced migration and resettlement in Australia, the differing emotional sensations of being recognised as a legitimate and equal human being, and how Australia's immigration policy informed visa status, which in turn affected women's lives within three social policy areas: housing, education and health.

The research aimed to investigate the intersections of migration and integration on the cultural well-being of vulnerable women from Sri Lankan Tamil and Syrian backgrounds. There were two main research questions:

1. What are the factors that influence the subjective cultural well-being of the target group of Syrian and Sri Lankan Tamil women in greater Western Sydney Australia?
2. To what extent do differential policies for refugees and asylum seekers impact on the subjective and cultural well-being of the Sri Lankan Tamil and Syrian women in Greater Western Sydney Australia?

Three main factors emerge as major influences in participants' lives: trauma, visa status and language acquisition and these factors intersect to impact on participants' abilities and capacities to settle in Australia. They affect their capacity to find and hold employment, which affects financial status, housing status and access to education, as well as social cohesion – all things that shape one's identity and sense of belonging in Australia and which ultimately affect well-being.

In the discussion the report focuses on unpacking these themes. It draws attention to the differential outcomes that result from the Australian Government applying different visa subclasses to refugees and asylum seekers according to their mode of arrival.

This study represents the first comparative study of the settlement experiences of Syrian and Sri Lankan Tamil cohorts with an explicit focus on how visa status affects well-being. It contributes to understandings of contemporary women's experiences of migration by exploring how social structures and political ideologies shape women's lives and affect their sense of womanhood and identity.

There are five recommendations that stem from this report.

1. That the Department of Home Affairs gives greater recognition to the impact of the excessive delays in resolving visa status on the health and well-being on those seeking asylum or on a temporary humanitarian visa, especially vulnerable women, and take necessary steps to:
   - → expedite the processing of the initial applications of those within the Legacy Caseload; and
   - → ensure there is no impact on access to entitlements during transition from a bridging visa onto a humanitarian visa or during renewal of a temporary (humanitarian) visa.
2. That the Department of Home Affairs recognises the detrimental impact of leaving vulnerable asylum seekers without adequate financial support and:
   - → expand eligibility requirements for Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) to include a greater focus on vulnerability; and
   - → increase the level of SRSS payments to create parity with JobSeeker benefits.
3. That the Department of Home Affairs work closely with the specialist refugee health providers in each state to ensure that holders of any form of humanitarian visa have unimpeded access to basic health services, and that the agencies and community groups who come into contact with these visa holders are aware of such pathways.
4. That the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) increase its efforts to ensure that:
   - → accredited interpreters have the cultural and linguistic competency to interpret for traumatised asylum seekers and refugees; and
   - → there is far greater use of accredited interpreters by those supporting refugees, including, but not limited to, General Practitioners.
5. That enrolment staff within universities and TAFE colleges receive training in how to interpret the eligibility of various visa subclass holders for higher education, and from where they can seek advice if a student finds themself temporarily without a visa.

INTRODUCTION

This report deals with two groups of women who have had ostensibly similar experiences of fleeing war and persecution. They are both currently in Australia but due to means of their arrival, they are treated very differently by the Australian government. In order to understand why this is the case, this background section examines aspects of international refugee law, particularly the legal mechanism of claiming asylum and the protection obligations of states who have signed the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

This introductory section has three aims:

1. To discuss the definition of a refugee and Australia's support of efforts to resettle refugees.
2. To review the main types of humanitarian visas and their entitlements.
3. To introduce the two cohorts of women.

Throughout the introduction and in this report we note that these cohorts of women have been affected by the extreme politicisation of the issue of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia.

REFUGEES AND THE 1951 REFUGEE CONVENTION

Article 14.1 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution" (UNGA, 1948). In 1951 this protection commitment was strengthened when an international legal agreement, the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (hereinafter the Refugee Convention), sought to create a legal definition of a refugee, to establish the range of rights that should apply to a person granted protection, as well as the obligations toward refugees for those states that had signed the Refugee Convention. In 1967 a Protocol (an optional additional part of a Convention) was added to the Refugee Convention that extended to the rest of the world the mechanisms that had evolved to resettle displaced European populations (UNHCR, 2019a).

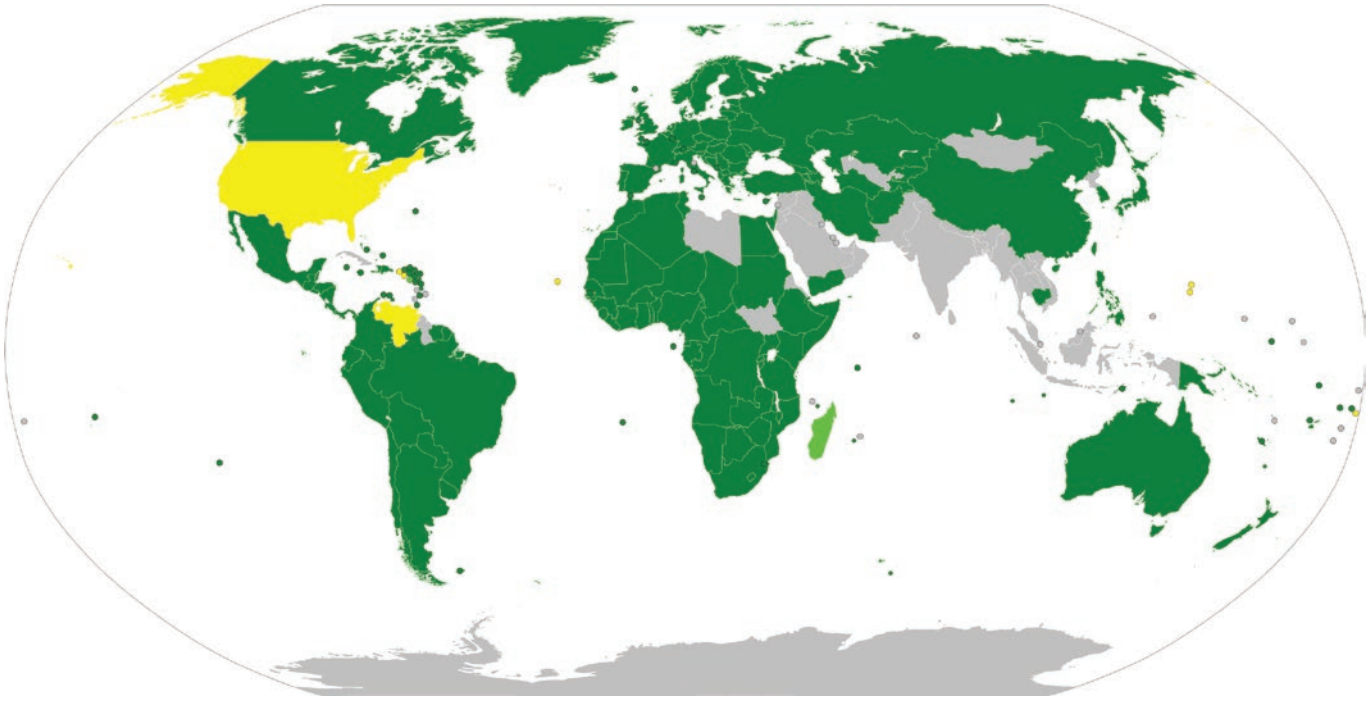
According to the Refugee Convention (Article 1.2), a 'refugee' is a person who:

> ...is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

A person cannot be a refugee inside their own state; to be recognised as a refugee one must first enter another state and ask for the protection of that state. In many cases the determination of refugee status is conducted by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

At the time of writing (4 December 2021) Australia was one of 149 states that are parties to one or both the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2019b; 2019c). The Refugee Convention has global application, however among the states of South Asia and Southeast Asia there is far less support. As seen in Figure 1 below, states shaded grey are not party to either the Refugee Convention or its Protocol, while those in dark green are party to both. States in light green are party to the Refugee Convention only, and those in yellow party to the 1967 Protocol only.

Figure 1: 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol Signatories



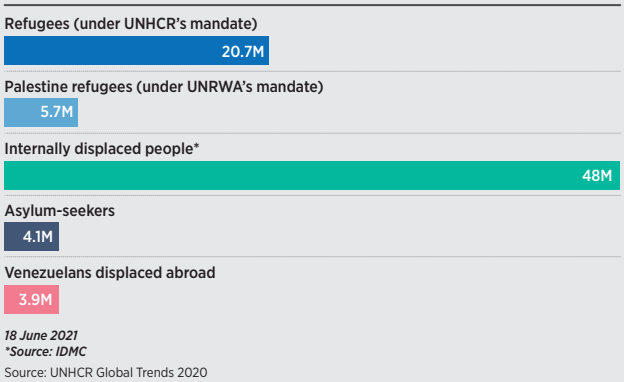
Source: Wikipedia (2021) Image by Getsnoopy – Own work based on BlankMap-World.svg., CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=85908894

One of the principles of the Refugee Convention is that refugees not be returned to the country from which they have fled if doing so would expose them to the danger of death, torture or other mistreatment, including arbitrary detention. This is a principle called *non-refoulement* (AHRC, 2013: 1). Under international human rights law the prohibition of refoulement is explicitly included in the Refugee Convention, however it is also included in the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED). Australia is party to all of these treaties, but has not passed specific legislation to give effect to these commitments. With no specific legislation to enshrine refugee rights there are no domestic remedies that can be pursued when Australia violates its treaty obligations.

According to the UNHCR, at 1 July 2021 there were over 82 million people who were displaced from their homes and in need of support (UNHCR, 2021). UNHCR is directly responsible for managing some 20.7 million people – those whose claims for asylum have been upheld and who have been officially granted the status of 'refugee'. Some refugees are housed in camps, however such camps are only meant to be temporary – they provide basic services (food, shelter, blankets, medical treatment, legal aid, counselling).

Once refugee determination has taken place – a process conducted either through the UNHCR or by a state – refugees await one of three things: (1) the conclusion of conflict, and the ability to return home free from persecution (for example if a civil war results in the defeat of the government that was persecuting an individual, then that person may feel it is possible to return); or (2) resettlement, however only about 0.25% of the world's refugees are resettled in any given year; or (3) regularisation of their status in the country to which a person has fled.

Figure 2: Refugees and displaced persons (2021)



Source: UNHCR (2021)

The total number of refugees resettled in developed states is however very small (92,400) when compared to the number of refugees (25.9 million) (IOM, 2020: 39-42).[1] The United States, Canada and Australia are three common resettlement destinations for refugees, followed by Sweden and Norway.[2]

AUSTRALIA, REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

In Australia the admission and settlement of refugees and asylum seekers forms part of a broader migration program which has three parts: skilled; family; and humanitarian and refugee.

In 2021-22 Australia's immigration policy aims to attract 160,000 migrants. Just under half of these (79,600) are in the skilled stream, which includes employer sponsored positions (22,000), global talent (15,000) and business innovation and investment visas (13,500). The other large group (77,300) is the family stream, which is heavily geared towards partners (72,300) rather than parents (4,500). There are also special eligibility (100 places) and child (an estimated 3,000 places) (DHA, 2021a).

Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program comprises two sub-programs: the onshore protection program and the offshore resettlement program. The offshore resettlement program contains three categories: Refugee, Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) and Community Support Program (CSP).

- → The Refugee category applies mostly to people living in other countries who have been identified as refugees by UNHCR and referred to Australia for resettlement, and a small in-country component.
- → The SHP category applies to people who are subject to substantial discrimination in their home country, and are proposed by a person or organisation in Australia; this includes immediate family members of people who have been granted protection in Australia.
- → The CSP began in July 2017, and enables refugees to be resettled with support from individuals, community groups or business. There is an annual limit of 1,000 CSP places which are included in the total of Australia's humanitarian intake (DHA 2021a).

The onshore protection program is available to people seeking asylum who arrived in Australia on a valid visa (e.g. a student or tourist visa). People in this category can apply for protection and if successful they are granted a visa which allows them to live and work in Australia as permanent residents. Onshore visas are provided for persons already within Australia who are found to be refugees according to the Refugee Convention, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights or the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. As of 2014 this program specifically excludes people who arrived in Australia by boat or without a valid visa.

1 IOM is including Palestinians in its total refugee count.

2 Between 2005-2017, the US has had the largest resettlement program of between 50-70,000 places (people) per year, however a 2018 policy change in the US led to a substantially decreased intake (to 23,000). In that year, Canada became the state with the world's largest refugee resettlement program (about 28,000), while Australia's program was third with around 13,000 (IOM, 2020: 39-42).

The humanitarian stream operates separately from the general migration stream, and its numbers vary year by year. For example, the target for the Refugee and Humanitarian Program for 2019-2020 was 18,750 but due to the COVID-19 pandemic the program was suspended on 19 March 2020, and the final figure accepted for the 2019-2020 Humanitarian Program was 5,000 less than anticipated (Refugee Council of Australia 2020a). In the 2019-2020 year there were over 70,000 applications lodged for an Australian offshore humanitarian visa, with 11,521 granted. Over 60% of applicants originated from the Middle East (DHA 2021a).

There are six classes of visas (and numerous sub-categories) that permit a holder to remain in Australia:

→ visitor visas (6 sub categories);

→ studying and training visas (3 sub categories);

→ family and partner visas (23 sub categories);

→ working and skilled visas (24 sub categories);

→ refugee and humanitarian visas (5 sub categories);

→ other visas (13 sub categories).

In this report we discuss the five sub categories of refugee and humanitarian visas – Global Special Humanitarian (subclass 202); Protection visa (subclass 866); Refugee visas (subclass 200,201, 203 and 204); Temporary Protection visa (subclass 785) (ASRC 2020a, 2020b) and Safe Haven Enterprise visa (subclass 790). We also discuss the Bridging Visa E – BVE (subclass 050 and 051) – which falls under the 'Other visas' category.

As the table below shows, the Refugee (48.7%) and Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) (38.7%) components are the largest aspects of the humanitarian intake, with the onshore program making up a much smaller number (12.5%).

Table 3: Refugee and Humanitarian Intake Year 2019-2020

	REFUGEE	SHP	ONSHORE
Intake	6,422	5,099	1,650

Despite the ongoing demonisation of irregular maritime asylum seekers, since 25 November 2011, successive Ministers for Home Affairs/Immigration have used their "non-compellable, non-delegable intervention power under s 195A of the Migration Act 1958 (DHA, 2019:1)" to grant a class of visa known as a Bridging Visa E (BVE) to some irregular maritime arrivals (IMAs). BVE holders are legal in Australia while they apply for a substantive visa, and are free to choose where they live within Australia. In 2019, of the 13,827 BVE holders, 5,178 lived in NSW (37.4%). Of these NSW BVE holders, the most numerous groups by citizenship were from Iran (1,559) and Sri Lanka (1,491) (DHA 2019: 2-5). While there is no gender breakdown by citizenship group, in NSW BVE holders were predominantly (86%) male (4,461 of 5,178) (DHA, 2019: 4-5).

Different refugee and humanitarian visa types provide different rights to services in Australia as per Table 4, which explains the visa classes and available benefits discussed in this report.

