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The social impact of family separation on refugee settlement and inclusion in Australia

Associate Professor Rebecca Wickes, John van Kooy, Rebecca Powell and Claire Moran

Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre

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Acronyms

BNLA	Building a New Life in Australia
DoHA	Department of Home Affairs
DSS	Department of Social Services
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RCOA	Refugee Council of Australia
SCOA	Settlement Council of Australia
SHEV	Safe Haven Enterprise Visa
SHP	Special Humanitarian Program
TPV	Temporary Protection Visa
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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1

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

Family reunion is an important component of successful migrant settlement. Yet in Australia, some humanitarian migrants are at a disadvantage when applying for family reunification visas. Emerging evidence reveals that family separation can have negative effects on an individual's well-being and compromise the settlement process for new migrants.

The aim of this report is to examine the relationship between family reunion and successful settlement for refugees. Conducted by the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre and supported by the Oxfam-Monash Partnership, this report provides foundational evidence to inform policy on family reunion in Australia, with a specific focus on the impact of family separation and resettlement on social inclusion outcomes for refugees.

This report comprises three data analysis methods: a systematic review of available scholarly and grey literature; an analysis of the 'Building a New Life in Australia' (BNLA) survey of humanitarian migrants; and two in-depth, case studies with refugees in Australia.

A number of barriers to refugee migrant settlement and the impacts of family separation on individuals and families were identified in this report. Costs and lengthy processing timeframes associated with family reunification visas hindered refugee settlement opportunities and potential. Prolonged family separation was associated with longer term difficulties achieving settlement milestones. Mental health concerns were related to family separation and employment and educational variables.

1.1 Key findings

Literature review:
▸ Family separation has negative effects on settlement success including ongoing trauma and prolonged uncertainty;
▸ Family separation can limit migrants' economic and social participation;
▸ Female migrants are particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of family separation.

The BNLA analyses:
▸ Humanitarian migrants in frequent contact with family members overseas and those able to send remittances overseas to friends and family were more likely to be in regular employment;
▸ Humanitarian migrants experiencing family separation and waiting for family overseas to join them in Australia reported a higher probability of mental illness and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD);
▸ The effects of family separation were greater for women who are more likely to be single parents, unemployed and experiencing financial hardship, and are therefore less likely to be sending money to family overseas. All of these factors pose a risk to their mental health;
▸ Family reunification was mentioned by approximately a quarter of participants who answered open-ended questions about their hopes and dreams.

Case studies:
▸ Interviewees separated from families reported feelings of stress and suicidal ideation;
▸ They experienced lengthy and disappointing family reunification application outcomes, which caused anxiety and distress;
▸ Participants felt welcomed and happy with their life in Australia but felt family reunification would make settlement easier.

Recommendations
Family is key to successful resettlement of refugees in Australia and elsewhere in terms of enhancing social inclusion, integration and cohesion. Specific policies targeting family reunification would benefit humanitarian migrants and potentially lead to better settlement outcomes. To achieve these outcomes, and drawing from our research, we provide the following recommendations:
▸ **Recommendation 1:** Reducing costs and streamlining the family reunification process, including broadening the definition of family and concepts of dependency in line with UN High Commissioner for Refugees efforts to address a variety of family configurations.
▸ **Recommendation 2:** In recognition of the mental health impacts of family separation, funding specialised mental health support services tailored to refugees experiencing family separation.
▸ **Recommendation 3:** Providing better support for women refugees experiencing family separation, including access to employment, education, English language classes, child care and other needs.
▸ **Recommendation 4:** Greater campaigning and awareness raising around the benefits of humanitarian migrants in Australia and the importance of family in the migrant settlement experience, with a particular focus on the potential of employment, education and job training.

2

Refugee Family Reunion: An Introduction

The family is key to successful settlement of refugees in host countries. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that the family is the fundamental unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state (UN General Assembly 1948; 1966). Yet in situations of forced displacement, family separation is a common occurrence. Family reunification is often the first intention refugees have upon receiving protection status (UNHCR 2013).
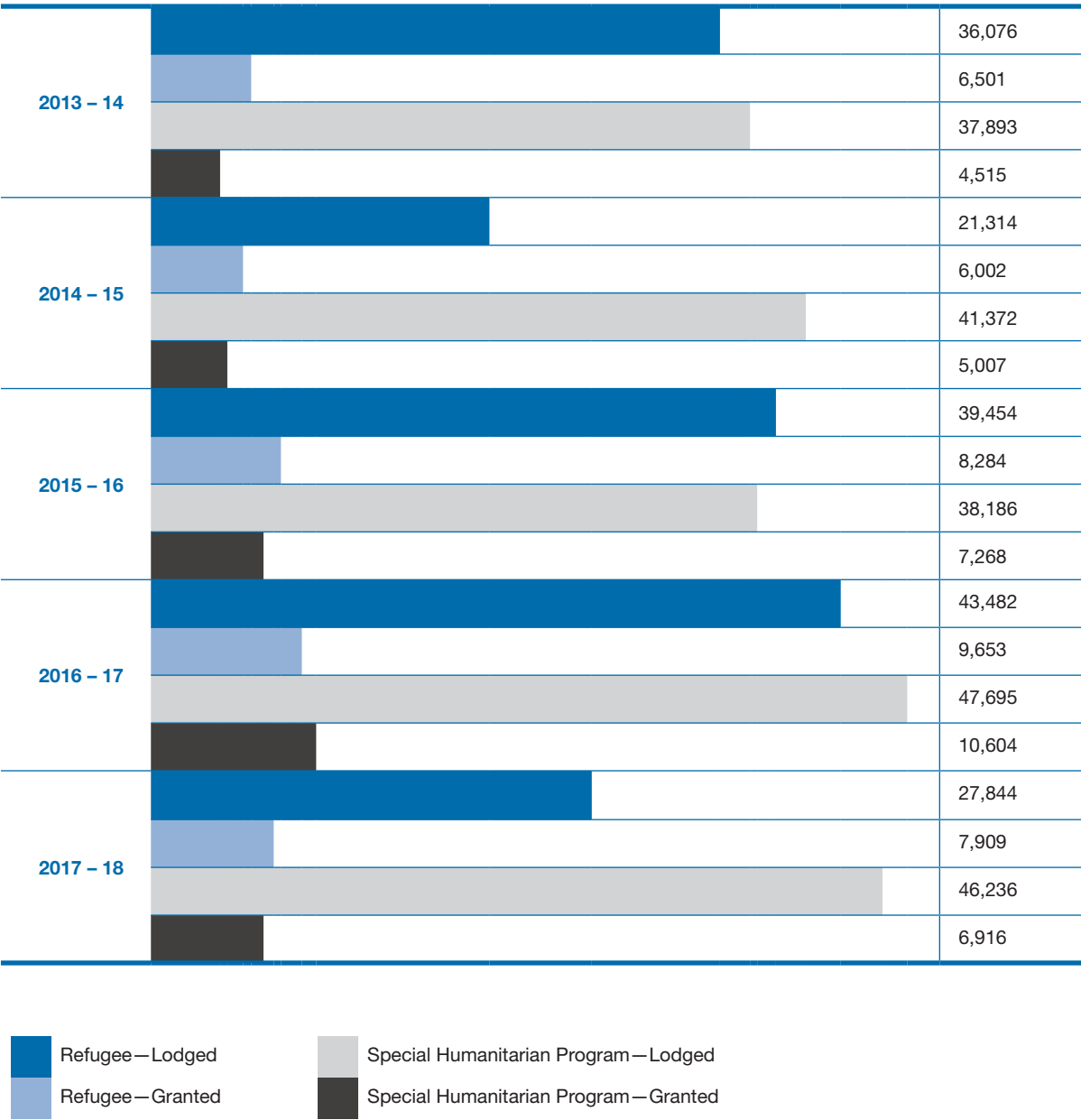
In 2017, Australia was ranked 25th in the world on resettlement of refugees with a recognised status. Statistics from the Department of Home Affairs (DoHA) show that for 2017-18, Australia's annual Humanitarian program comprised 16,250 visas granted, including 7,909 Refugee category visas, 6,916 Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) visas, and 1,425 Permanent Protection Visas (DoHA 2018). The main groups resettled were:

▶ Syrians in Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey;
▶ Iraqis in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Syria;
▶ Refugees from Myanmar;
▶ Afghans in Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia;
▶ Bhutanese in Nepal; and
▶ Refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia.

The Commonwealth is a signatory to the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. This declaration commits governments to ensure flexible arrangements to assist family reunification. Despite this, opportunities for people on refugee or humanitarian visas to bring family members to safety in Australia are limited. Indeed, for refugees living in Australia, family separation remains one of the greatest obstacles to successful settlement (Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) 2016).