Table 4: Australian government information on visa classes discussed in this report

VISA CLASS	VISA TYPE	DESCRIPTION	ALLOWANCES
Refugee and Humanitarian	Safe Haven Enterprise visa (SHEV) (subclass 790)	This visa is for people who arrived in Australia without a visa, and want to seek asylum. It permits the holder stay in Australia temporarily if they engage Australia's protection obligations and meet all other requirements for the granting of the visa.	Holders may: → live, work and study in Australia temporarily for five years → access government services such as jobactive, Medicare and Centrelink services → access short-term counselling for torture and trauma when required → attend English language classes for free if the holder is eligible → travel overseas to countries other than the home country if the holder obtains written approval due to compassionate or compelling circumstances → apply for certain other visas in Australia, including permanent visas such as skilled and family visas (but not a permanent Protection visa) if the Safe Haven Enterprise visa pathway requirements are met Visa may be cancelled if travel to a third country is undertaken without approval. "If you travel overseas without the Department's written approval, you will breach visa condition 8570, and we may cancel your visa (and the visas of members of your family unit) while you are offshore".
Refugee and Humanitarian	Temporary Protection visa (TPV) (subclass 785)	This visa is for people who arrived in Australia without a visa, and want to seek asylum. It permits the holder stay in Australia temporarily if they engage Australia's protection obligations and meet all other requirements for the granting of the visa.	Holders may: → live, work and study in Australia temporarily for three years → access government services such as jobactive, Medicare and Centrelink services → access short-term counselling for torture and trauma when required → attend English language classes for free if the holder is eligible → travel overseas to countries other than the home country if the holder obtains written approval due to compassionate or compelling circumstances "If you travel overseas without the Department's written approval, you will breach visa condition 8570, and we may cancel your visa (and the visas of members of your family unit) while you are offshore."
Refugee and Humanitarian	Refugee visa 200 (Refugee visa (offshore) subclass 200)	This is a permanent residence visa, usually for people referred to Australia for resettlement by UNHCR.	Applicants must be offshore and subject to persecution in home country, meet the 'compelling reasons' criterion, meet health, character and national security requirements. Holders may: → stay in Australia permanently → work and study in Australia → enrol in Australia's public healthcare scheme, Medicare → propose family members for permanent residence → travel to and from Australia for five years → if eligible become an Australian citizen → attend free English language classes through the Adult Migrant English Program As a permanent resident the holder is eligible for social security "NewStart" (unemployment) allowance (Now called 'Job Seeker').
Refugee and Humanitarian	Global Special Humanitarian visa (subclass 202)	With this visa a holder may move to Australia if they face substantial discrimination or human rights abuses, and have a proposer, and to stay in Australia permanently with their immediate family.	Allowances are as for visa subclass 200 above, plus in addition the holder may: stay in Australia indefinitely; become a permanent resident on the day they enter Australia on this visa. For citizenship purposes, permanent residency starts on the day the holder enters Australia on this visa. As a permanent resident the holder is eligible for social security "NewStart" (unemployment) allowance.
Refugee and Humanitarian	Refugee visa 204 Women at Risk (subclass 204)	Permanent visa for women who do not have the effective protection of a partner or a relative and are in danger of victimisation. It affords protection to women who are living outside the country and who have been subjected to harassment, persecution, abuse or victimisation on the basis of gender, and to their dependents.	Allowances as per visa classes 200, 202 (above). "You must be outside Australia when you apply. You must also be outside Australia when a visa is granted".
Other	Bridging visa E (BVE) (subclass 051 (Protection Visa Applicant)	This visa permits a holder to stay lawfully in Australia while they make arrangements to leave, finalise their immigration matter or wait for an immigration decision.	This visa lets holders stay in Australia while their Protection visa application is being processed. It is used to rectify their immigration status, generally if they are currently unlawful, the holder of a BVE 050 or the holder of a BVD 041 Holders may be subject to a range of restrictions including: no paid work; a maximum of 40 hours per week paid work; weekly reporting to Immigration; paying for detention; not being disruptive.

Source: Adapted from DHA (2021 a; DHA 2021b, DHA 2021c)

SYRIANS AND SRI LANKAN TAMILS IN AUSTRALIA

Existing studies and research on Syrian and Sri Lankan Tamil women in Australia is mostly from 2017 onwards for both cohorts. There is very limited literature on Syrian refugee communities' experiences in Australia with just two studies; one focused on health and health seeking behaviours (Renzaho & Dhingra, 2017), and one on barriers to accessing services (Maldari et al., 2019). Six studies were located on Sri Lankan Tamil communities in Australia. Three focused on their health seeking behaviours (Samuel et al., 2018; Silove et al., 1998; Steel et al., 1999); one was on 'generation 1.5', who had migrated to Australia as adolescents and thus had different ideas of homeland, and different experiences of identity and family displacement when compared to first generation migrants (Kandasamy, 2018). One study explored the reasons Sri Lankan Tamils choose to migrate, and strategies used to adapt to a new culture while maintaining Sri Lankan Tamil identity (Arasaratnam, 2008), while Kandasamy et al. (2020) brought together life stories and experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil women to investigate the concept of 'home', and what the (re)creation of 'home' means.

Syrian and Sri Lankan Tamil communities were well established in Australia prior to the arrival of the cohorts of Syrian refugees and Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers included in this study. Yet while the experience of these new Syrian and Sri Lankan Tamil communities is similar in their experiences of fleeing conflict, their paths to Australia, and their treatment within Australia on arrival, have been and remain radically different.

Both the Syrian and Sri Lankan Tamil populations in Australia share a lived experience of war, violence and forced migration from their home countries (Laavanyan, 2012; George, 2013; George & Jettner, 2015; David, 2012; Kandasamy, 2018). They also share common experiences of losing a family member or relative, and of family displacement (Kandasamy 2018; Kandasamy et al. 2020).

SYRIANS IN AUSTRALIA

Syrian settlement in Australia predates the establishment of the Australian Commonwealth in 1901, however the Syrian expatriate community remained small in number until 2011 (Collins et al., 2018: 5). From that time onwards there has been increased migration flows of Syrians due to the ongoing political and military conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria), which commenced with protests in February 2011 and developed into an armed conflict by September 2011 (World Vision, 2021).

The Syrian conflict has led to mass displacement. By 2015, an estimated 2.3 million Syrians had requested asylum in Europe. With the support of the UNHCR, Syrian refugees were resettled in Germany (115,600) and Sweden (52,700), at that point the most generous hosts for displaced Syrians (UNHCR, 2016: 16). In 2018 Germany and Sweden were the OECD states with the most generous resettlement programs for Syrian refugees (PBS, 2019). From 2015, North American and Oceanic states including Canada, United States, Australia and New Zealand have also participated in Syrian refugee resettlement (UNHCR, 2016: 57-60). World Vision reports that in 2020 there were 5.6 million Syrian refugees in other states (mostly in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan), with another 6.2 million people internally displaced within Syria (World Vision, 2021). In 2020 Turkey was host to the largest number of displaced Syrians (3.6 million), followed by substantial numbers in Lebanon (892,000), Jordan (658,000), Iraq (245,000) and Egypt (130,000) (UNHCR 2020).

Like other developed states, Australia moved to accept special cohorts of refugees from Syria and Iraq, of which the Syrian women in this study form part. In 2015 the Abbott government announced that Australia would resettle 12,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees as a result of the conflict in the Middle East.[3]

Syrian refugees are selected for settlement in Australia either from the UNHCR camps or directly from urban communities in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. The Australian Government prioritised "those most in need – the women, children and families of persecuted minorities who have sought refuge from the conflict in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey" (AG, 2015). The majority of the Syrian refugee population in Australia is concentrated in metropolitan areas of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland (Collins et al. 2018: 5).

Humanitarian entrants settled in Australia are granted permanent residency – they have the same access as Australian citizens to government-funded social security benefits (through Centrelink) and health care services (Medicare). They are also eligible to receive English language training, as well as torture and trauma counselling and a range of settlement services. These services are managed by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and include: the Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO) Program (DHA, 2021a), which is closely linked to the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP).[4]

The HSP provides support to humanitarian entrants for up to 18 months following their arrival in Australia. It works in combination with other settlement and mainstream services and assists clients by: facilitating English language skills (through the Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP));[5] supporting engagement with education, training and building employment readiness. Participation in the HSP is voluntary (DSS 2018). Under the HSP eligible humanitarian entrants with complex or high needs (not met by other settlement services) can also access Specialised and Intensive Services for up to five years.

3 In the past Australia has provided temporary sanctuary to people from specific conflicts. In April 1999 some 4,000 Kosovar refugees were given temporary sanctuary in Australia under what was dubbed *Operation Safe Haven*. A similar arrangement was made for 1,600 Timorese later in the same year (Ames 2021). Australia played a minor role in the Syrian conflict through its air operational assistance in bombing Islamic State in Syria and Iraq from 2014 (Hawksley & Georgeou, 2016: 188-189). They Syrian intake was in addition to the existing Humanitarian Program which had been slashed from 20,000 to 13,750 refugees in 2013 by the incoming Abbott government, and then raised to 16,250 places in 2017-2018, and 18,750 from 2018-2019 onwards (RCA, 2021). The Abbott government agreed to increase the overall humanitarian intake in exchange for receiving support in the Senate to reintroduce temporary protection for maritime arrivals (Refugee Council 2020b)

4 The HSP is delivered on behalf of the Australian government by five service providers in eleven contract regions across Australia. In Sydney and Regional New South Wales (Newcastle, Coffs Harbour and Armidale) the HSP is delivered by Settlement Services International Limited (DHA 2020).

5 Until 28 August 2020 there had been a limit on the number of hours of English study, which had been set at 510 hours. This limit has now been removed. The reformed Immigration (Education) Act 1971 extends eligibility from functional English to Vocational English, and removes time limits for enrolling, commencing and completing English tuition for eligible visa holders who were in Australia on or before 1 October 2020. "These changes mean that more migrants can now access free English tuition for longer and until they reach a higher level of proficiency." https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/amep/about-the-program/background

SRI LANKAN TAMILS IN AUSTRALIA

Following Sri Lankan independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, and after the introduction of the 1956 *Sinhala Only Act* (Official Language Act No.33 of 1956) – which mandated Sinhalese as the only official language (replacing English) – significant numbers of Sri Lankans of Tamil ancestry migrated. Initially in the 1970s Sri Lankan Tamil migrants were mostly professionals and university students in search of improved economic and educational opportunities. Persecution of the rights of Tamils in Sri Lanka by Sinhalese-dominated governments gave rise to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which emerged in 1983 and fought the Sri Lankan state for an independent Tamil state and homeland ('Tamil Eelam') in the north-east of Sri Lanka (McRae, 2015; Parashar 2009: 240).

From the 1980s the migration flow from Sri Lanka altered as increasing violence in Sri Lanka led to Tamils seeking asylum due to fear of persecution during the Sri Lankan civil war (Hugo and Dissanayake, 2017). This conflict lasted from 1983 to 2009, and it ended with the state's military victory over the Tamil Tigers. The UN estimates that between 40,000-70,000 people were killed in the final phase of the war (Hyndman & Amarasingam 2014), and the Sri Lankan government army has been accused of drawing civilians into a no-fire zone and then firing on them, killing over 40,000 people, as well as of war crimes, including rape and murder (McRae 2015).

After the war, minority groups, particularly Tamils and Muslims, continue to struggle to find security in Sri Lanka (Thiranagama & Obeyesekere 2011). While the war has officially concluded, Tamils continue to seek asylum due to fear of persecution and violence in their homeland (Kandasamy et. al. 2020).

A 2020 estimate placed Sri Lanka's émigré Tamil population (the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora) at around 887,000. Most Sri Lankan Tamils are in Canada (over 200,000), however significant populations are in Europe – the UK (120,000), Germany (60,000), France (50,000), Switzerland (35,000), and under 10,000 each in Norway, Denmark and Sweden. The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Australia is estimated at around 50,000, with populations concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne. Sri Lankan Tamils have been arriving as asylum seekers in Australia since the 1980s (Kandasamy. et. al., 2020), but accelerated during and after the civil war.

Some of the Sri Lankan Tamil women in this study are part of the 'Legacy Caseload'. They receive Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), subject to strict eligibility criteria.[6] SRSS recipients receive around $35 a day (Anglicare 2018; RCA, 2019). Sri Lankan Tamil women on BVEs are at a financial disadvantage when compared with Newstart recipients as the SRSS is set at 89% of Newstart, which the Refugee Council of Australia (2018) argues has been well below the poverty line since the year 2000. Lester (2018) argues that with respect to the SRSS:

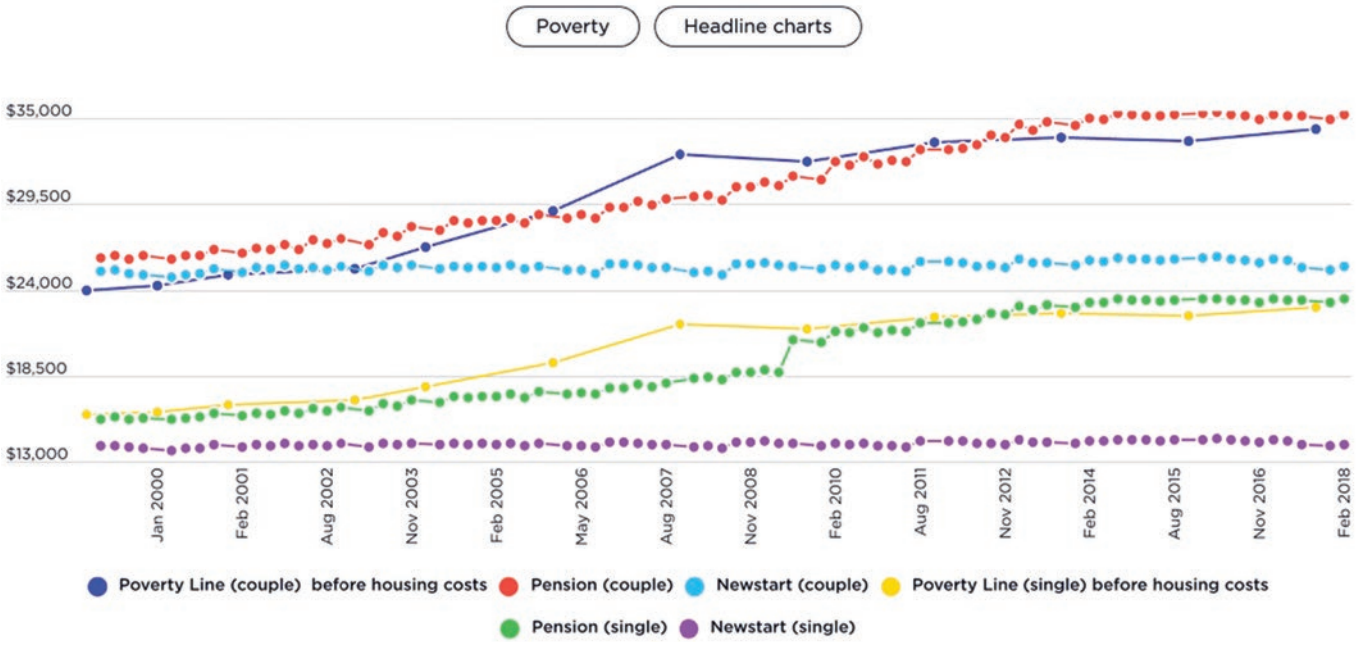
> No legislation or regulations govern the administration of the SRSS scheme. The law deems an SRSS payment to be discretionary, with the clear intention that decisions refusing SRSS payments cannot be independently reviewed. Financial assistance is termed an "act of grace payment".

Department of Home Affairs may decide other benefits (for example rent assistance, child support) are warranted, but while a person receives the SRSS, they are unable to receive any other government welfare payments. This disadvantage between Newstart and SRSS was exacerbated during the COVID pandemic, when Newstart was increased but SRSs was not (ABC 2021a; 2021b; Klapdor 2020).

6 As the Kaldor Centre (2019) notes, there was a window between August 2012 and 1 January 2014 where around 30,000 people – a group termed the 'Legacy Caseload' – arrived by boat seeking asylum in Australia. Due to policies at the time this group of people were not subject to removal to Manus Island and Nauru under Operation Sovereign Borders (AG 2021). Those who made their migration journey to Australia prior to Operation Sovereign Borders commencing and are included in the Legacy Caseload (AHRC 2019), were "barred from making an application for protection for up to four years" after arriving in Australia. Since 2015, their asylum claims are being assessed through a 'fast-track process' which entails more limited procedural safeguards than the process available to other protection applicants. This group faces numerous challenges, including cuts to publicly funded legal assistance and income support (Kaldor Centre, 2019). The majority of people in the legacy caseload are no longer asylum seekers.

Figure 3: Anglicare graphic of Newstart and poverty line

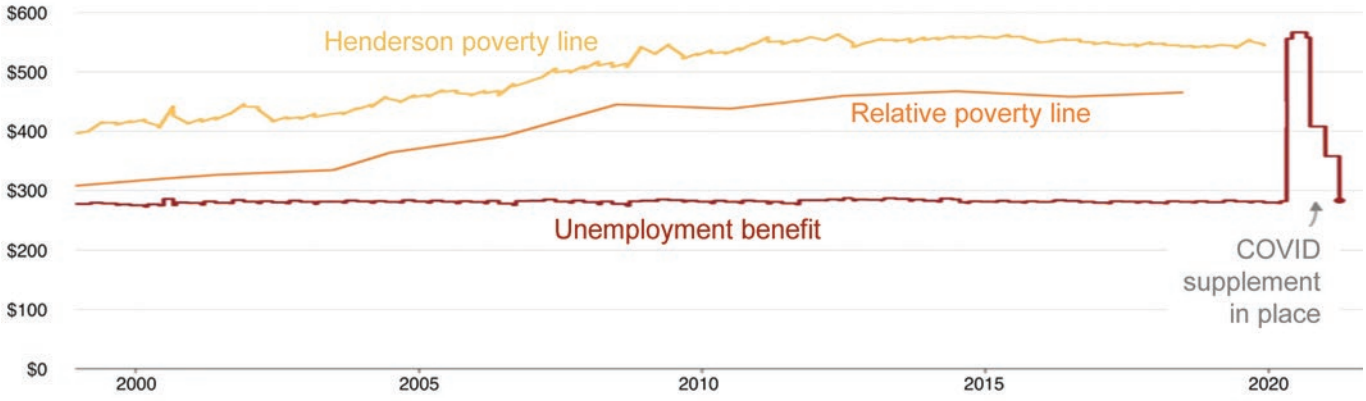
Comparison of poverty lines with pension and Newstart (now JobSeeker) payments for singles and couples without children (in $2017-18 per annum)



Source: Poverty and Inequality (2018)

Figure 4: Poverty lines and unemployment benefits per week

Poverty lines and unemployment benefits per week



The unemployment benefit, in inflation-adjusted 2020 dollars, has fallen further and further below the poverty line. *(Grattan Institute)*

Source: ABC (2021b)

THE TWO COHORTS

No previous study has compared or contrasted the experiences of Syrian women with Sri Lankan Tamil women. None of the studies surveyed for this report had a focus on the cultural well-being of women, and nor did they view visa status as a specific issue affecting well-being.

In this report we integrate the migrant experience, cultural well being and visa status with three policy areas – health, education and housing – to develop a nuanced understanding of issues that affect identity, and barriers to social inclusion. We focus in particular on how these refugee and asylum seeker women interact with and access social services; the roles that these services play in their lives; the role of social capital (including community) in navigating their lives upon migration; and the role played by culture in settlement in Australia. The two cohorts are:

1. 17 Sri Lankan Tamil women who came to Australia by boat on or after 13 August 2012 and before 1 January 2014, and who have asked for Australia's protection.
2. 17 Syrian women who arrived in Australia within the last three years (2017-2020) as refugees from the Syrian conflict.

Within each cohort, women were in Australia on different visas, which all had different rules and restrictions (see table 4 on visa allowances).

Table 5 The cohorts and their visa classes

VISA CLASS	SPECIFIC VISA AND SUBCLASS	SRI LANKAN TAMIL WOMEN (17)	SYRIAN WOMEN (17)
Refugee			
	Refugee visa (subclass 200)		3
	Global Special Humanitarian (visa subclass 202)		11
	Women at Risk (visa subclass 204)		3
	Temporary Protection Visa (subclass 785)	1	
	Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (subclass 790)	4	
Other			
	Bridging Visa E (BVE) (subclass 051)	12	

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our research questions are:

1. Which factors influence the cultural well-being of the two cohorts of women (Sri Lankan Tamil women and Syrian women) in Greater Western Sydney?
2. To what extent do intentionally different policies and visas for refugees and asylum seekers impact the cultural well-being of the two cohorts (Sri Lankan Tamil women and Syrian women) in Greater Western Sydney?

METHODOLOGY

A central concern of this research is the experience of Sri Lankan Tamil women and Syrian women in their new location and context. Specifically, the research explores how the two cohorts construct their identities and build a sense of belonging. While women from both groups have differing cultural backgrounds, religions, and to an extent classes, both are also migrants seeking to establish themselves in Greater Western Sydney and to forge new identities and a sense of belonging.

This research adopts a view that identities are constructed and negotiated through interaction. The relationship between the 'self' and identity is important because "the 'self' influences society through actions and the society influences the self through having shared language and meanings that enable the person to take the role of the other" (Stets & Burke, 2003: 128). Anthias (2002: 491) notes that rather than focusing simply on identity it might be more useful to explore 'narratives of location', as:

> ...location and positionality (and translocational positionality) are more useful concepts for investigating processes and outcomes of collective identification – that is, the claims and attributions that individuals make about their position in the social order of things, their views of where and to what they belong (and to what they do not belong) as well as an understanding of the broader social relations that constitute and are constituted in this process.

As such, the flight and settlement journey to Australia are integral parts of understanding markers of identity and belonging in Australia. Despite some parallels (flight to safety, residence in Australia), the lives of these women from the two different cohorts are not that similar as the women within both cohorts have not had the same settlement experience. Each woman's journey – her (forced) pre-migration, journey and post migration re-settlement – differs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – CULTURAL WELL-BEING

Cultural well-being is closely linked to a relationship with place. As an approach, cultural well-being emphasises the importance of the cultural, religious and political contexts of place in research to avoid making assumptions concerning the meanings of place for different women. Cultural well-being is influenced by the freedom to participate in and practice cultural activities, and to belong to a cultural group. Le et al. (2015) observe that migrants experience a positive settlement and integration experience into their host country if the cultural identity of the origin country is maintained and combined with identification with the host country. Culture, cultural practice and relationship to place are thus central to creating a sense of identity and belonging for both individuals and communities as they settle into a host country, "a becoming of the self within community" (Mackay, 2016: 3).

This research therefore adopts a cultural well-being approach, an initiative adopted by governments in New Zealand (NZMfCH, 2019), United Kingdom and Finland that focuses on the "vitality that communities and individuals enjoy through participation in recreation, creative and cultural activities ... [linked with] their arts, history, heritage and traditions" (NZMfCH, 2005). In this research a cultural well-being approach provides a rich conceptual framework that illuminates the interconnectedness of past and present, as well as physical, political, social, economic, cultural, emotional and spiritual factors that impact well-being of the Syrian and Sri Lankan women in this study as they resettle in Greater Western Sydney.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To ensure the cultural appropriateness of the research approach the research design was developed by HADRI researchers in collaboration with the CMRC community facilitator for the Sri Lankan Tamil women's group, and the SydWest Multicultural Services community facilitator for the Syrian women's group,

As part of its cultural well-being approach, this research employed arts-based research (ABR) practices defined as "...a set of methodological tools used by researchers across all disciplines during all phases of social research including data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation" (Leavy, 2015: 4). ABR allowed participants to use different media to relate their experiences. The approach engages with multiple forms of knowing as it portrays what cannot be articulated linguistically and represents a "deliteralisation" of knowledge (Eisner, 2008: 7).

There is strong evidence to show that engaging with the arts improves the lives and well-being of communities and individuals: "Arts and cultural activities enhance social inclusion, reduce loneliness, increase confidence and improve feelings of self-worth. These outcomes, in turn, have a direct impact on both physical and mental health" (AAH, 2019: 49). Art practice provides the medium for creative exploration of identities and can facilitate a sense of belonging. It enables the cultivation of heritage, traditions, customs and culture of the origin country (Netto, 2008; Mackay, 2016) as it can assume new values and meanings, and can inform new identities. The visual and performing arts also provide opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to challenge discrimination and social exclusion and to foster intercultural dialogue (McGregor & Ragab, 2016; Edmonds & Roberts, 2020).

Adopting an ABR approach enabled an exploration of the settlement experiences of Syrian and Sri Lankan Tamil women through embodied and tangible cultural works of art, cultural practices and a sense of place. Even though the creative workshops were delivered in English (and translated into Tamil and Arabic), the ABR approach permitted the women's creative expression to share their forced migration trajectories and re-settlement experiences when words were sometimes not adequate. The use of creative expression (such as painting, drawing, sculpture, words, movement) thus allowed women to express themselves in different ways.

METHOD

The study adopted an ABR approach that included creative expression workshops (which included one-on-one storytelling interviews) and ethnographic observation.

1. **Creative Expression Workshops**

   In consultation with the women's group facilitators Mackay designed six three-hour group workshops (one for each week) using a mix of creative expression activities – drawing, painting, clay work, singing and dancing – to guide participants and encourage them to reflect on their lived experience of re-settlement in Australia's Greater Western Sydney. The course was structured around the 'past, present and future' and designed to encourage discussion. Within the creative expression workshops research participants were actively engaged in designing and co-producing research data in the form of creative outputs over an extended period of time (six weeks). At the end of each workshop, participants were encouraged to reflect on how participation in the creative expression course impacted their subjective cultural well-being.

   In addition to data creation and collection, the creative expression workshops acted as interventions, designed to build the capacity, skills and knowledge of participants. They also served to build rapport between participants and researchers, and to create a mutually trusting environment. To develop mutual trust the researchers were involved in making art alongside the participants to contribute to the creation of a safe and positive environment. During the creative expression sessions, the researcher(s) practiced techniques of 'effective listening' to show the speakers they were being heard and understood. These measures assisted if sensitive topics arose, and enabled potentially difficult topics to be managed without exclusion or censure.

   The course was presented in a workbook (see Appendix 1), delivered in English by a workshop facilitator who was supported by HADRI interpreters, and CMRC and SydWest community facilitators, who assisted with linguistic and cultural translation. Training on delivery of the Creative Expression Course was provided to CMRC community facilitators by the HADRI researchers during the workshops.

2. **Ethnographic observation**

   Our research was located within the discipline of cultural anthropology, which employs ethnographic observation to elucidate the world views of people from cultures other than their own. In Cultural Anthropology the researcher takes 'fieldnotes' (ethnographic documentation) (Campbell & Lassiter, 2014: 64) that document important contextual information, as well as noting her observations of participants (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). Specifically, in this type of study the researcher will be present in the event (the workshop) and observe how participants naturally interact with the creative expression activities, and with each other. The researcher would also note the mood and level of engagement of participants, as well as how she engages with the research participants. The researcher would note, for example, how participants might reflect on the different topics discussed.

   An interpreter and a research assistant took notes at each workshop for each group, using techniques of 'observant participation'. There are differences between 'observant participation' and the more standard technique of 'participant observation'. As Seim (2021: 1) notes, "Where participant observation presents more opportunities for mobile positioning, outward gazing, and inscription, observant participation presents more opportunities for fixed positioning, inward gazing, and incarnation." The use of observant participation over the duration of the workshops explicitly acknowledges how the researcher's own positionality informs her interpretation of others; builds on processes of intersubjectivity; and focuses attention on those points where "co-understandings" emerge between people.

   Further documentation of events was provided by the research assistants, who took photographs of the activities, and of the artworks and the artifacts made by participants, as well as of objects they brought to the workshops.

As a small gesture of appreciation for their time, participants were provided with gift voucher cards to the value of $40 each.


Acrylic

DATA ANALYSIS

The research employed thematic analysis. All transcriptions from the one-on-one story-telling interviews and creative expression workshops were manually analysed using Braun and Clark's (2006) six step process:

1. Familiarising oneself with the data through reading and re-reading the transcripts and field notes.
2. Generating initial codes and inserting the initial codes in the transcripts.
3. Searching for themes, and grouping the codes into developing relevant themes.
4. Reviewing the themes against the coded extracts and the data extracts.
5. Defining and naming the themes and sub-themes.
6. Narrating the themes and sub-themes, with a selection of participants' voices for each theme.

This process was adapted to the analysis of creative outputs.

FINDINGS

The different types of visas under which Syrian and Sri Lankan Tamil women were permitted to be in Australia affected them differently. For the Sri Lankan Tamil women, each time their visa expired they would feel uncertainty about whether their visa would be renewed. Their temporary visa status (TPV, BVE or SHEV) held these women in a state of precarity and uncertainty, and this affected their ability to feel settled and/or fully enjoy "the beautiful Australian life" as one of the participants commented.

In contrast, as the Syrian women had permanent residency in Australia, they did not experience the same precarity as the Sri Lankan Tamil women. Yet while the Syrian women's visa status provided them with the same rights as Australian citizens, they struggled to reunite their families, lived with fear for the safety of those they had left behind in Syria, and grieved for the peace they remembered.

The data revealed that there are three main factors that intersect and reinforce each other.

The main factors are:

1. **trauma**, which existed prior to arrival in Australia, but which is ongoing, partly due to difficulties experienced in Australia;
2. **visa status**, which creates differential rights of access to social services, support payments and entitlements within Australia; and
3. **language acquisition**, which affects employment and a woman's financial situation.

Several other factors linked to visa status are related to access to social services, and these both intersect with (and are reinforced by) trauma, and language acquisition. Visa status determines a woman's level of access to government social services for health, Government support payments, employment opportunities and educational opportunities. The capacity to obtain work and higher education training are augmented if a woman has access to government health and welfare services but the low level of financial support in some visa classes affects the woman's or her family's overall financial situation, as well as her ability to find work.

The three main factors – trauma, visa status and language acquisition – undermine social cohesion. To present a holistic picture of the experiences of the Sri Lankan Tamil women and Syrian women cohorts, the data for each section is presented below under each factor.

FACTOR 1: TRAUMA

> …refugees and asylum seekers who are victims of torture or intentional violence in their countries of origin… are often "invisible" to society, to politics, to those they meet in the street. Their scars are often invisible too because they are often not physical but in their souls. They endured and survived torture, which left them with terrible, unforgettable psychic pain.
>
> [Caizzi 2012: 165]

All the participants in this study were forced to leave their countries due to war and persecution, and all had encountered trauma in some form – from the events that forced them to leave their respective home country, and throughout their forced migration journey, before arriving in Australia. Significantly, in all twelve workshops (six workshops for each cohort), the women revealed that their traumatic experiences had involved one or more of the following kinds of loss: death of loved ones, loss of home, loss of jobs, safety of one's (and one's family's) life, physical torture, injuries sustained during the war(s), challenges in countries in which they sought temporary asylum (particularly the Syrian group), challenging journeys and loss of sense of belonging & identity. Many women had been victims of torture or intentional violence in their country of origin, and/or in the country/ies in which they sought asylum before arriving in Australia.

In the extracts below the Syrian women discuss the consequences of collective violence[7] – experienced through their forced displacement, their migration journey and resettlement – and their physical and mental health issues, as well as the loss of possessions, loss of career/employment and their views on the financial support they were receiving from the Australian government. Separation from and dispersion of family are also common themes in the Syrian women's experiences.

> One day I was sitting in my office, I was a school principal, an armed young man walked into my office. I was frightened, he asked me "Where is the mosque?" in formal Arabic language. I was very scared. I answered him spontaneously "To the left" although I knew there is no mosque in the school I worked in. I told him this so I could escape.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

7 According to the WHO (2002) collective violence can be defined as; "the instrumental use of violence by people who identify as members of a group – whether the group is transitory or has a more permanent identity – against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives.

...my mother started baking bread. It was very expensive to buy bread. In our village. I remember we did not have electricity for one month. We tried to apply for a passport when my husband decided to go to Iraq, but we could not get one as it was very difficult. We stayed for a while in the village then we went back to Aleppo city, but we could not sleep in the rooms because of the loud bombing, so we used to sleep in the hallway of the house. Then I went back to the village and my husband went to Iraq. It was a very hard journey, 15 hours in a small van, I was wearing hijab and closed clothes to protect myself from ISIS, I was holding my children and I avoided looking up. I was on the border and my husband was on the other side, so I stayed there and started crying when I saw the leader there and I told him I cannot go back after all that I saw, even if I had to live here on the border I will. They [ISIS] only allowed injured people to cross the border for medical treatment. But he [the leader] empathised with me and only let me [cross] after I insisted on crossing the border to Iraq. After I went to the other side there was still no life, no sun because I am alone. My family are over there, five brothers in Germany, two still in Iraq, no sun in my life.

[Syrian Women's Group participant]

Tanks were around my area, we were surrounded by the Syrian army and armed groups, then my son was shot four times, his wife was taking care of him and he has a little daughter. Then we went to Lebanon from one place to another. We had money to eat, but not for rent, so we used to sit with other people. We brought food and cooked and they let us stay with them until we got our visa and came here.

[Syrian Women's Group participant]

In Syria, you know rockets and all the battles around us, they threatened us many times to leave our house. We did leave but my father stayed there. Then I got married to a man who was serving in the military and I was in love with him, and God gave us our angel Scarlett in 2018. Then we decided to leave so she can have a better life. We went to Iraq and waited for two years, we had a hard life. The waiting was the hardest, thank God we had financial support from his family. When my husband used to go to the front line I used to sit and pray that he didn't have to shoot anyone. I prayed that he wouldn't get killed or have to kill anyone. As bad as the fighting gets, you don't want harm to come to anyone.