The SHP visa is the main pathway for people from refugee backgrounds to seek reunification with family members in Australia. Demand for these visas currently far outstrips supply, with Departmental statistics showing nearly 50,000 people (predominantly from the Middle East) lodging applications for an SHP visa in 2017-18, compared with fewer than 7,000 visa grants (DoHA 2018). The long-range data shows a consistent shortfall between SHP visa lodgements and finalised grants (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Offshore humanitarian program visa lodgements and grants
Source: Department of Home Affairs, Historical Migration Statistics

Year	Refugee—Lodged	Refugee—Granted	Special Humanitarian Program—Lodged	Special Humanitarian Program—Granted
2013 – 14	36,076	6,501	37,893	4,515
2014 – 15	21,314	6,002	41,372	5,007
2015 – 16	39,454	8,284	38,186	7,268
2016 – 17	43,482	9,653	47,695	10,604
2017 – 18	27,844	7,909	46,236	6,916

- Refugee—Lodged
- Refugee—Granted
- Special Humanitarian Program—Lodged
- Special Humanitarian Program—Granted

1. See: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getfacts/seekingsafety/resettlement/global-trends-2017/ [accessed 29 April 2019].

2. The Government has committed to increasing the size of the annual quota to 18,750 places in 2018-19. See also: https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/syria-and-iraq-additional-12000-at-glance.pdf [accessed 29 April 2019].

2.1 Family reunification policy in Australia

Permanent visas in Australia are highly regulated. Each year a specific number of visa allocations are made available by the Australian Government (Okhovat et al. 2017). While the Australian Refugee and Humanitarian Program states they aim to 'reunite refugees and people in refugee-like situations overseas with their family in Australia' (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2016), under the current policies there are many barriers to family reunification.

The SHP is the primary avenue through which refugees in Australia can apply for family reunification. In 1997, under the leadership of John Howard, the Australian Government introduced the 'split family' provision of the special Humanitarian Program. The split family provision allows applications made by immediate family members of the humanitarian migrant who currently hold (or previously held) a permanent residency visa. According to RCOA estimates, the demand for SHP visas exceeds supply at a rate of seven to one, suggesting many humanitarian migrants in Australia are waiting for family to join them (RCOA 2016).

This situation is graver still for irregular humanitarian migrants. Boat arrivals who arrived in Australia on or after 13 August 2012 are not eligible to propose the resettlement of any family members (Migration Regulations Act 1994 paragraph 202.21). For those who arrived by boat prior to this date, their applications for family visas are given the lowest priority. Given the demand for visa places, those who are least prioritised will likely never receive a visa (Okhovat et al. 2017). From 22 March 2014, minors arriving by boat were also restricted from proposing their family for settlement in Australia (Okhovat et al. 2017). These policies therefore disadvantage some of the most vulnerable migrant groups in Australia.

The processing time of family reunification visa applications is extensive for those on SHP visas. Processing can take many years and comes at a high financial cost (RCOA 2016). For example, a partner visa (subclass 209) application takes over 20 months to be processed, a dependent child visa (subclass 45) application takes over eight months and an orphan relative visa application takes three years (RCOA 2019). If an application is unsuccessful, even after lengthy waiting periods and/or as a result of administrative error, applicants will have to begin the application process again. These wait times are significant for refugee families who may have family members residing in conflict areas. It is not uncommon for family members to be killed while waiting for a visa application to be processed (RCOA 2016). Policies that prolong periods of family separation create difficulties for the reunification process and increase the likelihood of longer-term damage to the family (Rousseau et al. 2004). Federal Government funding of migration advice for family reunion ceased in 2013. Applicants are now seeking advice from a limited number of specialist services and/or through private migration agents or lawyers that come at a high, and for many prohibitive, financial cost (RCOA 2016).

In addition to the limited number of places available under the SHP, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA 2019) notes the following key barriers to refugee family reunion:

▸ Significant costs associated with family reunion (such as visa processing fees, medical tests and airfares), particularly those seeking to sponsor relatives under the family stream of the Migration Program who must also pay visa application charges;

▸ Burdensome documentation and other evidentiary requirements which are very difficult, if not impossible for many refugee and humanitarian entrants to meet (such as obtaining police clearances from countries where a person has been subject to persecution or had no formal legal status);

▸ Limited visa options for relatives who are not part of the sponsor's immediate family (such as adult children, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents);

▸ Prolonged waiting periods even if relatives are at immediate risk;

▸ Limited access to settlement and other support services following arrival that can assist with applications for family reunification visas;

▸ Restrictions on access to family reunion opportunities for asylum seekers who arrived by boat; and

▸ Limited availability of affordable migration advice for people lodging family reunion applications.

3

The
Project

3. The Project

Given the significance of family reunion for successful refugee settlement, this research seeks to understand the impact of family separation and resettlement and social inclusion outcomes for refugees in Australia. The primary research focusses on human migration and resettlement experience in Australia for refugees from Afghanistan, Syria, the Horn of Africa, and Asia.

Four key research questions guide the research:
▸ **RQ1.** What are the consequences of family separation for men and women, boys and girls from refugee backgrounds? What are the differences and similarities between these groups?
▸ **RQ2.** What are the consequences on physical wellbeing, economic welfare, and social networks and participation of refugees when families are separated? What are the coping mechanisms that individuals and families utilise?
▸ **RQ3.** What are the perceived challenges and costs of (refugee) families being separated, when compared to the benefits of being reunited?
▸ **RQ4.** What other insights can be derived from the data to inform our understanding of forced migration drivers, pathways, journeys, and effects for separated refugee families?

The research employed three data analysis methods: a systematic review of available scholarly and grey literature; analysis of the 'Building a New Life in Australia' (BNLA) survey of humanitarian migrants (including an analysis of open-ended survey question); and two in-depth, case studies with refugees in Australia from different backgrounds. Each of these methods is summarised below.

3.1 Literature review

The literature adapts the systematic research review guidelines developed by the UK's Social Care Institute for Excellence (Rutter et al. 2010), designed for conducting detailed reviews where a large body of literature is concerned. The search strategy comprises the following stages:
▸ A preliminary search using Google Scholar;
▸ Systematic database searches;
▸ Checking the references lists and bibliographies of retrieved articles;
▸ Cross-referencing from a list of relevant articles and publications provided by Oxfam Australia and the Refugee Council of Australia;
▸ Searching for grey literature published on the websites of key organisations.

Screening of retrieved records was conducted using the following inclusion/exclusion criteria: date of publication (after 2000); English language; publication type (journal articles and research reports); population type (refugees and other migrants); scope (outcomes and impacts of family separation or reunification); and empirical, evaluative or synthetic research.

Articles retrieved were imported into a reference library and analysed to produce a summary of the key insights, findings, recommendations and evidentiary gaps relating to refugee settlement and family reunion.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that family separation can be a major barrier to successful settlement. Humanitarian migrants live in constant fear for their family left behind, and experience prolonged periods of uncertainty. Additionally, when families are separated, family roles and dynamics change, with children often having to take on adult responsibilities for parents who find themselves financially vulnerable. Family separation has consequences on the economic participation of humanitarian migrants as it may limit their ability to fully participate in the labour force, pursue educational opportunities and develop important social and employment skills. Family separation appears to be more harmful for women, with emerging findings demonstrating a gender disparity in settlement experiences. Key findings from the literature review are presented in Section 4 of this report.

1. The academic databases searched included the Australian Public Affairs Information Service (APAIS), Academic OneFile, Australian Public Affairs-full text (APA-FT), Web of Science, Cambridge Journals Online, Conference Proceedings Citation Index (CPCI), Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Informit, Oxford journals, Project Muse, ProQuest central, and Taylor & Francis online.

3.2 Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA)

BNLA is the largest and the most comprehensive survey of humanitarian migrants in Australia and includes individuals and families who were granted protection visas through Australia's humanitarian programme between May and December 2013 (Edwards et al. 2018). The longitudinal study was commissioned by the Australian Government to trace the settlement journeys and measure settlement indicators of participants for at least five years. Information is collected annually via alternating waves of home visits (Waves 1 and 3) and telephone interviews (Waves 2 and 4). Of the 2,399 participants in the study at Wave 1, a total of 1,929 (80.4%) remained in the study by Wave 4 (responses collected in late 2016/early 2017—the most recent data available).

Table 1: BNLA data collection, waves 1 – 4

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
Data collection dates	Oct 2013 – Mar 2014	Oct 2014 – Feb 2015	Oct 2015 – Feb 2016	Oct 2016 – Feb 2017
Total participants (interviews conducted)	2,399	2,009	1,894	1,929
Retention rate of wave 1 sample %	-	83.7	78.9	80.4
Avg. Interview length (principal respondents)	56 mins	23 mins	50 mins	20 mins

Table 2: Description of variables

Variables	Description
Dependent	
Stability of paid work (W2&4)	**Derived total time in paid work over previous 12 months:** • No employment (in both waves) • Irregular employment (less than six months in both waves) • Regular employment (6 months or more in both waves)
Engagement in education (W1-4)	**Measure of educational attainment in Australia since last interview:** • No study or job training (in all waves) • In progress or incomplete (commenced but not completed, or had stopped in any wave) • Completed (in any wave)
Improvement in understanding of spoken English (W1&4)	**Measure of change in understanding of spoken English:** • No improvement (no change, or decline in understanding between waves) • Improved (change from 'not well/not at all' to 'very well/well' between waves)
Experience of financial hardship (W1-4)	Number of derived instances of financial hardship (cumulative)
Severity of psychological distress (W4)	Categories derived from scale measure of symptoms relating to psychological distress (K6 method)
Presence of PTSD criteria (W4)	Categories derived from scale measure of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD-8 method)
Overall settlement experience (W4)	Self-reported experience of settling in Australia overall

Table 2: Description of variables (cont)

Variables	Description
Independent	
Pre-arrival family separation	Self-reported forced separation from family before coming to Australia
Family waiting to come to Australia	Self-reported family in another country waiting to come to Australia
Family members migrated to Australia since arriving	Categories derived from number of family members migrated to Australia since last interview
Frequency of contact with family overseas (W3)	Categories derived from self-reported contact with family members
Has sent money to friends/ family overseas (W3&4)	Self-reported sent money overseas in previous 12 months (Primary visa applicants only)
Control	
Age range	Categories derived from age at interview household grid variable
Gender	Derived from gender household grid variable
Region of birth	Categories derived from country of birth (SACC 2011) household grid variable
Refugee visa subclass	Categories derived from visa subclass administrative variable
Household structure (W4)	Categories derived from household structure administrative variable

4. For details of BNLA response and retention rates, see: https://www.dss.gov.au/about-the-department/national-centre-for-longitudinal-studies/growing-up-in-australia-the-longitudinal-study-of-australian-children-lsac/sample-sizes-and-response-rates-for-the-centre-studies [accessed 29 April 2019].

Table 3: Selected variables from the BNLA dataset

Research theme	Independent variables (IVs)	Dependent variables (DVs)
Impact of family separation/ reunion on settlement	▪ Pre-arrival family separation ▪ Family waiting to come to Australia ▪ Family members migrated since last interview ▪ Frequency of contact w/ family overseas ▪ Sent money overseas in last 12 months	▪ Education ▪ English ▪ Employment
Impacts of family separation/ reunion on well-being		▪ Experience of financial hardship ▪ Overall health past 4 weeks ▪ Confidence in own abilities ▪ Risk of mental illness ▪ Meets criteria for PTSD ▪ Overall life satisfaction
Individual variables	▪ Age ▪ Gender ▪ SEIFA IRSD 2011 ▪ Country of birth ▪ Visa subclass ▪ Household structure ▪ Times moved ▪ Receipt of government payments	

4. For details of BNLA response and retention rates, see: https://www.dss.gov.au/about-the-department/national-centre-for-longitudinal-studies/growing-up-in-australia-the-longitudinal-study-of-australian-children-lsac/sample-sizes-and-response-rates-for-the-centre-studies [accessed 29 April 2019].

3.3 Case studies

Facilitated by the Refugee Council of Australia, the African-Australian Multicultural Employment and Youth Service and Free to Feed Melbourne, the research team conducted two semi-structured interviews with refugees who have settled in Australia and have some experience with the family reunification process.

The interviews were conducted with individuals from Afghanistan and Eritrea. The semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed for the interviewees to share their experiences of settlement in Australia, including the family reunification process and the impact this had on their settlement.

Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee approval was completed prior to these interviews. The interview narratives supplement the literature review and BNLA analysis findings, and are presented as a series of case studies in Section 6.

Limitations and challenges with semi-structured interviews: The Monash Research team worked with Oxfam Australia via refugee network contacts to facilitate introductions to four refugees in the Australian community, willing to participate in a one hour interview for this project.

However, this proved challenging and only two interviews were secured before the reporting deadline. It is worth noting that the recent result of the 2019 federal election led to a high level of sensitivity and distrust from a number of potential participants to be involved in this research.

Additionally, this research was conducted at a tragic time for the South Sudanese community who had experienced the death of six young community members in eight weeks which impacted their capacity to participate.

4

Literature Review Findings

4. Literature review findings

The success of Australia's humanitarian program is measured by how many people are resettled and the extent to which they are able to rebuild their lives and contribute to the Australian community. Preliminary findings from the bnla study indicate that the most important factors for successful settlement for humanitarian migrants in Australia are: feeling safe; the happiness of children, and; having family in Australia (Department of Social Services (DSS) 2017, p. 96). These findings highlight the importance of family within settlement experiences of humanitarian migrants. Yet, a growing body of literature on barriers to settlement amongst humanitarian migrants suggests that family separation remains an ongoing concern in australia (RCOA 2016, SCOA 2016).

When family members are separated, they are deprived of important social and emotional support that is critical to positive settlement outcomes (Okhovat et al. 2017; RCOA 2019; Pittaway et al. 2009; Schweitzer et al. 2006; Wilmsen 2013). Family separation not only has negative consequences for refugees but also for Australia more broadly. There is often a 'ripple effect' where the ongoing trauma related to refugee's constant fear for their family creates barriers to engaging in social and economic activities most desired during settlement. This impacts significantly on settlement outcomes such as labour force participation, English proficiency and educational opportunities.

4.1 The benefits of humanitarian migrants in Australia

Humanitarian migrants bring many benefits to Australia. Most migrants are relatively young (median age 22.7 years) and therefore at a prime working age (ABS 2018), offering opportunities for these individuals to fill important labour shortages in Australia. This is particularly evident in regional areas. Currently, regional development is an important issue in Australia, with suggestions that humanitarian migrants can assist in reviving regional areas (DSS 2011). Additionally, migrants who successfully settle in these regions encourage family and friends to follow (DSS 2011).

In addition to economic benefits, humanitarian migrants have a positive impact on the social and cultural life of Australia. Humanitarian migrants often volunteer as a pathway to gaining employment and as a way of participating in the wider community (DSS 2011). Additionally, many refugees volunteer in roles where they assist other new settlers with their new lives in Australia by providing support with transport, housing and childcare (DSS 2011). These findings point to the community-building potential of humanitarian migrants who contribute positively to Australia's social and cultural fabric.

4.2 Defining family

Conceptualisations of family for refugee groups are complex, with definitions of family varying across cultural contexts and ethnic groups. Family structures may incorporate biological and non-biological members who perform roles quite different to those expected in a nuclear family (Lewig et al. 2009). Multiple or communal parents can serve a protective function for children if parent figures are unavailable or unable to parent. Parenting from a variety of caregivers, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and other extended family members, is important in collectivist cultures (Lewig et al. 2009). To illustrate this, in the Assyrian language (commonly spoken in Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey), the word 'cousin' does not exist as cousins are regarded as brothers and sisters.

In Australia, under the Migration Regulations Act 1994, definitions of 'immediate family' are restricted to parents and children under the age of 18 years (paragraph 1.12AA). These definitions exclude unmarried adult children, older relatives who live with the family, stepchildren whose biological parents have died and children who have been adopted where no government-sanctioned process of adoption is available. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has recognised the need to address the variety of family configurations that form part of the refugee family, by broadening the definition of family to include concepts of dependency (UNHCR 2008).

The current definition of 'family' places significant burden on refugee families to evidence 'dependency' before an application for family reunion can be made (Okhovat et al. 2017). In some situations, providing evidence of family may prove difficult. For example, in a study by Tilbury and Rapley (2004), a refugee woman detailed how she was asked to pay $3000 to obtain DNA proof that her husband was the father of her three children before he would be allowed into Australia. Tilbury and Rapley (2004, p. 60) explain, 'in tears she told the authorities that two of her children were the result of rapes while in a refugee camp, so only the eldest would have the husband's DNA'. These types of experiences point to a significant problem in the way notions of family (and the accompanying processes) are conceptualised and enacted under the current family reunion policy in Australia.

Furthermore, publications from the UNHCR are quick to point out that DNA testing raises serious concerns, including the right to privacy, confidentiality and informed, voluntary consent. The results of DNA tests can lead to emotional harm on individuals and result in further trauma (UNHCR 2008). These findings suggest that a comprehensive effort to address definitions of family in immigration policy would need to take into consideration the social roles that may be distributed across multiple extended family members of refugee entrants.

4.3 The benefits of family

The strengths that families bring to the settlement process are well documented (RCOA 2016; SCOA 2016; Okhovat et al. 2017). Family provides significant support during the challenging process of settlement, leading to long-term personal, social, community and economic benefits.

Families play a pivotal role in providing emotional, physical and material support (RCOA 2016). Family anchors an individual's identity by affirming mutual understanding of roles and supporting one another to navigate new social systems (Flook & Fuligni 2008; Wallace 2017; Yablonska 2013).

The presence of a supportive family enhances the capacity to negotiate services, access education, enter the labour force and establish strong social networks. Having a larger, informal network may create greater opportunities for humanitarian migrants to achieve education and employment success (Bevelander 2011; RCOA 2016; DSS 2019).