[Syrian Women's Group participant]

Women and men were separated (see Figure 5); I am from the same village as [other group participant], they saw a lot of things there [urges other participant to speak about her experiences]. They saw a man being beheaded, her brother has severe psychological problems from what he experienced at the hands of ISIS. Maybe women did not witness as much as men. They put all the women in one room and they tortured the men separately. [Other participant] can't talk about this, but I know about her story and that's why I am talking on her behalf. They used to hit the men with cables, electric cables, and excuse my language, they even peed on them. They killed someone because he admitted that he is from the Yazidi faith. He said "I am not Muslim and I am not afraid of you". They beheaded him in front of all the other young men to scare them. That's why they have severe psychological issues, and then they sent them back to the Syrian village and did not let them cross the border to Iraq. [other participant crying] When they knew that someone is not Muslim, they kept them and killed them later.

[Syrian Women's Group participants]

...we just wanted to escape, and they charged us double price for the tickets. I went to my parents' city and the situation was worse. They used to put a list on the street of the people they wanted to kill... and I forgot to add how much money we lost during that time. We sold our house half-price and my husband stopped working. Then my husband decided that we needed to get out of Syria. We went to Lebanon and we suffered trying to obtain legal documents, and renting was very expensive, and we waited to go to Australia.

[Syrian Women's Group participant]

... my journey and suffering is very long; in Aleppo there was a lot of fighting and killing, and it got worse. After six months, we ran away from our homes with only our clothes.

[Syrian Women's Group participant]

Figure 5: Artwork of a Syrian woman's journey

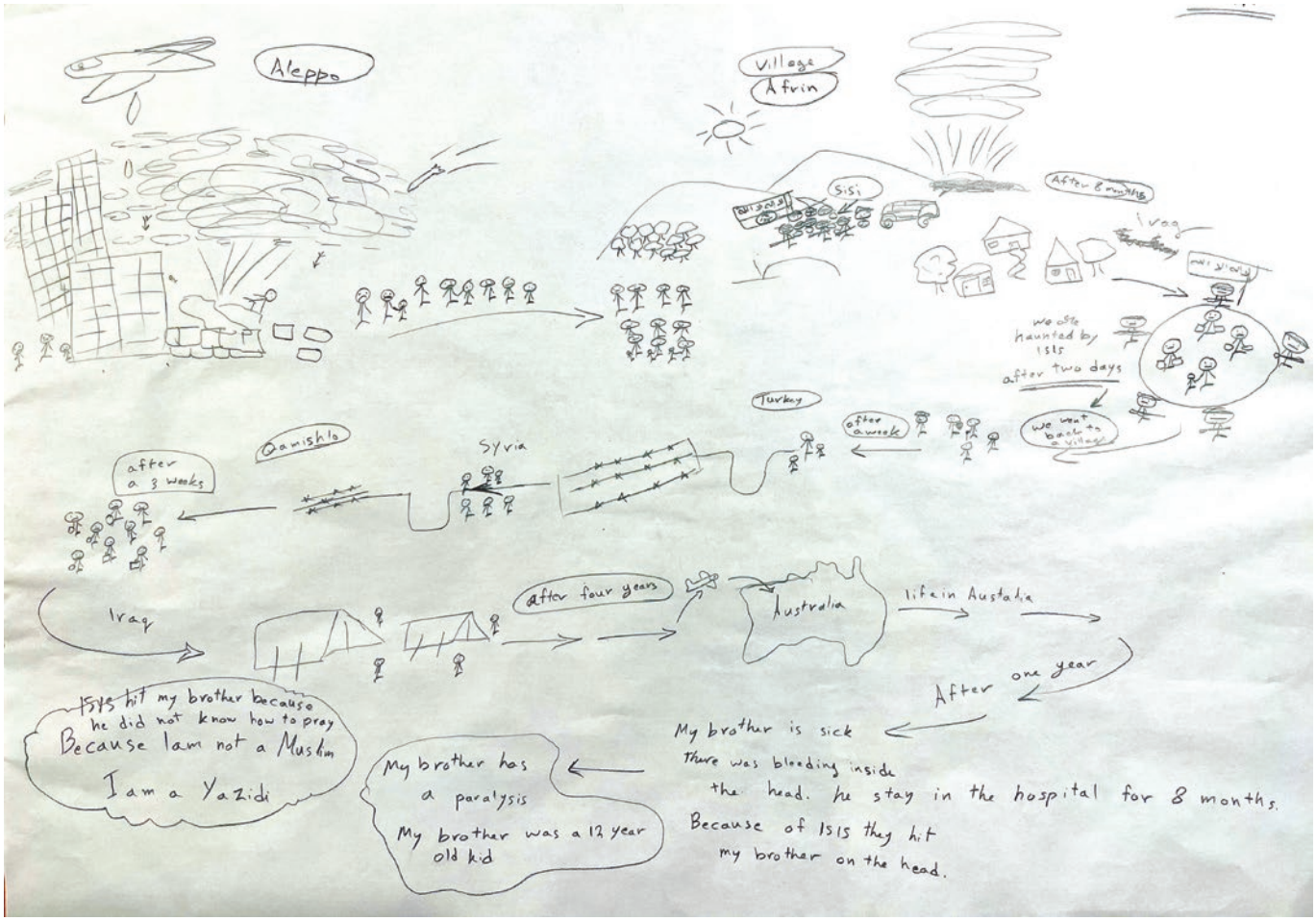


Figure 6: Moulded cadaver of a Syrian mother

A participant who lived with her son and his family revealed that upon her arrival in Australia she had suffered a heart attack – a result of the trauma that she had experienced as she fled the war in Syria and sheltered in neighbouring Lebanon where she had sought asylum. The precarity of existence in the liminal space, between 'home' and resettlement in Australia, had resulted in the manifestation of severe health issues upon her arrival in Australia. In tearfully sharing her stories, she mentioned that she was very sickly and wished to see her daughter (from whom she was separated) just once before she dies. Below is an image of an artefact – her own cadaver – that she created with clay during the workshops before she revealed her story.

Figure 7: Artwork representing happy and prosperous times in Syria- when the participant had a good job and felt safe.

The older Syrian women in the cohort found relocation to Australia without their families difficult and expressed grief and nostalgia for the loss of pre-war Syria.

> The sea represents when we were in Syria the waves is like we had happy days sometimes and other days were hard, but there was settlement and safety. It was one of the safest countries in the world; we could go out at 1:00am. Yes before the war, our situation was good financially. My husband and I had good jobs, my in laws had farms and houses; until the war started, our area was multicultural and diverse and life was good, until the war started.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

At the same time the loss of well-paid jobs, and having to rely on financial support from Centrelink had a marked and ongoing impact on the self-esteem and mental health of many of the older women in the Syrian cohort.

Figure 8: Artwork by the Syrian woman representing resettlement in Greater Western Sydney as a positive and hopeful opportunity for her three year old daughter.

In contrast, a young Syrian mother of a three-year-old girl refused to focus on the past and instead concentrated only on the positives that Australia had to offer her and her family rather than the loss she had experienced due to forced migration. This young woman spoke in English, and her artwork (see Figure 8) depicted her resettlement in Australia quite differently to that of the older woman in the group whose artworks depicted confusion and loss of identity. The young woman painted land and blue skies. The artwork depicts the war in Syria in the top left corner, and Australia at the bottom. The angel in the centre of the artwork represents her daughter, who separates her from her traumatic past – the war in Syria – and the angel faces the sunny blue skies and green grass of Australia with a smile. The artwork represents resettlement in Greater Western Sydney as a positive and hopeful opportunity for her daughter. She explained:

> A new land, a new sky- maybe God wants us to be here- new opportunities. I feel I died in Syria and when I walk in Sydney I feel this is another person, another life … my daughter deserves a happy mum.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

The above comment and Figure 8 reveal that this young woman used different coping mechanisms to the much older women in the Syrian woman's group. The young woman chose to disassociate herself from her past trauma as she had the future to focus on – the responsibility of raising her daughter in a new land. In group discussions she emphasised that she had chosen not to pass on her trauma to her daughter.

The following vignettes are of stories of journeys to Australia shared by the Sri Lankan Tamil women:

> I lived in a small island called Nainathivu in Sri Lanka's Northern Province. It's a small, very small island next to Jaffna, the main city, and to go to the main city we had to take a small ferry. So, I'm very familiar with travelling by ferry. Due to the massacre, the situation became bad. One day my husband said "We are leaving this country." I was totally shocked and I was not aware of what was going on around me. Where are going? How are we going? When are we leaving? One morning my husband said "We are going to Australia by boat." I asked him "Seriously?" He said "Get ready." So the following early morning we took off from where we lived. On my way I was dreaming I would be travelling in a big boat like the ones I had seen in books. After days of tedious travelling, at the shore I saw a very small boat loaded with many people. We too asked to board it. With disappointment I boarded the boat [expressed with eyes wide open]. I myself did not know I was pregnant at that moment. When I was travelling, I had bad vomiting with nausea, and fainted a number of times. Only then I realised that I was pregnant. Everyone thought I might die during the journey, but I do not know how I survived. I couldn't stand on my feet. I had to be carried. I could not eat. I could not believe I would survive 'till I landed at Cocos Island. My journey was from Sri Lanka to Malaysia, and Malaysia to Cocos Island. It was very drastic, painful, scary travel. Mostly I was unconscious. These memories never fade from my mind. As a result, yes, because of the bad travel without good food I had to undergo many problems with my pregnancy, with dropped placenta [placental abruption] – and had to undergo a very difficult birth. Now I'm OK. I'm going to have my third baby after a long lapse of time. I believe everything will be OK and the future will be good. I am waiting for the best.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's group participant]

> I left Sri Lanka when I was 13 years old. One night my mom started packing saying that me and my two sisters are going to leave this place and going to join my dad and my youngest sister. Me and my sister were very excited and felt soooooo happy. OH! We are going to see our dad and sister. We helped mom pack and started off from eastern province to the south. We reached the capital city the following Sunday early morning. It was dark then. Joining with some others we walked to the seashore to board a boat, and we got into a small boat like a canoe, which took us to the big boat. They said "It's a big boat" but it was not. "I don't like this boat" I grumbled and started annoying mom. She tried to console me and my sisters. The two boats stood next to each other. The children were thrown from one boat to another like cargo being thrown. Luckily people stood on the other side and caught them. Us, being me and my sisters, must go through this. It was scary and painful. So now we are in the boat along with 93 other people. When we boarded the boat, we were directed by the captain to go to the lower deck to avoid being caught by the Sri Lankan army. It is illegal to overload a boat. This is what I heard. We were kept inside for three days. My mom protested and explained how hard it is [for us because], we were unable to breathe, suffocating and also, we could not continue to stay in a crouched position anymore. So, they [the boat's crew] allowed us to go to the upper deck. From then, it was a long journey it took 23 days to reach Cocos Island. The last four days were very critical. No water. No food. Answer is "All ran out!" It was an agony to go without water. Luckily an Indonesian boat passed by, and they offered us limited water bottles. This also reminds me, when we were suffering with thirst my mom used to collect salt water, drain it and pour into our mouths [expressed with tears]. This was the most difficult time in my life as a kid. When the food ran short, and we were starving with hunger, my mother had some formula milk she gave us and shared with many. This incident is evergreen in my heart. These are painful memories in our lives.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

> The Sri Lankan government killed many of my family members. My husband was arrested and taken away to the notorious jail [Terrorist Investigation Division run detention facility in Boosa][8]. Other members of my family including me, and my children were threatened as suspects in many ways and many times. One day suddenly, they arrested me saying I'm one of the suspects and put me in jail for four long years. Daily they tortured me in many ways. One of the unbearable unforgettable tortures and endless trauma, they pulled out my nails… as a woman, they tortured me ….[she couldn't continue with her story and started sobbing.]
>
> After four years I was released with the grace of God. This was the reason I decided to get out of the country and selected a terrible path to come over here to safeguard me and my children – took a very thorn in thorny path at last arrived here. By the way my husband is still in jail.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

8 The Terrorist Investigation Division run detention facility in Boosa was notorious for its torture of Sri Lankan Tamil political prisoners. It should not however be confused with the regular prison at Boosa. The Sri Lankan state has systematically abused and discriminated against Tamil prisoners, on the assumption that all Tamils have links to the separatist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) however, this is not the case as many Tamils were either forcibly recruited by the LTTE or have no such links.

Figure 9: A Tamil woman's depiction of her journey to Australia

The collective violence that forced the participants from their respective home countries was compounded by their migration journeys, which can be conceptualised as the experience of existing in a state of liminality as participants waited in, or passed through, contexts of uncertainty, animosity, violence, conflict and physical deprivation (hunger, thirst, and a lack of or inadequate shelter).

FACTOR 2: VISA STATUS

The Sri Lankan Tamil and Syrian women's settlement in Greater Western Sydney was significantly impacted in various ways by their visa status. Specifically, the Syrian women who held humanitarian visas faced financial challenges in bringing their children to Australia. The separation from their family compounded trauma and impacted some women very deeply, especially those who lived alone and had no family in Australia. Participants described their grief, loneliness and frustration with the migration system and how ongoing uncertainty about their children's safety and security impacted their sense of identity, connection to place and mental health well-being:

My son is in Lebanon, and I am fighting to bring him here. I also sent my daughter to America because they said they want to kidnap her. I need to bring my son here. Why do I have to pay money to bring him? I need my daughter too… We need our children to be with us. There are a lot of families like me, their children are in Iraq or Syria, and they tell us "Come to this program, come to that program, any program". What is the point, there is no hope.

[Syrian Women's Group participant]

…the saddest thing for us is when you leave a piece of your heart overseas… This is what happened to all of us. I need my son next to me. I moved house four times by myself, packing by myself. The life in Lebanon is impossible, and our people are there. We need help from the government. We need help to bring our family. We are not safe in our country, and we are not accepted here. We need to be settled, its affecting us emotionally. I refuse to go to family gatherings when I am invited because I need my son next to me. It's really important to bring our children with us.

[Syrian Women's Group participant]

I still have another daughter in Lebanon. I wish to God for the people responsible for this decision to let her come here [crying]. My roots will become stronger when my daughter comes here.

[Syrian Women's Group participant]

Figure 10: Series of trees revealing displacement, family separation, loneliness and frustration, indicating no real roots in Australia

To express how she felt visually, one participant created a tree, which depicted her as having no roots in Australia (see Figure 10), thus illustrating tenets of displacement, family separation and identity crises – "a tree without roots".

> I am trying to establish myself here, but still there are difficulties. Sometimes I feel I can't take my face out of the water. I am a tree without roots. I am strong, but I am weak. I need my daughter, I need my son, I need my granddaughter. These are the mixed feelings inside me. I am without roots because there's no hope for me, because I need a job. I need to protect myself; for that I need someone beside me.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

The above excerpts reveal that separation from family (in this case children and grandchildren) contributes to the poor mental health of refugees in resettlement in Australia.

The concerns and experiences of the Sri Lankan Tamil women, differed from those of the Syrian women, who struggled to reunite their families. The precarity and uncertainty of existing in a liminal space continued for the Sri Lankan Tamil women after their arrival in Australia due to their visa status. However, while the Sri Lankan Tamil women's visa status (they held BVE, SHEV and TPV visas) was more precarious than that of the Syrian women, the Sri Lankan Tamil women were generally much younger than the women in the Syrian women's group (except for two young mothers in the Syrian cohort), and had their spouses and children with them in Greater Western Sydney. Two of the Sri Lankan Tamil women however, had slightly different situations in this cohort – one woman was single, and another was married but without children as she had had two stillbirths in Australia.

Despite having their husbands and children with them, the Sri Lankan Tamil women expressed their sense of precarity and uncertainty due to the conditions of their bridging visas.