An intact family can devote their full attention to rebuilding lives (RCOA 2019). Family can share economic burdens such as cost of housing and support each other in educational opportunities such as learning English (Wilmsen 2013). Families can also help each other to establish small businesses, which is common practice among humanitarian migrants (DSS 2011).

The accumulation of financial resources of family members enable the start-up of enterprises, with family members often providing labour at a low cost until the business begins making money (RCOA 2016).

These supports minimise the risk of serious poverty, with family members (inclusive of extended family) collectively supporting each other and sharing resources (DSS 2011).

4.4 Family separation

The literature indicates strongly that family separation is a major challenge to timely and successful settlement and the integration of refugees in Australia (Schweitzer et al. 2006; Pittaway et al. 2009; Wilmsen 2013; RCOA 2016; Okhovat et al. 2017). The separation of refugee families, and subsequent delay in reunification, can have long-lasting consequences for a person's well-being, mental health and ability to contribute to the Australian community (Schweitzer et al. 2006). These consequences are not only experienced by adults within the family structure but extend to adolescents and children, who continue to face ongoing trauma as they settle in Australia. Some evidence suggests that the longer families remain separated the more likely there is longer-term damage to family members (Rousseau et al. 2004). This is discussed further in the next section.

The consequences of family separation are examined through two domains of impact: biomedical/psychological and social inclusion. As this project focusses on the impacts of family separation on social inclusion, we focus our discussion on literature that uses this framework. However, we do acknowledge that an individual's ability to participate wholly within Australian life is strongly associated with their psychological well-being. Therefore, traumas associated with the pre-migration and settlement experiences of humanitarian migrants in Australia should not be discounted as they have significant impact on an individual's mental wellbeing and, by extension, their ability to participate fully in Australian life.

These consequences of family separation prevent humanitarian migrants from rebuilding their lives and contributing to Australia, causing significant problems for their ability to integrate and settle successfully in Australia. To address what happens when families are separated, we look specifically at the following categories:

▸ Fear and uncertainty;
▸ Changing family roles and dynamics;
▸ Employment, English and education;
▸ The gendered impact of family separation.

4.5 What happens when families are separated

4.5.1 Fearing for family

Family separation is associated with severe and ongoing trauma for resettled migrants, which can impact significantly on their social and economic outcomes (Schweitzer et al. 2006; Pittaway et al. 2009; Simich et al. 2010; Wilmsen 2013; Okhovat et al. 2017). The trauma of constant concern for family members is a major factor in the psychological health and participative potential for separated families. Studies have indicated that concern for family not living in Australia was commonly associated with depression (Wilmsen 2013), anxiety and somatisation (Schweitzer et al. 2006). A study of Iraqi refugees found that participants who had family still living in Iraq had higher levels of PTSD and depression compared to Iraqi refugees who did not (Nickerson et al. 2010).

Concerns for family left behind weighs heavily on the minds of humanitarian migrants, who find it difficult to concentrate on the more practical tasks of settlement, such as learning English, seeking employment and engaging in community (Wilmsen 2013; RCOA 2019). In a study by the Refugee Council of Australia (2019) a participant expressed the impact of fearing for his family on his ability to participate in Australia, 'mostly what hurts me is my family are in a very insecure place … my friend says I would not be able to do anything for the community because I have lost my mental health' (RCOA 2019c).

A study by Wilmsen (2013) outlined the significance of fear for family on the lives of participants (N = 41) from Sudanese, Afghan and Karen communities living in Melbourne, Australia. These participants discussed how constant fear for family resulted in sleepless nights, poor concentration, guilt and depression which had significant impacts on their participation in practical aspects of settlement. For example, participants found it more difficult to enter the workforce, attend English classes and were under relentless financial strain.

Additionally, preliminary BNLA findings indicate that refugee children aged 11 to 17 years old experience PTSD symptoms higher than the general population (DSS 2017, p. 103). These findings reveal that trauma amongst this age group is ongoing during settlement and should be considered as part of future studies on family separation.

4.5.2 Prolonged uncertainty

When separated from family, new arrivals may be unable to make any long-term plans, believing that they must wait until the family is together (RCOA 2016). African participants in an Australian study by Tilbury and Rapley (2004, p. 61) describe family separation as 'constantly looking over the shoulder,' with affected refugees existing in a type of 'limbo' between their country of origin and Australia.

Refugees from particular cultural backgrounds, such as Sudanese, Somali, Eritrean and Ethiopian, may suffer adverse mental health effects where extended family and traditional community bonds have been severed (Schweitzer et al. 2006). These ties are typically an important source of support that, when severed, result in strong feelings of loneliness and even depression (Rousseau et al. 2004; Tilbury & Rapley 2004; Schweitzer et al. 2006). In a Canadian study of Congolese refugees, Rosseau et al. (2004) outlined how during the long processing time of reunification applications, participants felt a sense of powerlessness led them to question their identity, the meaning of life and even the desire to live.

The ongoing suffering and trauma of family separation is likened to the 'mortal torture' that is 'practically the same' as the violence refugees fled in their country of origin (Rosseau et al. 2004, p. 1099). In Australia, a report by the Refugee Council of Australia (2016, p. 7) documents the desperation of an unaccompanied minor who arrived in Australia by boat in March 2014, just after the additional restrictions were made on family visas by boat arrivals. The new restrictions prohibited minors arriving by boat from applying for family reunion visas. Following this, the minor 'attempted suicide because the thought of never seeing his family again was just too much for him'.

For refugees granted humanitarian visas, there may be considerable feelings of 'survivors' guilt' over family members left behind. As such, there is often pressure to provide financial support to these family members (Tilbury & Rapley 2004; Lewig et al. 2009). Refugees may forgo study and other skill development opportunities, in favour of paid work, in order to send remittances to family members left behind (Okhovat et al. 2017). These remittances provide significant economic benefits in the refugee's home countries because they impact directly on families and therefore have an immediate impact (DSS 2011; Deloitte 2019).

It is estimated that remittances sent to low-income countries comprise nearly 6% of these countries GDP (Deloitte 2019). Upon arrival in Australia, remittances sent to family members overseas are high, however as migrants settle and increase their engagement in the Australian economy, the demand for remittance services declines (Australian Centre for Financial Studies 2016). Initially these remittances are a major financial burden to humanitarian migrants, sometimes constituting 10-20% of their weekly income (DSS 2011).

These remittances often place additional financial stress on the family and leave little money to spend on educational pursuits or basic needs such as food and clothing (RCOA 2016; DSS 2017). Conversely, evidence shows that in situations where family reunification is achieved, remittances decline due to a reduction or removal of the demand for it. Earnings then have greater potential to be spent and saved in the host country (Cortino and Ochoa-Reza 2008; Brown 1998; Bartolini 2015).

4.5.3 Changing family roles and family dynamics

While the majority of the literature reveals that family reunification is key to successful settlement, family reunification can place further stress on families due to the disruption and subsequent re-establishment of family roles upon reunion (Rousseau et al. 2004; Lewig et al. 2009). For family members who have experienced trauma, this process may be particularly difficult as they come to terms with re-defining family roles that account for both the past (ideals of the home culture) and the present (the realities of the host country). This appears to be made more difficult the longer families are separated (Rousseau et al. 2004).

Power dynamics in the family can change dramatically during resettlement (UNHCR 2008). Children often have to take on the role of the adult in the family, because of the loss of a parent, a parent being unable to fulfil their normal parenting role, or because of the child's more rapid development of English and other skills needed in the country of resettlement (Lewig et al. 2009; UNHCR 2008).

Additionally, sole parents may be financially vulnerable because of their restricted ability to work or acquire job skills (Rousseau et al. 2004). Women may find themselves 'caught' between the traditional roles expected in their country of origin and the expectations of their new society. By undertaking work outside the home, women may challenge traditional family roles, causing inter-gender and inter-generational conflict (Tilbury & Rapley 2004). Additionally, separation from family may also lead to loss of family cohesion, due to family members' feelings of being 'abandoned' (Okhovat et al. 2017).

4.5.4 Employment, English and education

Labour force participation amongst humanitarian migrants increases as their time in Australia increases (DSS 2017) however, a large share remains unemployed when compared to the broader Australian population. This suggests that there are barriers to employment that continue to prevent full economic participation. These barriers include the consequences of trauma on physical and mental health, disrupted education and low levels of English proficiency (DSS 2017).

Studies suggest that separated families find it more difficult to enter the labour market for numerous reasons (Wilmsen 2013; DSS 2017; Deloitte 2019). The trauma of being separated from family often leads to a disengagement in other activities such as English classes, as migrants feel unable to concentrate. This subsequently impacts their ability to secure a job beyond entry-level employment. Participants in a study by Wilmsen (2013) mentioned that without extended family available to provide childcare, they were unable to attend English classes and pursue other educational opportunities. These findings are similar to a study by Bloch (2007) who found that more than 50% of female refugees were not looking for work because of family and/or childcare commitments, compared with 5% of men. There were similar findings in the preliminary BNLA report that found participation in English classes by migrants decreased over time due to work and family responsibilities (DSS 2017). In this study, humanitarian migrants who stated they 'did not want a paid job' cited the reasons for this were due to 'health problems' or 'looking after family or home' (p. 43). These findings point to the gendered impact of family separation and will be expanded upon in the next section of this report.

Participation in English classes is closely linked to greater proficiency in English (DSS 2017) and English proficiency has a strong relationship with the ability to secure paid employment. Migrants with high levels of English-speaking proficiency have much greater rates of employment than those with lower levels (DSS 2017; DSS 2011; ABS 2007). The consequences of not having proficient English skills impact on accessing Government services and internet use (DSS 2017) which may further disadvantage separated families.

4.5.5 Gender and family reunion

Studies suggest that family separation is harder on women (Manderson et al. 1998; Tilbury & Rapley 2004; Wilmsen 2013). Women who are sole parents may be limited from accessing employment and educational opportunities to acquire job skills, thereby increasing financial vulnerability (Manderson et al. 1998). In the absence of extended family or spouses to help with care giving, women limited to domestic responsibilities are isolated from the wider community (Wilmsen 2013; RCOA 2009). Some women are discouraged from attending English courses by older relatives, who see earning money or raising children as more immediate priorities (Wilmsen 2013). Women are less likely to undertake tasks such as 'Use public transport', 'Use banking services' and 'Get help from the police'. This is attributed to women feeling less confident in their ability to undertake these tasks (DSS 2017, p. 77).

Women are also much less likely to be working than men, although rates of working humanitarian migrant women do increase as time in Australia increases (DSS 2017). Women are more likely to have lower levels of education upon arrival in Australia and this may have an impact on acquiring English, other skills and seeking employment (DSS 2017). Additionally, women are significantly more likely to experience PTSD symptoms that remain consistent as time in Australia increases (DSS 2017). Family separation has been identified as one of the most significant contributors to mental health problems for refugee communities in Australia (RCOA 2019). Furthermore, studies have examined how women's happiness in settlement is structured around discourses of family. In their study with Sudanese refugee women, Tilbury and Rapley (2011) found that women's well-being was not focused on their own adjustment during settlement but on their ability to see that their families were well cared for and safe.

5

BNLA Key Findings

The BNLA survey data allow us to examine the issues identified in the literature in more detail.

In what follows, we report on the main findings from our analysis of the BNLA data, based on significant relationships between variables and other points of interest for understanding the impacts of family separation and reunion.

5.1 BNLA demographics

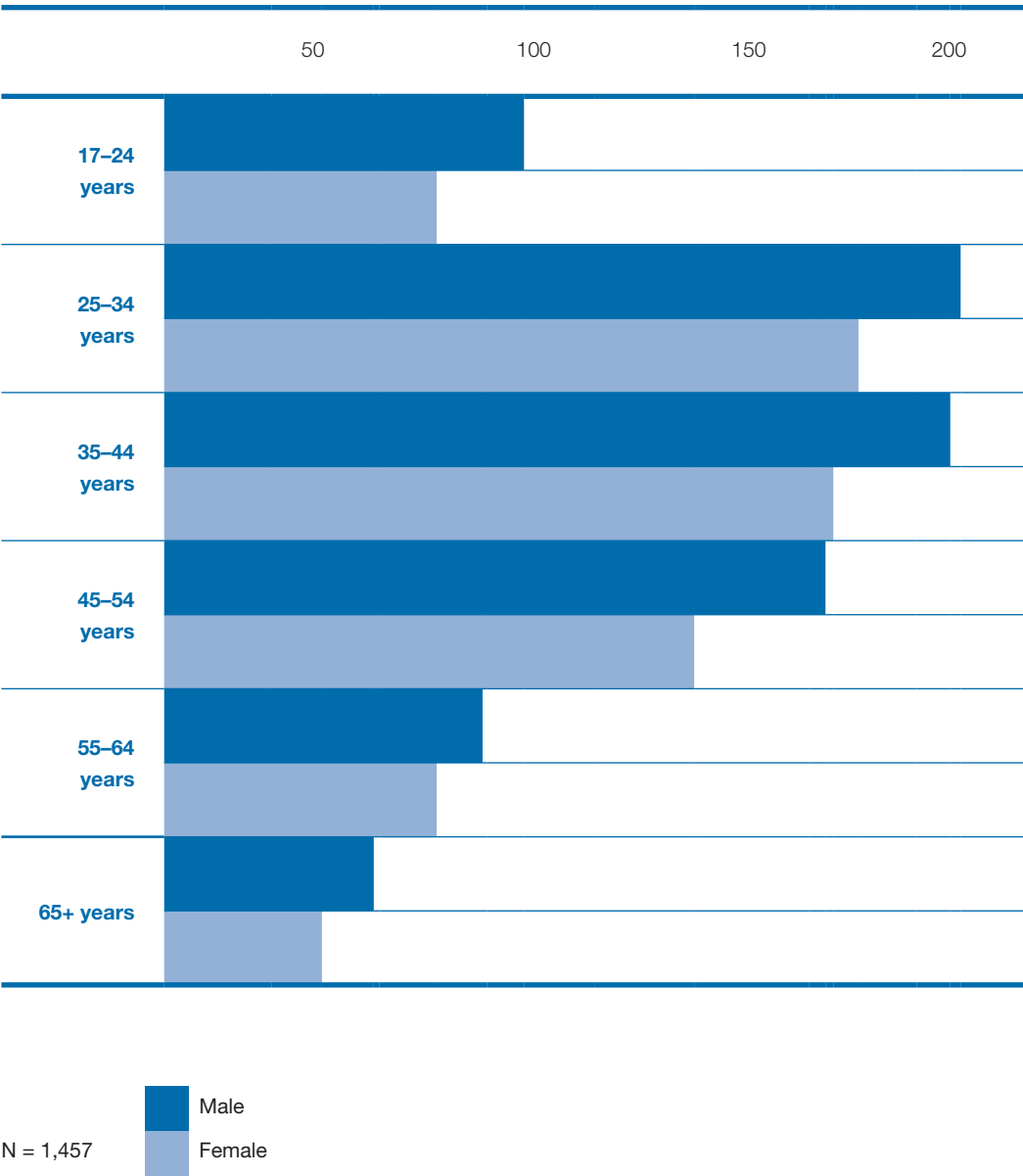**Figure 2: Age and gender distribution of sample (W4, total)**

N = 1,457

Male
Female

Table 4: Country of birth

	N=	%
Iraq	682	47.0
Afghanistan	333	23.0
Iran	131	9.0
Myanmar	84	5.8
Bhutan	81	5.6
Pakistan	28	1.9
Sri Lanka	19	1.3
Syria	17	1.2
Egypt	15	1.0
Libya	15	1.0
DR Congo	15	1.0
Nepal	12	0.8
Eritrea	9	0.6
Ethiopia	5	0.3
Sudan	3	0.2
India	1	0.1
Total	1,450	100.00

Although refugee participants in the BNLA study are diverse, 'typical' respondents were men aged between 25 and 54 years (See Figure 2), born in Iraq, Iran or Afghanistan (See Table 4), and holding a refugee protection visa obtained offshore (see Table 5).

These demographics combined account for 24% of the sample, and broadly correspond to Australia's Humanitarian Program statistics for 2013 (with the exception of Syria from which there are very few BNLA respondents). Nearly two-thirds of the sample (65%) lived in couple-headed households with children, with a further 21% living with mixed family arrangements or with unrelated household members (See Figure 3).