> We came here 11 years ago, and still are waiting for [a permanent residency] visa. Waiting is the hardest thing. We are safe and peaceful here. This country is beautiful, and I want my life to be as beautiful as this country... My eldest son is in the University. My youngest son is two years old. I am happy in some way, but I feel our future is bleak. I took this dry long leaf (see Figure 11) as I can see the scars. I have a fear that my life also will wither away.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

> Now we have freedom to live but ....NO VISA. Coping with uncertainty, and children who are growing up with instability. Our emotions are kept within the shell. "How long? When will it be? How many more years? How are we going to cope? When... when?" These are the questions that torture us every single day. At the touch of this clay within my palms moulded into shells (see Figure 12), my thoughts went back to the sea-shore of Sri Lanka remembering collecting sea shells as a young girl. Then I was a single, care-free child. Now I am married with kids, and have responsibility. I feel we are tied down within the shell, my creation resembles this – unsteadiness, a bleak future threatens me day after day. Waiting is a way of life for us.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

Figure 11: A long dried branch – a Tamil woman's symbol of fear that her life will wither away

Figure 12: A moulded sea shell; depicting a Tamil woman's memories of collecting sea shells in childhood – a symbol of nostalgia for a simpler, peaceful time.

Figure 13: Banyan Tree revealing visa uncertainty and its impact on resettlement for the Sri Lankan Tamil women

The Sri Lankan Tamil women lived one day at a time and the lack of certainty about whether they would be granted permanent residency in Australia caused them ongoing distress and mental health issues.

One of the Tamil participants drew a Banyan tree (see Figure 13) to illustrate her sense of uncertainty; the drawing explicitly articulates the effect of not knowing if residency will be granted on her mental health. The young Tamil woman first drew a huge and strong Banyan tree with four elements – deep strong roots in the ground, a thick solid trunk, a lush canopy, and strong aerial roots hanging like vines. She then added tiny red fruit and birds on the canopy and stick figures of people and an animal under the tree. She explained that the aerial roots reflected her current situation – like them she is still hanging in terms of belonging; not knowing what her future holds; not being able to take root anywhere. She explained that the aerial roots are about to touch the ground, but not quite fully. Like them, she too had grown over the years in Australia and had learnt a lot, but there was still room for her roots to touch the ground, both figuratively in terms of the Banyan tree, and literally with respect to gaining permanent residency in Australia.

On her drawing, above the aerial roots, she wrote: "We try to study but we can't concentrate". On the tip of the aerial root she wrote: "We have limited support, but we try, but our mind always gives us fear". Beside the stick figure lying on the ground she wrote: "I try to forget the past but my mind never erases it because of my fear that the government will send us back."

The previous section has illustrated that the consequences of collective violence intersect and compound to have an impact on settlement of vulnerable people. The impacts of post-migration trauma are perceived by all participants as equally important as pre-migration trauma, and as determinants of refugees' (poor) mental health (Villagran et al., 2021).

ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

While Medicare does cover the costs of general medical services, the Syrian women explained that it does not cover the costs of medical specialists. They said that they could not afford to pay for specialist medical expenses, and for some this resulted in chronic illness.

> I am alone, for me it's financial hardship, Centrelink money is not enough. Paying for the specialist and my eye operation is too much and I cannot afford it and it's urgent.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

> My husband had a surgery and specialist appointment, and we paid a lot. They should consider these things.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

> I made a snake (see Figure 14). The snake represents difficulties. The snake also represents health as I am getting sick now, for example when I was sick in Syria it was very easy to get medication. Here in Australia its very expensive. The bird nest and the eggs is my children's future.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

Figure 14: A Syrian participant's representation of a snake, which represents her difficulties and poor health, with the bird's nest and eggs, representing her children's future.

Most of the Sri Lankan Tamil women disclosed that they faced challenges communicating on helplines or with emergency services as their English was not proficient enough to articulate situations explicitly, and this could create serious difficulties. The women said that there was a great need to make more interpreters available to assist them in accessing a range of health services including general practitioners, ambulance and/or hospital services.

> Oh, we have extensive problems due to the language barrier. We are not fluent in English language, and we need an interpreter when we go to our children's school admission, hospital, and government offices for our needs. Also, opening bank accounts, using a Medicare card, and mingling in different communities was a new experience. In case of an emergency we have to dial 000 to get an ambulance, and answering their questions is very exhausting due to our lack of fluency in the English language.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

Many Sri Lankan Tamil women explained that due to their BVE status they were only given temporary access to Medicare. Once their visa expired and they entered the reassessment process, however, there was a hiatus before their Medicare eligibility was restored.[9]

The following comment from a Sri Lankan Tamil woman highlights the mental health implications of both incarceration in detention centres and in the loss of Medicare while they awaited reassessment:

> Keeping us in the detention centre is not helping us. We are getting mentally affected… Medicare should be extended as soon as it [our bridging visa] expires. Delay in all this creates mental health problems, and our health gets affected…
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's group participant]

The support of psychologists or psychiatrists is crucial for refugee individuals and communities who have experienced trauma, and while private psychologists may not be accessible, both cohorts do have access to The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) which provides specialist culturally relevant psychological treatment and community interventions for traumatised refugee populations. STARTTS representatives attended the first workshops for both cohorts to ensure that all participants were familiar with the service and to reassure participants that they were available to support them should the research trigger traumatic memories. It was clear to the researchers that the STARTTS representatives knew the participants well and had good rapport with them.

9 All unauthorised maritime arrivals have access to Medicare. Any BVE holder without Medicare can access the Refugee Health Service's GP clinic which negotiates further care if required.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Visa status determines whether a refugee can access Commonwealth funded places for tertiary education or if they are required to pay international fees. People arriving in Australia as humanitarian entrants and those who have been granted permanent protection visas are entitled to access higher education as domestic students and are eligible to access federal government programs designed to assist students with financing higher education study, including higher education loans schemes such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP),[10] HELP loans,[11] and Commonwealth Supported Placement (CSP).[12] Those who hold BVEs, TPVs and SHEVs, however, are not eligible for such loans programs as they are classified as 'overseas students' and expected to pay full international student tuition fees. They are also not eligible for Youth Allowance, Austudy or Centrelink support.

Both cohorts of women experienced challenges associated with access to education and awareness of opportunities. It is evident that post-migration factors (such as education accessibility) impact refugees' ability to recover from pre-migration distress (Hynie, 2018).

The Syrian women faced different barriers to those experienced by the Sri Lankan Tamil women when trying to further their education and gain employment. Most of the Syrian women were tertiary educated and had professional jobs in Syria, and at least two women had completed their Masters studies. The older Syrian women explained that they had already completed their education and were professionals, so they were reluctant to learn English and 'start from scratch'. Rather, these women preferred to obtain work related to their existing qualifications through study that assisted them to articulate their qualifications and experience with the Australian requirements in their field.

Many of the Sri Lankan Tamil women did not have a tertiary education qualification and most had been home-makers in Sri Lanka. Significantly, most of the Sri Lankan Tamil women revealed that while in Australia they had completed one or two TAFE courses such as cookery, jewellery making, childcare and age care. This younger cohort of women displayed an eagerness to learn English and take courses so that they could be employed. The desire for employment for this group of women was driven by the fact that most had young children to raise and they did not receive financial aid from Centrelink.

One of the older Tamil women, a 50 year old former teacher describes her determination to re-train, learn English and gain employment:

> My mind says again and again, "I am a teacher, why should I stay at home and ponder?" I was questioning myself all the time. One day I decided to go out and enrol myself into an English class in TAFE. I started attending college. I felt it was the best decision I have made. I felt very good. It was all new. I saw many multicultural people there. I felt happy to see that other people had the same problems as me. It was all new to me. I enjoyed learning and speaking to other people. Now I know I can improve my English and my other skills. After one year at TAFE, now I can speak and understand English and I'm very free to talk to people.
>
> After one year I joined West Ryde Community Centre. They taught me many skills. I was so interested in learning jewellery making, and I picked that up well. After a few weeks passed by, the manager came to class and said "The teacher, who is teaching this now is going on holidays. Surely, we must close the session." Saying this he turned to me and asked me "[Participant's name] you have learnt the skills very well, why don't you teach them to all the other students?" All other students agreed and shouted "Yes! Yes [participant's name] you can do it, otherwise it will be closed. We do not want to close the sessions." The manager agreed that I could continue teaching the classes. Here you are. I became a teacher I felt so happy. Classes started with twenty students. All were multicultural women, with different nationalities.
>
> Day by day admissions increased to 50. I taught the skills, as well as improved my English. I was proud teaching young and old refugee women of different nationalities. I worked for two years. In 2014 one day I organised a jewellery exhibition and sale in a market. It gave me a boost to my life.
>
> Later, one day my boss said "[Participant's name], you are a smart intelligent woman, you can do sewing, cooking, baking. You have a variety of talents. Why not run a cake class?" Then I decided to join a cake making class to learn how to cook cakes, do decorations using different techniques, parchment icing, flower making, make a different type of doughs. I completed that course. Then after I joined 'House of Welcome' community square catering shop. I worked for six years as a chef and gained many skills and catered for many requirements (food) for different occasions. Now I want to learn more to improve my skills. I joined the Chef Management Course in the City.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

BVE holders are eligible to enrol in some 'taster' subjects within some TAFE courses, however to gain the course qualification a student must complete the full course and enrol in and pay for other subjects in that course. As bridging visa holders are not eligible for any government support to enable them to complete their studies, the cost of the additional subjects required to gain the TAFE qualification is prohibitive for many.

While the Sri Lankan Tamil women were able to access TAFE educational opportunities, they found gaining a tertiary qualification even more difficult. A 24 year old mother of two who had arrived in Australia at the age of 15 disclosed that she had forgone the nursing course she had commenced at Newcastle University when her SHEV visa application was denied and she lost her right to study.

10 HEPPP provides universities with funding to implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for people from regional and remote Australia, low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, and indigenous persons. It aims to improve retention rates and completion rates of those students. [https://www.dese.gov.au/heppp]

11 There are four kinds of HELP loans: (1) HECS-HELP to assist students enrolled in a CSP to pay their fees; (2) FEE-HELP to assist those students not enrolled in a CSP to pay for their fees; (3) SA-HELP to assist students to pay student services and amenities fees; and (4) OS-HELP to assist with overseas study costs if a student wishes to study overseas.

12 A CSP is a place at university or higher education provider where the government pays part of a student's fees. This subsidy does not cover the entire cost of study. Most CSPs are for undergraduate study.

> I came here when I was young with my parents and siblings. I studied for one year at Newcastle University to become a Nurse, but I could not continue due to my visa… Discontinuing education at the University is heartbreaking, and the government authorities should support us in higher education by renewing a temporary visa as soon as it expires so the student can continue their education.
>
> Refugees who wish to study should be supported by allowing them to continue their studies without looking at the visa category.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

A Guide for Higher Education Institutions: Supporting students from a refugee or asylum seeking background (Khan et al 2020: 8) notes that, when a student loses their right to study as their BV, TPV or SHEV has expired, or their application for refugee status is rejected, "This can often be reversed with a letter to the Department of Immigration requesting re-instatement from a lawyer, refugee support agency case manager or higher education institute representative." It also acknowledges, however, difficulties accessing higher education and navigating it once admitted due to inconsistency across institutions and limited services and support provided to this cohort of students, especially with respect to knowledge of the different visa categories and their entitlements (Khan et al., 2020: 7). This culmination of factors means that while some students are fortunate enough to receive a university scholarship, the majority of students do not receive the support and advice required for them to continue their studies. In the case of the confident young woman who had completed her Year 11 and 12 education in Australia and who had good written and spoken English, a lack of such support and advice meant that she did not complete a tertiary degree.

The young woman married shortly after her education was disrupted and shortly after that became the mother of her first child, then later a second. She further explained that although her visa permits her to work she is ineligible for child care support/subsidy from the government, and as such it is practically impossible for her to go to work and raise the money required to continue her studies as she has to mind her two children:

> For working women, childcare support is not provided, and we request measures be taken to provide free childcare support. This will give an opportunity for women to find employment and support their family in their daily basic needs.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

The result of this policy is that mothers of children below the school age have no option but to forgo work to take care of their children at home, which has significant implications for those engaged in the precarious workforce and for continuing their own education. Sri Lankan Tamil women are thus doubly marginalised with respect to higher education accessibility.

GAINING EMPLOYMENT

For most of the Syrian women, their age, inability to communicate in English and cultural difference to mainstream Australia intersected to impact their chance of employment (Gines, 2011; Collins & Bilge, 2016). While most of the Syrian women were tertiary educated and had held professional jobs in Syria, those who were unskilled experienced frustration when engaging with employment services:

> Employment services do not help us find a job. They make me sit for one hour by myself, and ask me to find a job, but I have no experience to do anything. And if I do not go, they stopped my payment.[13]
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

> The money from Centrelink is not enough. There is no job, so where can I go? Just tell us what direction to go in.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

Further, as new migrants they lacked access to employment networks and knowledge of the Australian employment system. The Sri Lankan Tamil women's visa status intersects with language proficiency, which in-turn poses barriers to the equitable opportunities for these women to access work. The women explained to one of the researchers that in their experience some employers did not feel comfortable hiring them as their uncertain residency status in Australia could result in them having to leave the country, and their employment, at any time. As such the delaying of a decision on their permanent residency amplifies the uncertainty of their situation and has ongoing detrimental effects on Sri Lankan women.

In addition to a lack of employment opportunities, this cohort's uncertain residency status exacerbated financial pressures as they were not eligible to receive subsidies for child care (necessary for working parents of small children), which have further compounded the existing trauma of this vulnerable group.

> If the government accepts [us] as refugees on arrival, they should give us a working visa. We request they [the government] permit us to work even if we do not have visa. Our skills and qualifications should be recognised.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's group participant]

AGEISM

The Syrian women described significant experiences of ageism in the workplace. The majority were unemployed and lived with their adult children and helped around the house and to raise their grandchildren.

One Syrian women who did not have family in Australia kept trying to find a job and described being rejected several times when seeking employment due to age-based discrimination:

> …when I finished the course I found a job, but because of my age they didn't accept me, they started criticising and bullying me to push me to leave the job…
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

13 Newstart/JobSeeker applicants must attend interviews with prospective employers, who are paid by the government for the number of unemployed people for whom they find work.

Ageism served to marginalise women older Syrian women, locking them out of the workforce.

> We are all women, we need suitable jobs for our age…
> [Syrian Women's group participant]

> Age discrimination is a problem; it is impossible to find a job.
> [Syrian Women's group participant]

The women from the Sri Lankan cohort were mostly younger and did not mention that they experienced age discrimination when seeking employment.

LACK OF AWARENESS OF EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS

The data revealed that some women who were already in the work force or trying to enter the work force in Greater Western Sydney did not know where to go, or from whom to seek help if their employee rights were violated. A Syrian woman shared her experience with the group stating that:

> In the end I found a job in aged-care. They told me "We cannot make you permanent until you move your house closer to work." I found a house closer and I moved. When I signed the paper they started treating me bad to push me to leave the job. I am betrayed, and I told her to her face "You betrayed me". She said "It's not my problem." Then [I replied] "Whose problem is it?" No answer. She was happy sitting in her place…

She continued:

> When you find a job the government will give them [the employer] money. After the subsidy is finished they [the employer] tells you goodbye. Give me the money and I will build my own job! But we are not allowed. The rich people get richer and they cheat. We need to know about the law, we need lessons about our rights – like me being bullied and I don't know what to do, and they tell me "don't talk" because they are protected very well.
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

LACK OF RECOGNITION OF CREDENTIALS

The Syrian women expressed a lot of frustration about the challenge of having their qualifications recognised in Australia, including the requirement to do so in English. One young Syrian woman who had been a statistician in Syria said that she wanted to undertake a Master of Research degree, however she was unable to do so initially due to her level of English proficiency and the lack of precise information on enrolment requirements.

> I am enrolled in AMEP [Adult Migrant English Program]; I finished my studies overseas, but I needed to do an IELTS [International English Language Testing System] test and it's very hard, especially speaking. They don't recognise any certificate for you here, just UTS [University of Technology Sydney] and WSU [Western Sydney University] do. They said they will accept me, but I need more points with IELTS. Seven points maybe.
> [Syrian Women's group participant]

This anecdote illustrates this woman's experience of double marginalisation – first her qualifications do not get full recognition so she needs to do further study. Secondly, in order to pursue higher degree studies she needs to prove her English proficiency, which is difficult for her to attain due to difficulty accessing information. Thus a lack of awareness and proper guidance, language barriers, and lack of recognition of prior learning/qualifications, result in a sense of helplessness and frustration and negatively impacts self-esteem and settlement.

The Syrian cohort protested that their adult children's professional qualifications were not recognised in Australia, and that most of them – despite being dentists, accountants, teachers or other skilled professions – were compelled to work in warehouses or engage in the unskilled precarious workforce.

> My children studied in Syria, my son has a degree. Here he can't work in the same career, so he is working in a warehouse, I have another single son who lives with me who also works in a warehouse.
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

> The biggest problem is my son is a dentist, but he needs to get his qualification recognised.
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

The Syrian women displayed a lot of frustration and helplessness with respect to the situation of their adult children as it heightened their concerns about their family's future. The situation had a clear impact on the women's (and most likely their children's) self-esteem, mental health and well-being.

The Syrian women also explained that as unskilled workers received a lower pay-rate than skilled workers, their children were required to work long hours. The longer hours had an impact on the families of the Syrian women's children and resulted in less time for the parents with their young children, negatively affecting the settlement process for their offspring.

Within the Sri Lankan Tamil cohort, one of the two highly educated woman (the former principal of a school in Sri Lanka who had also owned a few small businesses) mentioned to the researcher that she could not find any employment so decided to improve her English and update her educational qualifications by completing a Certificate 4 and Diploma in Childcare as well as gaining qualifications in Aged Care. She said that since she had received a five-year SHEV visa she had received some aged care work in a regional area and was currently pursuing a nursing qualification. She claimed that although she was now employed, if she lost her job this might affect her Centrelink benefits for up to 42 months (three and a half years), and that this would create uncertainty for her future as it might prevent her applying for a permanent (non-humanitarian) visa. She feared being returned to Sri Lanka as she had been tortured and her husband had been imprisoned for the past twenty years. The researcher noted that she appeared to serve as a positive role model for the other women in the group and was ready to help them prepare job applications as she had the English proficiency to do so.

FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

The data revealed that the Syrian and Sri Lankan Tamil women both faced significant financial difficulties associated with rent, utility costs, transportation and medical expenses. In addition to these expenses, the Sri Lankan Tamil women also reported having to navigate the challenge of paying very high legal fees to pursue their cases for permanent residency, a comment that suggests that may have been unaware of the fact that there is free legal assistance available through Refugee Advocacy and Support (RACS) and Legal Aid.

Many of the Syrian women were faced with the challenge of saving money and sending it to their struggling adult children and their families who remained in situations of temporary asylum in the Middle East.

> ...my suffering now is I haven't seen my son for seven years. He is still in Iraq, and my brother is still in Syria. I send him [my son] money from my Centrelink money.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

Those Sri Lankan Tamil women with employment and whose husbands also worked coped better financially. For example, one Tamil woman who helped her husband run a small business also had a daytime job, as did her husband. This working couple did not have any children, so they were in a better position to send remittances to Sri Lanka to help out family and friends. In contrast, those Sri Lankan Tamil women who had young children had limited employment options as they could not afford child care and were not eligible for a childcare subsidy, experienced significantly more financial hardship. A 24 year old Sri Lankan Tamil women with two young children described her day:

> I wake up at 4am to cook for my family before travelling (via train) to the city to do cleaning jobs. I return home in time to drop my kids off to school... These sacrifices are necessary in order to meet the expenses of raising my children and running my family.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

Both the Syrian and Sri Lankan women disclosed that housing in Greater Western Sydney was unaffordable.

> When going house hunting for a rental it is a stressful experience. In Sri Lanka we have never looked to rent houses as we always lived in our own houses. Rent takes most of our earnings.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

A Sri Lankan Tamil participant said that more assistance from settlement service providers was needed to assist asylum seekers [and refugees] to find affordable housing:

> It will be helpful if service providers assist us in most of our needs by finding accommodation, immediate access 'Centrelink' payment, extend 'Medicare' facilities automatically on expiry to help us continue medical treatment, and ways to find access to charity organisations.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

Indeed a Syrian women who was unemployed and without family in Australia said that she could not manage on the support provided by Centrelink, and she could not find a safe and affordable place to rent in Greater Western Sydney. She explained that she had to constantly move houses, and that she felt that public transport was unaffordable. She also said that her experience of support from employment services was poor. The financial stress, the isolation it caused, along with the frustration of not being able to find suitable employment, affected her mental health well-being making her resettlement in Greater Western Sydney extremely difficult:

> Housing. We all suffer from this point. Rent is very expensive. I live alone. When I arrived, they gave me a house for one month. The money from Centrelink was $500/$600 or $700. They told me you are not allowed to rent a house for more than $250, but I couldn't find a house because it's not enough [money]. I rent a house for $280, but I stopped working. What can I do? This is a big issue for refugees. Especially for a lonely women. Centrelink money is very low... only $7 left from Centrelink. I can't pay my electricity and gas bills. I am using the tax return for 3 months, and when I go to some organization for help, they say if you have more than $500 in your bank we cannot help you... The transportation is very expensive as well, and thank you for the community, SydWest, because they help us to get involved in the society. I need more money from Centrelink. I need the same money [I received during] the Corona time, $1200 ... in other countries they take rent based on your money, for example if you have $900 they take $300 so you live with dignity, you respect others and you live peacefully. I have a crazy mind. Crazy thoughts.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

Women in both cohorts demonstrated a lack of knowledge about what services were available and how to access them. For example, after learning that one of the HADRI research assistants was Christian, one Syrian women who was trying to find a job mentioned that she could not afford driving lessons in Greater Western Sydney. The woman asked the research assistant where to get information about driving lessons conducted by Anglican churches, which she had heard were usually cheaper. This incident, and that of the Sri Lankan Tamil woman who was apparently not aware of free legal support, points to a lack of awareness about available services by visa class, and of the overall fragmentation of settlement support services, which are delivered by government, not-for-profit organisations, volunteers, and private enterprise.

A young Syrian woman with children in primary school disclosed that children's leisure activities were unaffordable. In the last five years she had only managed to take her children to the local Play Centre once:

> Taking my children to playtime is expensive. I paid $200 for the [sports] games, and my kids have the right to play. They see other children at school, and they want to go to same places, but I cannot tell them I do not have money for that.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

She explained that it was unaffordable to enrol her children in any extracurricular learning opportunities. The Syrian Women's group facilitator explained that although the government had given $100 vouchers towards sports' programs, the parents were expected to pay another $100 for the full activity. However, the parents do not use these vouchers, as they cannot afford the extra cost. This cost problem is not however unique to the women in this cohort, who exist on social security benefits, as many low-income Australian families struggle to afford extra-curricular activities for their children. The cumulative effect of limited English proficiency, unrecognised qualifications and age, do however affect their capacity to find employment and afford the co-contributions that the voucher scheme promotes.

These examples clearly indicate that the women in both cohorts (and their children) experience significant financial challenges, as they cannot afford to engage in even the most basic social activities (like having a cup of coffee, or enrolling their children in a sport program). This financial hardship serves to marginalise the women and their families, and affects not only their own mental health, but also their children's life chances.

FACTOR 3: SOCIAL COHESION

The term 'social cohesion' referse to the process of 'how the community operates together within a diverse society', can be defined as "the willingness of members of society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper" (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2021). Social cohesion is integral to social connection and one's sense of 'belonging'. Forced migrants, however, face unique challenges as they attempt to resettle and forge meaningful connections with others as the forced migration experience results in the geographical dispersion and fragmentation of families and communities, and their resettlement in a country with a vastly different culture. This creates anxiety about the loss of one's culture and cultural values.

Both the Sri Lankan Tamil and Syrian women faced language and cultural barriers in accessing jobs. Almost all the women from both cohorts were did not speak English on arrival in Australia and had since struggled to learn English. Even those who could communicate quite well in English expressed their struggle to gain proficiency in the language.

Some of the Syrian women said that it was very difficult for them to learn a new language at their age (over 60 years of age), and that their lack of language proficiency had resulted in financial penalty. One was fined for a driving offence:

> Me and my husband did not know how to read the street signs and we were fined with demerit points.
>
> [Syrian Women's group participant]

Many of the women in the Syrian cohort found learning English very stressful. A 43-year old Syrian participant quietly explained to one of the researchers that it was almost impossible for her to pass the citizenship test as her English language proficiency was very low.

As mentioned earlier, as the Syrian women were older, there was some reluctance to learn English.

> We came to Australia with my family, our roots are shallow but strong. Me and my husband, we stopped at a certain stage because we are old and can't learn a new language or work.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

In addition, although they were skilled professionals, in order to work in similar fields again they had to have high levels of English literacy, which was rather difficult for most; especially those over 60 years of age. One woman painted a tree with weak and shallow roots to illustrate her sense of displacement in Australia [see Figure 10]. She specifically mentioned that not understanding English and not having a job made her nostalgic for home (Syria) where she had been happy until she was forced to flee as she had had a good job and could communicate easily in her own language. She regretted that the war had happened, and that she had been forced to leave.

> This tree represents me... I had branches and many leaves; in Australia my roots are weak and not deep. I lost a lot of branches in Australia. My family. I have a few leaves, they are my kids. They love Australia. They want to stay here. I was happy in my country and I spoke the language. It's a good life here, but I am not happy. I lost a lot of things, my family and the language is a problem.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

Given often limited English, the women from both cohorts relied on government funded interpreter services, however they felt these were not always adequate. Syrian women raised concerns about the capacity of existing government funded translation services to fully understand or explain issues to them in their preferred language. They noted that translators sometimes did not understand their specific dialect. Arabic speakers reported that certain dialects held emotional significance for them and could trigger past trauma. They explained that while Modern Standard Arabic (or Formal Arabic) is the universal language of Arabic speakers and is understood by all Arabic speakers, when their translator came from a different country they could sometimes experience feelings of stress and anxiety, depending on the background of the interpreter.[14]

A Sri Lankan Tamil woman who had arrived in Australia when she was 50, described her confusion as she could not speak English, and did not know where or how to access support as she navigated resettlement in Australia:

> Coming to a new country everything surprised me, mostly I was lost in this new place. I didn't know the language. With my three kids fifteen, seven and three years old, I did not know what to do, where to go, where to find [things]. I was really devastated. I was a teacher back in my country. Now I'm here, a 50-year-old woman not knowing what to do. The most distressing thing was to go around, to move around. My brain was thinking too much, I didn't know how to manage. How am I going to study at this age?
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

14 The Arabic language is the official language of 26 countries and with around 400 million speakers it is the fifth most widely spoken language in the world. It is one of the world's oldest languages and as the language of the Koran, it is the liturgical language of Islam and is spoken by many Muslims outside of countries in which it is the official language. Linguistic polycentrism is a prominent trait of the Arabic language and the broad geographical area over which Arabic is spoken means that different groups and countries of Arabic speakers have, over time, been in conflict with each other.

Like many of the Syrian women in the study, she had held a professional occupation – she had been a teacher in Sri Lanka – and she expressed anxiety that she was too old to learn English in order to retrain as a teacher, and was thus unable to continue in her chosen professional field of education. While in Australia she had however retrained in a different and low paid field, having achieved a Certificate 4 and Diploma in Childcare, as well as qualifications in Aged Care. She was nonetheless determined and hopeful, and said that she would like to be able to apply for teaching jobs so that she could work in her field of expertise again.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, TRANSMISSION OF CULTURE AND CHILDREN

A number of women in the Syrian cohort mentioned that they would like to communicate with others living around them and fully enjoy Australian life, but that limited English language proficiency was a significant barrier. The inability to communicate well in English made it difficult for them to build social networks and engage in social life beyond their immediate co-ethnics, and negatively impacted on the women's ability to settle in Australia.

Those mothers who had children in school mentioned that their English language proficiency was not sufficiently high to assist their children with schoolwork. One of the Sri Lankan Tamil women with younger children, who had been a school teacher in Sri Lanka said that she felt helpless as she had limited language proficiency and could not help her children with schoolwork, or have meaningful communication with the school/teachers about her children's education.

> How am I going to educate my children, how am I going to understand and learn English? … I decided and told my husband "You go out find a job and earn I will stay at home and look after the kids." Saying that my mind was thinking "How I am going to take my children to school? How can I talk to the teacher?"
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

The women in both the cohorts explained that their school aged children/grandchildren spoke English and that most were adapting to western life. The Syrian women expressed concern about an erosion of their own cultural values in the process of resettlement in Australia as their children adapted to a new language, food and way of life.

> Food, dancing, celebrations can be passed onto the younger generation, but our children will have a western mentality. How our children live their lives is different, how they find their partners is different. [Another participant]: we try to control it, we try, I try my best.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participants]

> This is a pot for *matte* [tea], a traditional drink in Syria. My family used to sit together to have *matte*; now our family is getting smaller; now this gathering doesn't exist anymore.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

THE IMPACTS OF TRAUMA ON SETTLEMENT

Persecution and trauma damages the social and cultural bonds that hold families together, often resulting in high levels of distrust for authorities and outsiders (Dony et al 2013: 15-17).

The data revealed that the trauma experienced by most of the refugee women in both cohorts extended beyond the individual to directly and indirectly affect the communities of the women as they resettled in Greater Western Sydney, Australia. The women explicitly described the impact of disconnection from, and fragmentation of family. A Syrian woman described her roots in Australia:

> My roots were cut off many times, maybe because I surrender, I don't know what kind of feeling comes to mind, mixed feelings, I say many people are like me, it's really hard from place to place, house to house, no contact with family. They are alone – no auntie, no uncle, no grandparents; we miss our life and these connections, and the family.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

She acknowledged that she was not the only one with problems and hardships in life, but through great emotional pain expressed the following in a poem:

> The things I have faced is really difficult you know!
> Like place to place
> Like house to house
> Like country to country
> Rent too many places
> No contact sometimes with family
> Miss in my life this connection of family
> I was alone
> I raised them up by my 'own' self
> I fight this life…
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

Figure 15: A Syrian participant's depiction of how events in Syria on her journey to Australia have disrupted her sense of belonging and identity

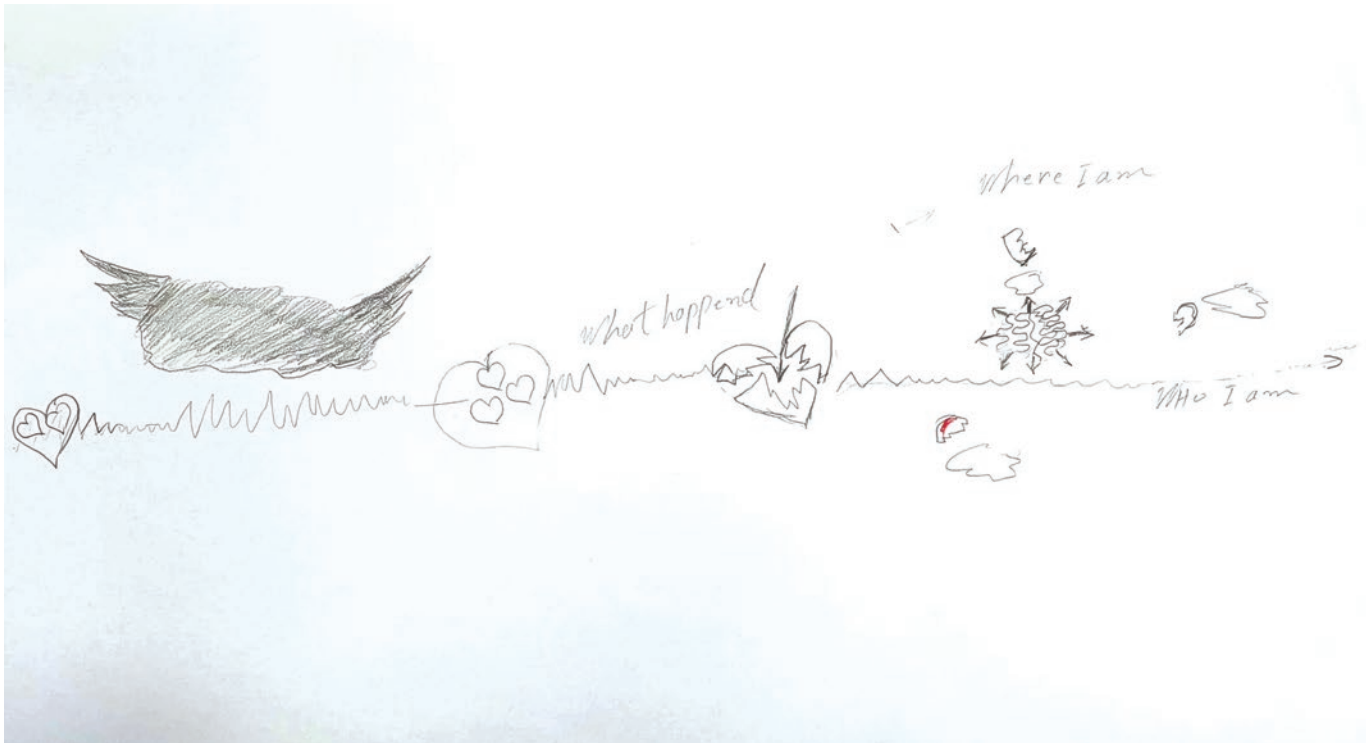


Figure 16: Image of a Sri Lankan Tamil woman's challenging journey to Australia and of the two still born babies (front left) she delivered while seeking asylum in Australia.