5. The offshore resettlement component of the Humanitarian Program comprises refugees typically referred by UNHCR and the visa subclasses: Refugee (200), In-country Special Humanitarian (201), Emergency Rescue (203), Woman at Risk (204), and Special Humanitarian Program (SHP).
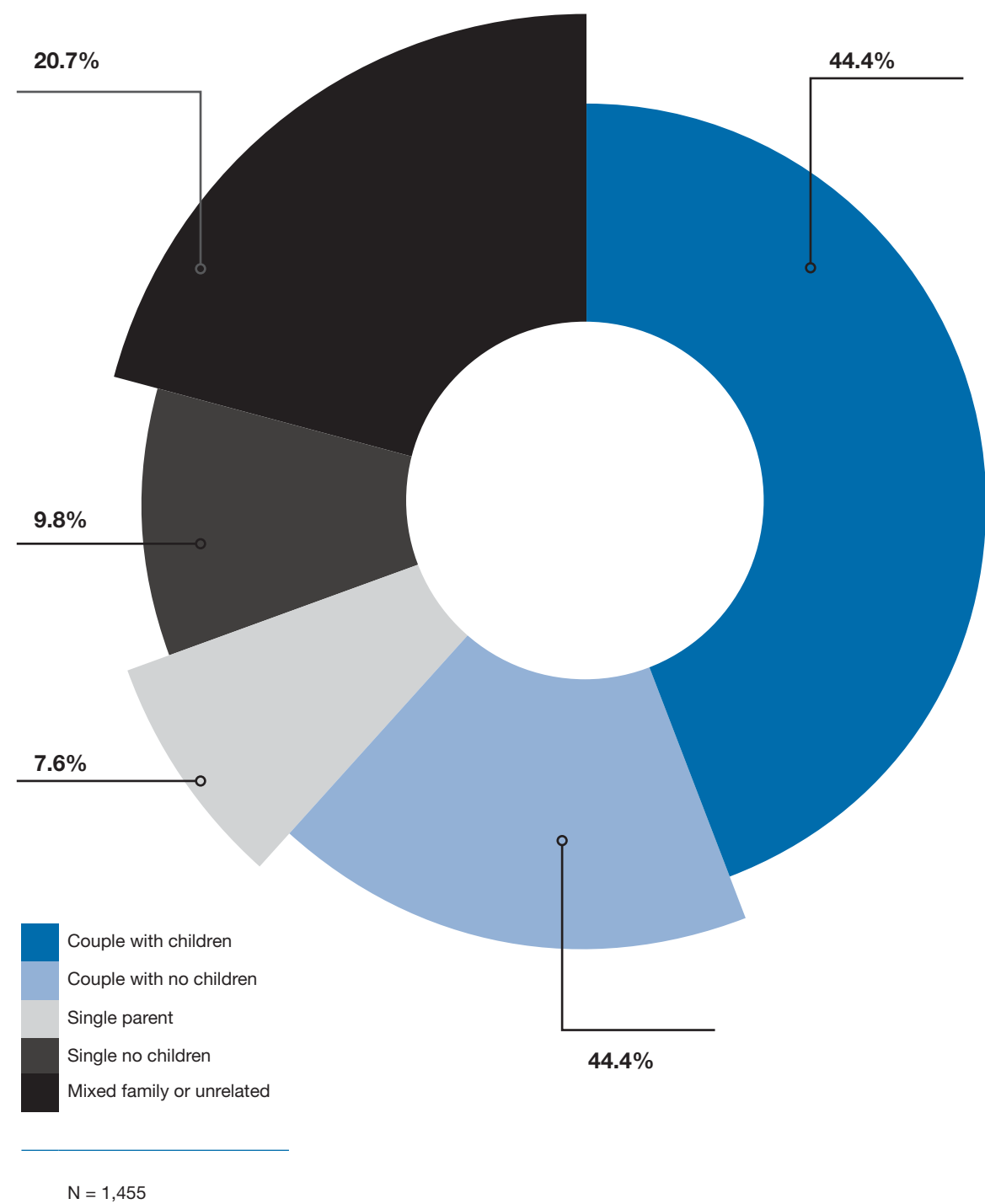
Figure 3: Household structure (W4, %)

- Couple with children
- Couple with no children
- Single parent
- Single no children
- Mixed family or unrelated

N = 1,455

Table 5: Demographic characteristics by region of birth (%)

	% North Africa/ Middle East	% Southern/ Central Asia	% Other region
(N=)	(863)	(474)	(113)
Gender:			
Male	52.7	59.3	51.3
Female	47.3	40.7	48.7
Visa subclass:			
Refugee (offshore)	82.3	63.1	87.6
Woman at risk	8.5	16.5	12.4
Onshore (asylum)	9.3	20.5	0.0

6. This reflects labour force data for all migrants which show higher rates of unemployment amongst migrants from North Africa and the Middle East during the first 10-15 years of settlement. See: https://theconversation.com/middle-eastern-migrants-arent-piling-on-to-the-dole-queue-72418.

5.2 Employment, education, English and pre-arrival family separation

5.2.1 Employment

We measured stability of paid work across Waves 2 and 4 of the survey. Around one in five respondents (21%) had regular employment while 68% were unemployed in both waves (See Table 6). Rates of regular employment were significantly higher for men (32%) compared to women (8%) (See Figure 4). The majority of those in regular employment (84%) were aged between 25-54 years. Almost all (96%) refugees over the age of 55 years were unemployed in both waves. Refugees from Southern and Central Asia had the highest rates of regular employment (33%), compared to only 14% of those from North Africa and the Middle East.

Those living alone or in mixed/unrelated households had the highest rates of regular employment (32% and 38% respectively); while fewer than 20% of all other household types were in regular employment. Onshore protection visa holders (former asylum seekers) were much more likely to be in regular employment (51%) than refugees who arrived on the 'offshore' (18%) or 'woman at risk' (12%) migration pathways (see Figure 5).

Table 6: Employment status of sample (W2-4)

	% No employment	% Irregular employment	% Regular employment
(N=)	(959)	(153)	(303)
Gender:			
Male	44.2	71.9	83.5
Female	55.8	28.1	16.5
Age group:			
Under 25 years	9.2	13.7	14.5
25-54 years	67.8	83.7	83.8
Over 55 years	23.1	2.6	1.7
Region of birth:			
North Africa/Middle East	67.6	47.1	39.5
Southern/Central Asia	26.9	36.0	50.2
Other	5.5	17.0	10.4
Visa subclass:			
Refugee (offshore)	80.5	74.5	64.0
Woman at risk	12.2	15.0	6.3
Onshore (asylum)	7.3	10.5	29.7

Figure 4: Employment status (W2-4) by gender

Male

Female

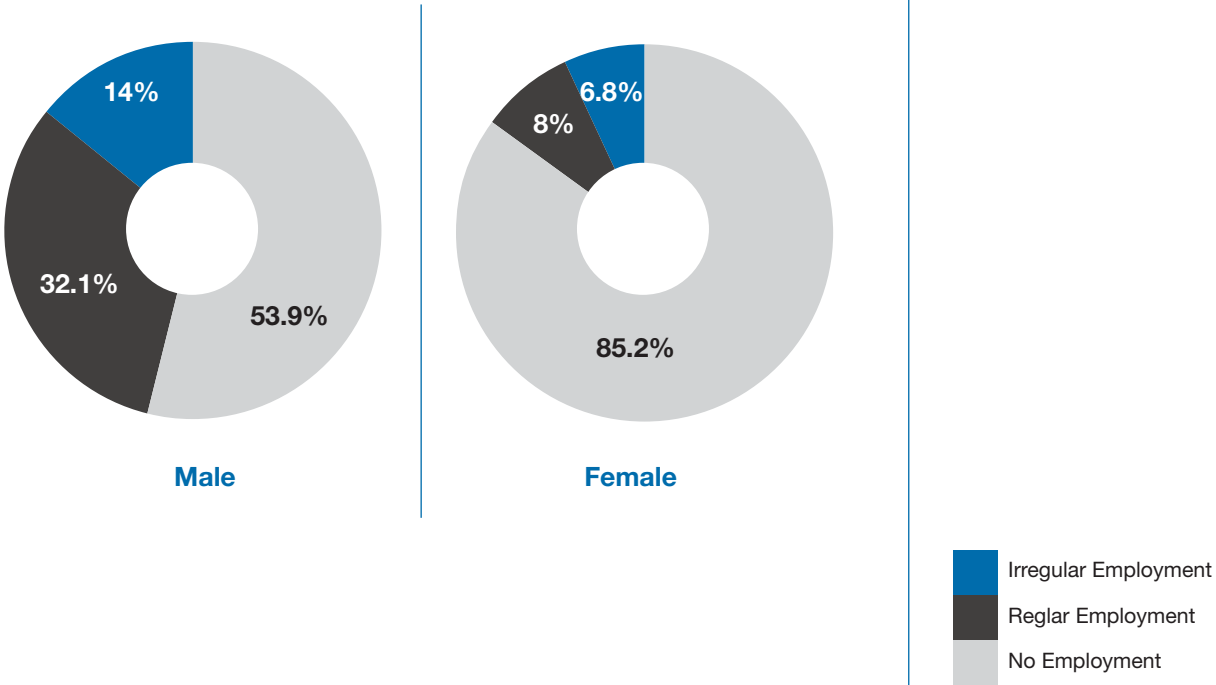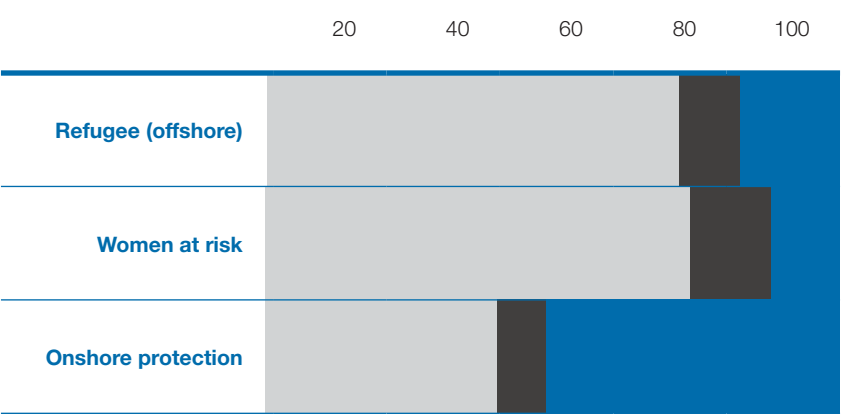Irregular Employment
Reglar Employment
No Employment

N = 1,415

Figure 5: Employment status (W2-4) by visa class

5. The offshore resettlement component of the Humanitarian Program comprises refugees typically referred by UNHCR and the visa subclasses: Refugee (200), In-country Special Humanitarian (201), Emergency Rescue (203), Woman at Risk (204), and Special Humanitarian Program (SHP).