In the artwork in Figure 15, a Syrian participant depicts a timeline that demonstrates how events in Syria led to her journey to Australia, and how these events have disrupted her sense of belonging and identity. The shape of the left indicates Syria, the shattered heart in the centre with "what happened" represents loss, the depiction to the right with "where am I" written above represents confusion, while the image on the far right with "Who I am?" written under it represents her loss of identity.

A Sri Lankan Tamil participant used clay to depict her journey to Australia (see Figure 16), and included two stillbirths that occurred when she arrived in Australia. The work depicts the relationship between the trauma of her journey and its ongoing impact on her life and family as she attempts to settle in Australia. In a macabre injustice, the family purchased land at Minchinbury cemetery to bury her children as stillbirths under 24 weeks cannot be cremated.

The experience of forced migration along with the barriers that the women faced as they worked to rebuild their lives in Australia undermined their confidence and self-esteem. Within small communities, fear of being judged, as well as the maintenance of social hierarchies that existed in the country of origin can act as inhibitors to social cohesion. Both groups of women expressed a strong sense of disconnection from their origin country and felt marginalised within the broader Australian social context. They attempted to build a sense of social cohesion within their own communities, and with those outside of them, despite significant language barriers, but in doing so they had to overcome additional barriers associated with financial deprivation, mental health issues (trauma from pre-arrival and post arrival), as well as their own (or a family member's) physical ailments. Those raising children and grandchildren also experienced concerns of cultural erosion and loss of language.

RACISM

The findings revealed that women from both the cohorts faced some sort of discrimination based on their racial background and/or status as 'refugee women' and 'boat people'. In the Syrian workshops one of the women mentioned discrimination based on visa status being life-long and inter-generational. The Syrian woman's experiences are of discrimination, ethnic disparity and racism in Australia that contradict the notion that Australia is the land of the "fair go" for all.

> Even if we get citizenship and stay here for 100 years they will still consider us as refugees.
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

> If I am a British mother and have a son with Italian citizenship and if he applies online for a [visitors] visa he gets it in half an hour and next day he is here. This is discrimination because I am not a British mum; I am not a European mum – I am a Palestinian mum; I am a Syrian mum [and my children cannot visit me here].
>
> [Syrian Women's Group participant]

A Sri Lankan Tamil woman who holds a qualification in aged care and was working in an aged care centre moved to a regional area but could not get a job as employers said that they would not employ her as she is a 'boat person'. The women in the Sri Lankan Tamil cohort reported that they felt that they were looked down upon, not accepted and referred to as 'boat people' by Australians of different socio-cultural backgrounds, even though many of these women worked and paid taxes like any other Australian citizen.

> Many Australians feel that 'the boat people' are taking benefits from the taxes they paid and what is rightfully theirs.
>
> [Sri Lankan Tamil Women's Group participant]

This common experience of discrimination is line with the results of an Ipsos poll (carried out in 22 countries) which found that 51% of participants deemed that the major factors as to why refugees entered their country, were economic reasons or to benefit from welfare services (Ipsos, 2016). The Sri Lankan Tamil women in this research felt that they are doubly marginalised as they are also looked down on by their own people – other Sri Lankan Tamils, who have been living in Australia for over 25 years and who are now Australian citizens.

DISCUSSION

This study has highlighted the relationship between social cohesion and a sense of belonging and cultural well-being. The findings illustrate that for both cohorts, the three main factors identified, trauma, visa status and language acquisition, create enormous uncertainly in the lives of the Syrian and Sri Lankan Tamil women who participated in this study, and this results in barriers to social cohesion and diminishes their sense of well-being. Their past experiences have been deeply traumatic, and while Syrian women have a level of legal protection, for Sri Lankan Tamil women there is constant depressing uncertainty and a fear of being returned to Sri Lanka that makes it very difficult for them to move on with their lives and to raise their families.

During the weekly creative expression workshops (data collection phase) through both the artwork and discussions of both groups, it was evident that there was an urgency for the women in this study to be heard and to have others bear witness to their experiences. It was also clear that trauma was deeply embedded in both cohorts of women, individually and collectively as a group. For example, despite the theme of the workshop. whether it was 'arrival to Australia' or policy areas of education, health and housing. most of the women still spoke about (to varying extents) the trauma they had faced during the wars and of their lives in liminal spaces as they made their journey to Australia. It is thus crucial to conceptualise the trauma/distress experienced by the women in this study in terms of an interaction between individuals, families, communities and the society at large rather than as an emotion located within the individual.

For relatively new refugee communities, connections with co-ethnics provide vital support and can protect against isolation (Doney et al., 2013: 1). For both cohorts in this study past traumas and current uncertainties (either permission to remain or permission to bring others to Australia) affects their health, which in turn shapes financial and social circumstances. Visa conditions also intersect with education and employment opportunities to compound and exacerbate stress, illness, poor mental health and well-being for both cohorts as they settle in Australia.

CULTURAL WELL-BEING

The significance of culture to well-being and good health has been well established (Napier et al., 2014). Experiences of well-being are influenced by the cultural contexts from which we make meaning, which in turn influence a range of factors that determine health outcomes including, *inter alia*, food choices and practices, mediation of relationships and care giving and receiving in cross-cultural and multicultural contexts (Napier et al., 2014: xi-xii). We may thus regard cultural well-being as a dynamic concept comprised of elements including "cultural values, beliefs, relationships, income, home, identity, combined with experiences such as a sense of being, feeling, thinking, creating and producing" that converge or diverge at various times throughout one's life (Mackay, 2016: 3).

Well-being outcomes depend on social policies as well as economic, environmental and cultural policies (Dalziel et al., 2006). Social policy is informed by dominant cultural values and assumptions, as well as political ideologies. These are both important factors that affect the integration of migrant groups into wider society. In this respect, integration is "as much about the way in which destination countries receive migrants as much as what migrants do to adapt to a new setting" (McGregor & Ragab, 2016: 7). Social policies that recognise the shared cultural values of the diverse members of society, and which strengthen cultural identities in those communities, are integral to supporting the social and cultural integration of asylum seekers and refugees, and to promoting their well-being (McGregor & Ragab, 2016). This study has highlighted the centrality of family as integral to identity and mental health well-being for Syrian women. Cultural well-being is thus intrinsically linked to supportive economic and environmental policies, but in particular to supportive social policy.

In addition to a supportive policy framework, the relationship between identity formation and context depends on the cultural values in certain domains, such as the relationship with people from the host country. This study has illustrated how explicit or implicit discrimination and prejudice can undermine the successful integration of asylum seekers and refugees and how it impacts negatively on their cultural well-being. Eliassi (2013: 45) notes that "immigrants are constructed as not really belonging to 'us', even if they share the same citizenship as 'us'", for example, when host cultures position migrants in ways that are often in contrast to how they position themselves. An example of this is the Sri Lankan women in this study who are positioned as seemingly 'problematic' due to their visa status. In this paradigm, the cultural well-being of the women in this study is undermined as modes of belonging are often questioned and challenged by dominant members (figures of authority, in particular government employees) of the host culture.

IMPACTS OF TRAUMA

Trauma has had a compounding affect materially, physically and emotionally, and is a contributing factor in trapping all of the women in a low socio-economic situation and poor living conditions. The data shows that trauma is deeply embedded within all participants in this study. Therefore it is important to conceptualise the trauma/distress experienced by women in the study in terms of an interaction between individuals, families, communities and the society at large, rather than as an entity located within the individual. A cultural well-being approach recognises that the consequences of collective violence continue to impact traumatised people following resettlement. Such an approach helps to understand the effects of trauma and supporting the traumatised as the women in this study, and their families, settle in Australia. It helps to understand the effects of the trauma which is experienced by refugees beyond their individual selves. Such trauma directly and indirectly affects the social and societal networks and social cohesion of the women in this study as they seek to settle in Greater Western Sydney.

Traumatic experiences such as those endured by the two cohorts of women in this study have affected the individuals and their suffering has in turn affected their physical health and mental health well-being. This finding correlates with those of a study of refugees from the former Yugoslavia which found that the consequences of family separation are loneliness, social isolation and a lack of social support, which negatively impacts mental health (Bogic, 2012). Indeed, loneliness among resettled refugees is a common phenomenon that has been observed in other parts of the world (Oudshoorn et al., 2019; Mangrio et al., 2019).

FRUSTRATIONS OF SETTLEMENT

Refugee and asylum seeker women are frustrated as much by a loss of purpose and social status in Australia, as they are by their reduced economic circumstances. These feelings intersect with their pre-migration trauma to create a sense of helplessness within their post-migration social context (settlement), and have become embodied in the form of ill-health, including poor mental health well-being.

This finding resonates with a study carried out in Canada that found that while all migrants faced challenges with their credentials not being fully recognised, the challenge was even greater for refugees who were more likely to be overqualified for their current employment. Significantly, the Canadian study also revealed that being overqualified for a job impacts one's self-worth (leading to lower self-esteem) and mental health (Chen et al., 2010).

LANGUAGE AND EMPLOYMENT

English language proficiency determines the extent to which refugees feel welcomed or discriminated against in the country of re-settlement; this impacts their mental health (Bogic et al., 2012). Participants from both the cohorts reported facing some form of discrimination associated with their inability to speak and understand English.

The data revealed a relationship between employment opportunities, English language proficiency (Gines, 2011; Collins & Bilge, 2016), access to educational opportunities, recognition of prior credentials (for the case of the Syrian women mostly), discrimination, and ageism (for the Syrian women in particular). The intersection of these factors resulted in financial challenges and mental health issues, which have negatively impacted the women's resettlement in Greater Western Sydney.

CONCLUSIONS

Trauma, visa status and language acquisition combine to create a circle of oppression for both cohorts of women in different ways. The Syrian women are refugees, so they are supported by the Australian government, but their lives are not whole as they remain unfulfilled. The physical situation of the Syrian refugee women is comparatively safe. They have permanent residency and are entitled to government support for health care, education, employment services and settlement services. Despite this, they remain traumatised by their experiences and have encountered difficulties in learning English. This feeds into their capacity to secure employment, which makes the objective of family reunification difficult. For Syrian women in Australia their separation from their children and families causes ongoing emotional problems that affect their well-being. Bringing family members to Australia is not always possible, as it is time consuming, difficult and expensive.

Sri Lankan Tamil women live their lives in Australia with high levels of uncertainty. After fleeing massacres and ongoing political oppression, for a minimum of eight years they have been waiting to learn if they will be permitted to stay. Their well-being is detrimentally affected by the calculated uncertainty of the Australian visa regime. The authors of this report argue that the "planned destitution" (Lester, 2018) of Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) payments is entirely avoidable. Political decisions on visa status produce social and economic exclusion, and deny extremely vulnerable people, including children, access to the necessities of life. The SRSS regime seems designed to make life in Australia unaffordable, perhaps to induce a decision to return 'home'.

The differences in these two situations are primarily due to the different visa status of the women in these cohorts – Refugee (including SHEV and TPV), and BVE. Australian policy determines which groups are given permanent residency, and which are not. It erects barriers to education for some, and not for others. For both groups it provides financial support, but at below the poverty line; in the case of SRSS the support offered is below the poverty line.

Even though Sri Lankan Tamil women on BVEs work, pay taxes and largely support themselves and their families, they can sometimes encounter short periods of Medicare ineligibility when one visa expires and they await another.

This situation is clearly inequitable, and the time taken to decide on the validity of the asylum claims made by Sri Lankan women seems extraordinary. Extensive delays cause prolonged anxiety, constant financial strain and appear calculated to make vulnerable people give up and opt to return 'home'. If so, the government has condemned Sri Lankan Tamil women to a life of constant uncertainty, even though they are trying to move on with their lives, obtain higher level skills and contribute to the community. One wonders how long a determination on a claim for asylum should take. It would appear more likely that it is the intent of the Australian government to punish all those who sought asylum from onboard a boat, as this serves as a deterrent for any who might seek to come to Australia by boat in the future.

For both cohorts their cultural well-being has suffered in Australia. Part of this is due to past trauma, however it is not made easier by a complex and decentralised system of social security, settlement, and health assistance. Such barriers make re-establishing their lives very difficult, and affects their cultural well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are five recommendations that stem from this report.

1. That the Department of Home Affairs gives greater recognition to the impact of the excessive delays in resolving visa status on the health and well-being on those seeking asylum or on a temporary humanitarian visa, especially vulnerable women, and take necessary steps to:
   - → expedite the processing of the initial applications of those within the Legacy Caseload (p. 7); and
   - → ensure there is no impact on access to entitlements during transition from a bridging visa onto a humanitarian visa or during renewal of a temporary (humanitarian) visa (pp. 22-25).
2. That the Department of Home Affairs recognises the detrimental impact of leaving vulnerable asylum seekers without adequate financial support and:
   - → expand eligibility requirements for Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) to include a greater focus on vulnerability (p. 7); and
   - → increase the level of SRSS payments to create parity with JobSeeker benefits (p. 7).
3. That the Department of Home Affairs work closely with the specialist refugee health providers in each state to ensure that holders of any form of humanitarian visa have unimpeded access to basic health services, and that the agencies and community groups who come into contact with these visa holders are aware of such pathways (pp. 22, 25-28).
4. That the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) increase its efforts to ensure that:
   - → accredited interpreters have the cultural and linguistic competency to interpret for traumatised asylum seekers and refugees (pp. 31-33); and
   - → there is far greater use of accredited interpreters by those supporting refugees, including, but not limited to, General Practitioners (pp. 25-34).
5. That enrolment staff within universities and TAFE colleges receive training in how to interpret the eligibility of various visa subclass holders for higher education, and from whom they can seek advice if a student finds themself temporarily without a visa (pp. 27-28).

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The Phoenix program is a tailored creative well-being program which has been specifically designed for women from refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds. The aim of the program was to create a safe space where women could creatively explore their experiences of settling in Australia under a range of visa categories. The program has been created as part of a collaborative research project with CMRC, SydWest Multicultural Services and Western Sydney University, *The Parallel Lives of Women Project*, which aimed to highlight the lived reality of Sri Lankan and Syrian women who are living in Australia. The Phoenix program aimed to create a well-being intervention for women but also to investigate the impact of policy implications on the lived reality of women's lives and the differential level of access to support services.

WEEK AND THEME	POLICY AREA	EDUCATIONAL MESSAGING	ACTIVITY
1. The Journey and My Life Before	Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program	→ People have moved across the globe throughout history for safety, due to climate change and for opportunity. → You have much to give and offer Your previous experience matters and is valued. → You are stronger than you realise. You have had courage to leave your home country and strength to make a life changing decision. You have taking a risk, and ventured into the unknown. These qualities are incredibly valuable if you recognise them.	**Activity** **Mapping your journey** The journey you have had in your life so far is part of what makes you who you are in the present. Life's joys, achievements big or small but also the difficulty aspects of life make you uniquely you. You may have endured many challenges physically, emotionally and spiritually. Some people may find that these challenges are too painful and difficult to talk about. Other people find solace in sharing many parts of their life experience. What is important is that you occasionally take time to reflect upon what you have experienced or achieved even if this is just to yourself. Doing this helps you to recognise your strengths in that you have survived and even thrived. Known your resilient qualities is important in helping you to heal and stay well for your future life In this activity you are encouraged to share as much as you like about your journey so far in your life. While we focus on the physical journey of traversing land, air and ocean we will also talk about your emotional and spiritual journey to you can use this self-knowledge for the net part of your journey. We will ask questions such as; → What have you learnt about yourself along the way? → What have you had to become good at that you didn't know that you were good at? → What did you find out about human nature both good and bad? If any anytime during or after the activity you feel overwhelmed stop the activity and reach out to your facilitator who will give you information on how to seek appropriate counselling help. Part A: On a large map of the world plot the places that you started your journey and how long you stopped at each place. This can be done using pins and string to show just how far you have come and to show other people your particular journey. Start with your town or village. Mark significant stops or places along the way until you reach Australia. Part B: Choose three points along the journey and tell your story on why each place is significant to you by writing or making a voice recording Part C: Choose one of the places on the map that you have plotted and draw or paint about why this place or event was important in your journey to Australia **Reflective questions** **1.** What would you like people to know about you from before you arrived in Australia? **2.** Why do you think it is important to acknowledge your past journey to Australia? **3.** How has the way that you have arrived in Australia influenced you and your family in your everyday life?

APPENDIX 1: THE PHOENIX PROGRAM

WEEK AND THEME	POLICY AREA	EDUCATIONAL MESSAGING	ACTIVITY
2. Arrival: View from the Bridge	Categories of visas	→ You are welcome in Australia with many people wishing you well. → When people are not welcoming try to establish a safe community where people welcome you → You have a unique perspective which can be very valuable. → Everyone's experience of arrival will be different. You are entitled to your own view of what this was like. → Expressing this to other supportive people can help you to not feel so alone and to find other people that have shared your experiences. It also is a way for you to acknowledge that you have moved beyond arriving to being someone who has valuable knowledge of what it is like to transition to living in Australia	**Activity** **Postcards to Home** Your arrival experience may have been very different to other migrants due to the way that you entered Australia and your visa. The rules for which visa category you have will in turn impact on initial and ongoing experience of living in Australia. The human story of refugee experience can often be lost in discussion about visa categories and seeking asylum. One of the aims of this activity is to reach into the hearts and minds of policy makers and to better inform service provision and the general population so they have a better understanding of what life has been like for you. We will focus upon the sensory memory of your arrival experience as this way of telling a story has the power to show people the lived reality rather than explain or tell. **Create** To begin this activity cast your mind back to when you first arrived in Australia and what that experience was like for you. Imagine that you are explaining your first impressions of what you experienced when you first arrived in Australia. What did you see, smell, hear and feel? What was the first thing you tasted? What was it that you missed? What was something that was wonderful? What surprised you? On one side of the postcard write about your feelings and first impressions. On the other side create an image that symbolises how you felt using pens, pencils or paint. Choose *one* of the following scenarios to help get you started; **1.** Choose a person who is significant in your life but that is not likely to visit Australia in the near future. They may be from your past or living overseas now. Write a letter or postcard telling them how you felt when arriving. What did you see? who did you first met, what did you smell or taste and how did you feel emotionally and physically. Finally, think about what you encountered that surprised you and what you miss about your home country. **2.** Write to your younger self before you set off to Australia. In your postcard explain what you will wished you had known before you arrived that would have helped you in a smooth transition **3.** Imagine you have made friends with a powerful politician who wants to make arrival for asylum seekers and refugees better. They ask you to write to them about the 6 top things you would change about your arrival experience. What would these be? **Reflective Questions** **1.** In retrospect would you have done anything differently in the first 6 months of your arrival in Australia? **2.** What do you think other refugee or asylum seeker women would benefit from knowing about upon their arrival to Australia? **3.** What have been the best aspects of arriving in Australia? **4.** What are three things policy makers or service providers could do differently to help upon arrival?

WEEK AND THEME	POLICY AREA	EDUCATIONAL MESSAGING	ACTIVITY
3. Making Home: Finding shelter and putting down roots	Access to Social Services	→ Making Home can be complicated. We know that when resettling in Australia there are many new aspects of life to navigate. → Making home can be about the practical aspects of finding a house to live in and an income stream. → Encompasses many legal obligations, accessing services, and getting children into school. This may feel burdensome. → Importantly making home is also about finding out about what you are entitled to, can and cannot access. → Making home is also about feeling like you are part of a community, meeting new people and making new friends. → To make home means you need to be able to communicate in a common language and feeling safe in expressing yourself and your culture.	**Activity** **My Home Tree: Roots and Branches** Making Home as an asylum seeker or refugee means that you have to navigate many systems, people and places, which can be overwhelming and leave little time for much else. When you are very busy figuring these things out you might sometimes feel lost or unsettled. Managing the everyday aspects of life can provide a sense of achievement and purpose, however if you are too stressed or unsupported it can be difficult to see a solution or know where to go for help. The saying "I can't see the forest for the trees" is a popular saying that means that it is hard to get a good perspective sometimes especially when you are too close to the problem. In this activity we will use the tree as a symbol of life and hope. When we can see the multiple connections clearly laid our it then becomes easier to deal with these one at a time, while also recognising that they may have many root causes. The image of the tree, its roots and branches will be used in this activity as a way to understand support networks and the relationships between these and how seemingly simple daily challenges can build up to feel insurmountable or create solid support. Trees can bear fruit and offer protection from the harshness of life. Some trees may be culturally and spiritually significant and offer more than just physical protection but also spiritual connection. Some trees have tall branches that reach up to the sun and into the future. The image of the tree offers a pathway forward by symbolically representing actions that can be taken towards our future selves. Choose one activity **Activity One: Post-it Tree** **1.** As a group have a general discussion for 5-10 minutes about the kinds of systems, people and places that you have had to navigate to make home in Australia. Make a list of the top 10 issues that were experienced by the group. Some common issues might be housing, legal issues, employment and income, access to services etc **2.** Now Split into smaller groups of 3 or 4. Draw an outline of a tree with both branches and roots on a large poster sized paper with thick black marker **3.** From the group discussion choose one of the issues from the list of 10 and write this inside the trunk of the tree. **4.** In the smaller groups use post it notes to identify a) the root causes of the main issue and b) what effects these have in the branches and c) how any of the issues make you feel. Place post it notes on the tree and have fun talking about all the other things people have written **Activity Two: Your Life as a Tree** On a large A3 poster or art canvas draw or paint a tree that you feel symbolises you, your culture and the way you have had to navigate and make home in Australia. It does not have to look like a realistic tree. The point is that your tree will tell your own story of putting down roots and what is important to you culturally and spiritually. Here are some things to think about when making your tree: → Does your tree have a special kind of personal or cultural significance? → How can you represent your tree so that it can symbolise you and your daily struggles to flourish? → Is your tree strong and upright or worn and weathered? Is it missing branches or breaking in some parts? → What is the root system of the tree like? Is it deep and extensive or shallow or lopsided? → Does your tree root system reflect you're the support you receive or the support you hope to receive? → Use colours to represent the mood you want to express in your tree. → Is your tree one that grows in Australia or is it a tree from your home country? → What is the cultural or spiritual symbolism to you of your tree? What does this represent to you? → Do you want to add any words, a story or poetry to your tree painting? Share: In pairs **1.** 3 minutes each. Take turns to listen to the other person's impression of your painting. What do they see? Is this similar or different to what you see? **2.** 3 minutes each. Now take turns to explain what you were trying to show in your tree **3.** 10 minutes. Return to the larger main group and report back on the others person's creation **Reflective Questions** **1.** What are the main 3 issues that you have learnt from your activity about community support networks in Australia? **2.** What has been helpful to you in putting down roots and re-making home in Australia? **3.** What have been the greatest challenges of making home in Australia? **4.** What kinds of people, groups or organisations might you be able to reach out to for support to as to build informal networks? **5.** What are 3 places that you now know how to access through your participation in this activity that you may not have previously considered accessing?

WEEK AND THEME	POLICY AREA	EDUCATIONAL MESSAGING	ACTIVITY
4. My Voice My Song	Education and language	→ You have a working knowledge of your home language which is a valuable asset → You may be proficient or emerging in English language as well as a number of other languages → You have cultural knowledge that is valuable → Some skills that you have can be built upon or used in other contexts for further education, employment or volunteer opportunities → There are many ways to participate in lifelong learning such as through sharing of oral history, searching on the internet or within groups like this one	**Activity** **Songbird** Whether you know it or not you hold a great deal of knowledge and wisdom within you already. You may have learnt stories, songs and poems from your family. You may have been passed down knowledge about how to cook a special meal or how to care for others in a nurturing way. You may have attained qualifications from your home country and may have a university degree. Even if these kinds of learnings are not always recognised by institutions in Australia you still hold this valuable knowledge and wisdom within you. In this activity we will be thinking about how we learn things so that you can a) build confidence in your ability to learn new things, b) express yourself and your ideas to others c) recognise alternate pathways to your education. It is important to have the confidence to express yourself so that you can communicate your needs to others such as at the doctor, a child's teacher or asking for work. Before coming to the group this week: **1.** Take some time to think about a story, a song, a poem that you know well or that you really like. This may be from your home culture, one from when you were a child or a song or poem that is contemporary and has inspired you in some way. **2.** Bring a story, song or poem to the group. **Activity 1** **1.** In groups or 3 or 4 take turns to introduce to the others the songs poems that you have bought along with you with each other. **2.** Now each take a turn in performing your song or poem. You can play it /sing it /read out aloud a short part of the song/poem. **3.** How did the performance of the song/poem make you feel compared to talking about it? **4.** What kind of themes are in the songs/poems? Are they about overcoming obstacles, love songs, songs of lamentation or success and strength? **Activity 2** Choose a song/poem from your group and either **a)** Learn a stanza that is unfamiliar to you and try to perform it back to the group **b)** Choose a familiar song and change the words of one of the stanzas about your experience with learning language in Australia and perform this as a group back to the main group **c)** Make up a new poem/song about what is really important to you at the moment. **Reflective Questions** **1.** How did you learn your song and what does this highlight about what is important about learning a new language? **2.** How might you use music and songs to help you become more proficient in your chosen language? **3.** How were songs and poems used in your home country to teach important life lessons? **4.** What are some of the impacts on your education that coming to Australia has changed? **5.** What if any are your learning goals for the next 12 months? **6.** What is something that you would like to learn and how might you go about learning this in an informal way?

WEEK AND THEME	POLICY AREA	EDUCATIONAL MESSAGING	ACTIVITY
5. Culture and Well-being	Health services	Well-being link between the physical and emotional and ritual spiritual values beliefs cultural traditions. Holding them back or solace. Mismatch	**Activity** **The Story Circle** Oral histories are important as they contain knowledge and wisdom that goes beyond the present generation. They hold truths that may not be actual lived reality but hold the essence of truth in myths, moral guidance and pathways for us to follow. Stories have a long tradition in many cultures of containing coded knowledge and a hidden guide to life's many ups and downs. Stories can be used as a way to address difficult life issues or explore moral dilemmas. It can be difficult to talk openly about personal issues for in some circumstances. It can be helpful to place the problem in a story as this also helps to give a safe distance and offers perspective and group problem solving In this activity we will draw upon the storytelling tradition that exists in cultures worldwide to explore our how story can help us in understanding the many internal and external battles that influence our lived experiences of well-being. It is really important that whatever your life circumstances that you develop strategies to support your emotional, physical, mental and spiritual health and healing. **Activity 1: Collective story telling circle** The idea of this story telling circle is to explore a theme/issue/challenge about finding well-being that the group wishes to explore. As the facilitator and group will have now completed the previous activities together there may be a shares knowing of what kinds of themes may be safe, appropriate or relevant to explore. This can be spontaneous and humorous or it can address a difficult usually taboo issue. Some possible themes to explore through story may be; → Emotional health and mental health → Challenges of being a "good" mother → Talking about women's health issues → Love → Freedom → Marriage and partnership → Women's sexuality → Coercion and control → Domestic violence → Friendship → Jealousy → Death and grief → Community expectations → Being a strong woman **Step One:** All group members sit in a circle and one person is chosen to go first. They start the first sentence and then the next person completes the next prompt and so on. Feel free to add other sentences that are not included below so that everyone gets at least one go at making up a part of the story. Once upon a time there was.....(a girl, a boy, a woman, a man) from..... lived in.....(house, suburb One day..... Found out that..... This all first started when..... Because And then And then Until What happened next And then finally **Step Two:** As a large group have a discussion to answer the following **1.** What parts of the story do you think has some truth to it in your community? **2.** Where you satisfied with the ending? How would you have changed this to one that is better or makes more sense? **3.** Was there anything that was left out of the story that you think needed to be included or made more prominent? **Step Three:** After the discussion and if there is time see if you can retell the story but this time dramatise this with actions. In this step you may only choose the characters and a narrator to perform the story. **Activity Two: Storyboard and 5 minute Video diary** **1.** Use a large A3 sized poster paper and draw 6 boxes in this. 3 on the top row and 3 on the bottom row. Under each box leave space for some writing. **2.** Choose one of the themes from the above list or choose your own theme that is important to you. **3.** Think about your own experience of your chosen issue or one that you have seen play out in your community. Decide what you want people to know about this issue that they may misunderstand. **4.** In each box draw/sketch a scene to show what happens in this life story that you want to portray. **5.** Under each story board box write a brief description of what is happening. **6.** Now use your story board as a guide for you to make a video diary recording. You can talk directly about the story board or you can talk more specifically about your own experiences

WEEK AND THEME	POLICY AREA	EDUCATIONAL MESSAGING	ACTIVITY
5. Culture and Well-being (continued)			**Instructions for video preparation:** Make sure that you have a phone or a computer that can make videos. You could try one of the video making programs that are available to make this easier. Capturing the quality sound is important so you will need a quiet and private space to complete your video diary entry. You will also need a clip on microphone to capture the best quality sound and lighting towards the face of the person who is the subject of the video. Ipads work well if they are set up on a tripod. **How to structure your video diary** **1.** State your name, your age, ethnicity and where you currently reside **2.** Say when you first arrived in Australia **3.** Say what theme/issue you are going to talk about and why you have chosen this. **4.** Talk about your issue or use the story board to guide you. Make sure you have a beginning, middle and end **5.** Conclude with....what I would like people to know about the issue is..... **Reflective Questions** **1.** What has had the biggest impact on your overall well-being since living in Australia? **2.** What kind of strategies have your found to be helpful in developing positive social connections? **3.** What would help you to maintain your positive mental health and emotional well-being? **4.** What are some informal ways for you to build strong social networks?
6. Like a bird	Other resources or support	Big Picture perspective. What does freedom look like for you? What do you ache/hope for? What are your next steps	**Activity** **Like a Bird** Birds have the ability to see long distances and with precision. Birds can fly thousands of kilometres over all kinds of terrain. Some birds migrate regularly flying over water, making perilous journeys to find their breeding grounds as they move back and forth with the seasons. Birds can be little and fast, majestic and graceful, bright and colourful or blend into their surroundings. It has been shown that the Crow or Raven are incredibly intelligent as they remember people's faces very well. Other birds such as the bower bird collect blue objects to decorate their nest in hope of attracting their partners and just because they like pretty blue objects and of course the white dove is a symbol of peace. As we near the end of the 6 week course we will use the metaphor of the bird as a symbol of freedom, hope and will. In this activity you will have the freedom to choose how you respond to these themes. What bird would you like to be? What superpowers does your bird possess? **Create** **1.** Using air drying clay make the shape of a bird as your personal symbol and icon to remind you of your strengths and superpower qualities. How do you see yourself or how would you like others to see you? What is your superpower? On a rectangular piece of cardboard write a sentence to describe three of your superpowers. For example, I make good decisions in a crisis, I work hard, I can keep going even when others want to give up, I make the best bread in my family. Have fun with this. **2.** In this activity you are free to choose any creative medium that you enjoy such as poetry, writing, drawing, acting, song, painting, sculpting, video making etc. Write/paint/sing/talk about the beauty of your bird in all it's glorious characters and colours. The aim of this activity is to try to capture the freedom of spirit that your bird encapsulates and takes with them wherever they fly. **3.** Using fabric or paper make the shape of an eagle or an imaginary Phoenix. The eagle has incredible eyesight and long perspective. The eagle is a symbol of power and strength. The phoenix has magical powers as it can rise from the ashes and come alive again. Write a message of strength to yourself or someone you love on the belly of the bird shape. Once each person in the group have completed these attach string to each bird and hang or display these so they move freely and your messages are visible to many others. **Reflective Questions** **1.** What kind of ways can you and your group build networks to support each other beyond this group? **2.** Putting aside what may seem impossible right now, what are your hopes, dreams or aspirations for the future? **3.** What is a small step that you can take in the next week that would move you in the direction you want to go? **4.** If you were the eagle or the phoenix that could speak, what wise words would you say about finding a new perspective in times of change?
7. Celebration and show of artworks and stories		Invite policy makers and other interested parties	Showcase of the stories and art and a short film (if made).

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