5.2.2 Education

We measured educational attainment (completion of study or job training) across all four waves. Only 14% of the entire sample had completed some form of education or training from Wave 1 to 4, while 57% of all respondents had no educational attainment.

Men had higher education or training completion rates (17%) than women (10%); the majority of those who completed education were under the age of 45 (57%); onshore visa applicants had the highest completion rates (22%) compared to offshore visa holders (13%).

5.2.3 English

Improvement in understanding of spoken English was examined across all four waves. Nearly a quarter (24%) of the sample reported some improvement from Wave 1 to 4.

Men (26%) reported a higher understanding of English language compared than women (21%), while people aged under 25 (36%), people from North Africa and the Middle East (27%), and the women at risk (31%) visa category had the highest rates of improved understanding of spoken English.

5.2.4 Pre-arrival family separation

Nearly one in five participants (17%) had experienced forced separation from family before arriving in Australia. This was highest for people from Southern and Central Asia (26%) and 'Other' regions (35%).

Single parents were the most likely household type (34%) to have experienced pre-arrival family separation. More than one-quarter (27%) of onshore visa applicants (former asylum seekers) had experienced family separation, compared to less than 15% of offshore visa holders, suggesting more refugees admitted through the offshore/UNHCR process had migrated as family units.

Most of those who experienced pre-arrival family separation are young men living in single or mixed households, with a larger proportion of former asylum seekers (who are likely to have migrated alone).

5.3 Frequency of contact with family overseas

Maintaining contact with separated family members is evidenced as being of upmost importance to refugees during settlement. Internet communication technologies and mobile phones are often key facilitators of communication and act as a means to bring approximation to family, familiarity and some degree of involvement in family affairs (see for example, Robertson et al 2016; Cogo 2017; Shaker 2017).

Approximately 70% (N=913) of all BNLA participants had fortnightly or more frequent contact with family overseas. Women at risk (12%) and those who had applied for protection visas onshore (former asylum seekers) (17%) contact family overseas at least fortnightly. Those holding an offshore protection visa contacted family less frequently (see Table 7).

One-quarter (25%) of refugees in contact with family at least fortnightly were in regular employment, compared to 17% of those who contacted family members monthly or less often. Respondents reporting more frequent contact had higher rates of educational completion (16%) compared to those with less frequent contact (10%).

Table 7: Frequency of contact with family members living overseas (W3)

	% Fortnightly contact or more	% Monthly contact or less
(N=)	(913)	(401)
Gender:		
Male	53.7	57.6
Female	46.3	42.4
Age group:		
Under 25 years	9.8	9.5
25-54 years	73.8	73.3
Over 55 years	16.4	17.2
Region of birth:		
North Africa/Middle East	60.5	55.9
Southern/Central Asia	34.5	31.1
Other	5.0	13.0
Visa subclass:		
Refugee (offshore)	71.5	84.8
Woman at risk	11.5	10.5
Onshore (asylum)	17.0	4.7

7. For the purposes of analysis, we grouped Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea and Ethiopia together as 'Other' in the variable 'Region of Birth'.

5.4 Family overseas waiting to come to Australia

Approximately 51% of all BNLA respondents reported having family waiting to come to Australia at Wave 4 (at Wave 1 this figure was 57%). Respondents from single-headed, mixed or unrelated households had the highest proportion of people reporting family overseas waiting to come to Australia (59%).

Nearly one-third (32%) of respondents in Wave 4 reported having family members migrate to Australia since their initial arrival in 2013. The major differences are in region of birth and visa subclass: those who have had family members migrate are more likely to be from North Africa and the Middle East (67%) and holding refugee (offshore) protection visas (86%) (See table 8).
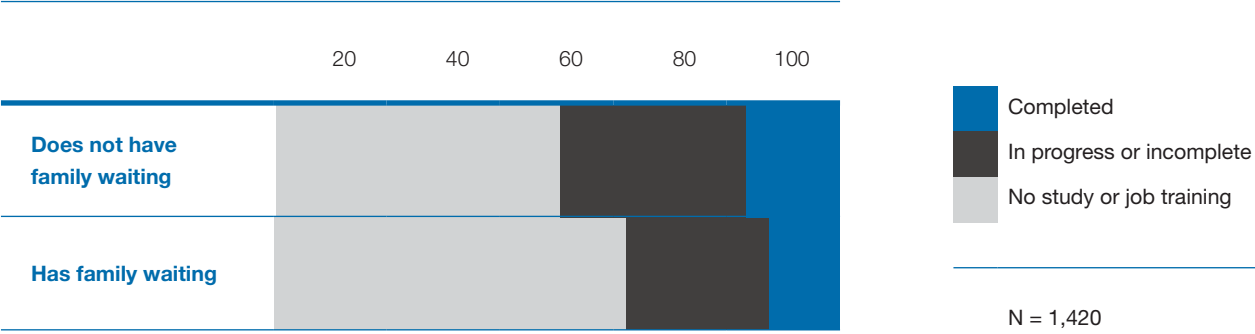
Refugees with family waiting overseas to come to Australia were more likely to have had no engagement in study or job training across all four survey waves, compared to those that did not have family waiting overseas (see Figure 6 below). There was no statistical relationship between having family waiting overseas and employment status. Although the data do not allow us to interrogate this, it is possible that in this humanitarian sample, people are choosing to forego educational opportunities to earn money in order to facilitate their lives in Australia or to send remittances to family overseas. It is also possible that the BNLA sample, which is a non-representative sample and one that comprises younger, prime working age males, might not accurately reflect the broader humanitarian population.

Table 8: Family reunion since arriving in Australia (W4)

	% Family members have not migrated	% Family members have migrated
(N=)	(979)	(459)
Gender:		
Male	56.2	52.5
Female	43.8	47.8
Age group:		
Under 25 years	10.6	10.7
25-54 years	74.6	68.9
Over 55 years	14.8	20.5
Region of birth:		
North Africa/Middle East	56.4	66.5
Southern/Central Asia	34.8	28.5
Other	8.9	5.0
Visa subclass:		
Refugee (offshore)	71.3	86.3
Woman at risk	11.9	9.8
Onshore (asylum)	16.9	3.9

8. The BNLA survey uses the 'Kessler' psychological test to ascertain probability of serious mental illness, consisting of six questions from which a derived score and grouping is measured. For more information on the Kessler method see: https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4817.0.55.001Chapter92007-08 [accessed 3 June 2019].

Figure 6: Study or job training status by family waiting (W4, %)

Legend:
- Completed
- In progress or incomplete
- No study or job training

N = 1,420

5.5 Psychological distress and waiting for family

The BNLA survey uses psychological indictors to ascertain probability of serious mental illness. Approximately 15% (N=217) of the total BNLA sample scored high enough on the scale to indicate the probability of serious mental illness.

The incidence of probable mental illness for refugees with family waiting to come to Australia was higher (18%) than for the overall sample, and lower for those who did not have family waiting (12%). In short, refugees with family waiting to come to Australia had a higher probability of serious mental illness when compared to the overall BNLA sample (Figure 7).

This finding aligns with the literature on family separation, which suggests higher incidences of distress, anxiety, worry and other negative psychological effects where families have been separated and are pursuing family reunification.

Table 8: Family reunion since arriving in Australia (W4)

	% Family members have not migrated	% Family members have migrated
(N=)	(979)	(459)
Gender:		
Male	56.2	52.5
Female	43.8	47.8
Age group:		
Under 25 years	10.6	10.7
25-54 years	74.6	68.9
Over 55 years	14.8	20.5
Region of birth:		
North Africa/Middle East	56.4	66.5
Southern/Central Asia	34.8	28.5
Other	8.9	5.0
Visa subclass:		
Refugee (offshore)	71.3	86.3
Woman at risk	11.9	9.8
Onshore (asylum)	16.9	3.9

Figure 7: Level of psychological distress by family waiting (W4, %)
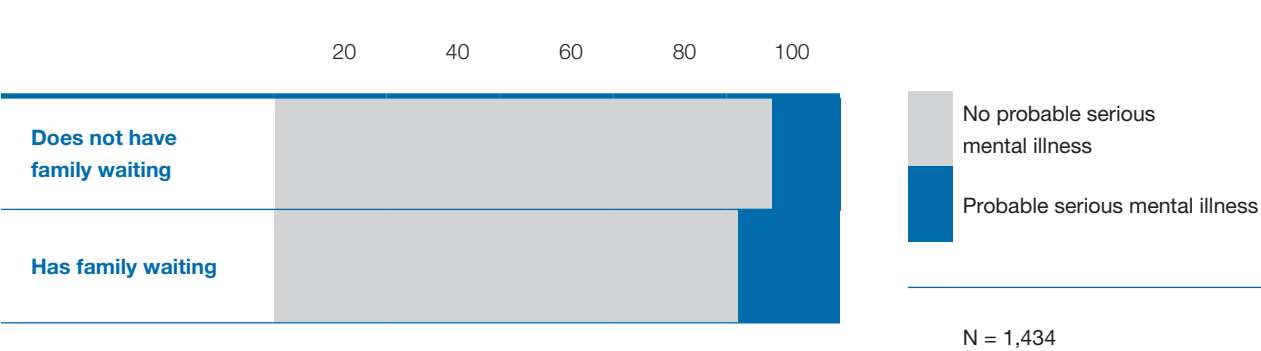
Legend:
- No probable serious mental illness
- Probable serious mental illness

N = 1,434

8. The BNLA survey uses the 'Kessler' psychological test to ascertain probability of serious mental illness, consisting of six questions from which a derived score and grouping is measured. For more information on the Kessler method see: https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4817.0.55.001Chapter92007-08 [accessed 3 June 2019].

5.6 Remittances, settlement and PTSD

Approximately 33% (N=303) of all BNLA respondents reported having sent money to family and/or friends overseas in either Wave 3 or 4. There are significant differences between those who did and did not send money overseas in the reporting period: the majority of those who sent remittances were male (81%), aged between 25-54 years (85%), from Southern/Central Asia (67%), and a large proportion were onshore applicants/had been former asylum seekers (34%) (see Table 9).

Work and study/training are clearly important factors in determining refugees' ability to remit money to friends or family overseas. Refugees who sent money to family or friends overseas were almost four times as likely to be in regular employment as those who had not sent remittances. Further, refugees who had sent remittances were almost twice as likely to have completed education or job training since arriving in Australia as those who had not sent remittances. The vast majority of remitters are men of 'prime' working age living in single-headed, mixed family or unrelated households, with greater capacity to engage in paid work than women with caring responsibilities, older people and households with dependent children.

Those unable to remit funds to family living overseas were also more likely to meet established criteria for PTSD. This suggests a complex relationship between employment, mental health and supporting family overseas that requires further analysis. It possible that being unable to provide for extended family may exaggerate mental health conditions for some people.

Table 9: Remittances (W3&4)

	% Has not sent money	% Has sent money
(N=)	(608)	(303)
Gender:		
Male	64.6	81.2
Female	35.4	18.8
Age group:		
Under 25 years	4.3	7.3
25-54 years	70.7	84.8
Over 55 years	25.0	7.9
Region of birth:		
North Africa/Middle East	71.7	20.7
Southern/Central Asia	23.9	66.6
Other	4.5	12.7
Visa subclass:		
Refugee (offshore)	78.1	58.1
Woman at risk	13.3	7.6
Onshore (asylum)	8.6	34.3

8. The BNLA survey uses the 'Kessler' psychological test to ascertain probability of serious mental illness, consisting of six questions from which a derived score and grouping is measured. For more information on the Kessler method see: https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4817.0.55.001Chapter92007-08 [accessed 3 June 2019].

5.7 Gender and family reunion

The findings demonstrate the role of family reunion for education and health outcomes, but there are also important gender dynamics that should be considered. In the BNLA study, women were over five times more likely to be single parents than men. They are also more likely to be unemployed and to have experienced financial hardship, and are therefore less likely to be in a financial position to send money to family overseas. Finally, women are also more likely to be at risk of serious mental illness or PTSD than men.

These findings may be a function of the BNLA sample, given that many of the women in the study were women already identified as being at significant risk. Regardless, differences between men and women on a range of settlement outcomes indicate the need to look more closely into the lives of women, particularly those women with parenting or caring responsibilities. Women with dependent children have urgent needs for familial support that will not only contribute to their own wellbeing, employment and educational opportunities, but to the wellbeing of their children as well. This is an important gap in the current literature and one that requires urgent attention given the intergenerational effects of trauma and depression (see for example, Sangalang & Vang 2017; East & Gahagan 2018; Bryant et al 2018).

5.8 Hopes and dreams of BNLA respondents

An open-ended survey question in the BNLA study offers insight relating to respondents' future hopes for themselves and their family. An open-ended invitation to comment on 'hopes and dreams for you and your family over the next 12 months' reveals 317 mentions of the word 'family' in Wave 3 of the BNLA data, represented in a word cloud in Figure 8 below. A thematic analysis of this question identified instances where respondents mentioned the well-being of their family and/or reuniting with family as 'hopes and dreams'. Almost one in five respondents (N = 194; 17.3%) commented that their 'hope and dream' was for the well-being of their family. Respondents linked family well-being with themselves and family members being safe, in secure housing, speaking English confidently, being well-educated, employed, and financially independent.

Safety (N = 23): The relative safety of Australia compared to their home country was seen as a precondition to achieving well-being. Australia was variously described as 'safe', 'secure', 'peaceful' and 'tranquil'. Simply living together with family in Australia was enough for many respondents to achieve a sense of well-being. For those with family living in unsafe conditions overseas, respondents spoke of the resultant stress and anxiety. This was seen to hinder their ability to achieve a 'happy, healthy' life for themselves and their family.

Housing (N = 13): Securing adequate and affordable housing was seen as essential to family well-being. Housing ownership or long-term government housing for themselves and their family was a goal for several respondents.

Figure 8: Word cloud of Wave 3 BNLA responses to 'hopes and dreams for the future'

Note: The image includes only words with a minimum frequency of 10. Common 'stop' words such as 'are,' 'be', 'can' 'if', 'the' and 'with' have been filtered out

English language (N = 19): Improvement of English was a hope for many. This was identified as essential to gaining employment and further education, the hallmarks of a 'successful' life.

Education (N = 76): Completing university-level education was identified as central to secure a 'good job', become financially independent and a 'productive' member of Australian society. Many saw their children's educational success as a pathway for them to secure well-paid, long-term employment and a 'good life' in Australia.

Employment (N = 53): Spouse, children, or the respondents themselves securing a 'good job' was seen as essential to family well-being. Education and employment were commonly spoken of together, and many hoped their children gained well-paid, secure employment following university studies. Many hoped for employment as a way to gain financial independence for themselves and their family, and not to rely on welfare payments. The 'hope and dream' of almost a quarter of respondents (N = 264; 23.5%) was reuniting with family members overseas. Themes raised in relation to family reunion included safety, health, housing, education, and employment.

Safety (N = 18): Respondents commonly feared unsafe or dangerous conditions for family still overseas. Australia was identified as a safe, secure place to settle, and reuniting with family members over the next 12 months was central to achieving a 'happy life together in safety'.

ALMOST ONE IN FIVE RESPONDENTS COMMENTED THAT THEIR 'HOPE AND DREAM' WAS FOR THE WELL-BEING OF THEIR FAMILY.

Health (N = 13): Feelings of stress, worry and isolation were identified while family remained overseas. Some commented on the impact this had on their mental health, while others worried about family with health conditions in an unsafe country with little support.

Housing (N = 10): Securing housing was identified as aiding the family reunion process, and was (along with employment) important for respondents to establish in order to provide for family upon their hopeful arrival in Australia.

Education (N = 15): Respondents wished to undertake university-level education in order to secure employment and assist their family with the settlement process. Those with children or spouse overseas wished for them to participate in the education opportunities available in Australia.

Employment (N = 20): Securing employment was identified as an important step in sponsoring family members overseas. Having a 'good job' or starting a business were identified as ways to assist financially with the family reunion process, and provide for family members upon their arrival. Government payments were identified as inadequate for the cost of living, and gaining employment was seen as essential to support themselves and their family following reunion.

6

Case Studies

The following two case studies look at refugees who have experienced family separation and/or reunification since arriving in Australia. These case studies illustrate lived realities, providing real life insights into the issues and challenges presented in the literature review and BNLA analysis above.

Note the names of the refugees featured in these case studies have been changed for anonymity in line with Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee requirements.

6.1 Case study 1: Ali

Ali arrived in Australia in 2013 as a young adult with three of his younger siblings, all financially dependent on him. Before his arrival, he had worked with the Australian army and coalition forces in Afghanistan as an interpreter. Once he had finished his contract with the Australian army, his army colleagues suggested he apply for a visa to come to Australia with his financially dependent family.

Given that the SHP visa criteria covers only financially dependent family members, Ali had to leave his mother, sister, step-brother and grandmother behind in Afghanistan. He did not know that their lives would be in danger after he left, however his family in Afghanistan were soon threatened with death by the Taliban who arrived on their doorstep with guns. His family fled Afghanistan to Pakistan where they are now registered with UNHCR. They are unable to work or study given they are not citizens. Ali and his siblings send them monthly remittances to support their lives in Pakistan and stay in regular contact with them by phone.

Ali has twice applied for a family reunification visa to bring his family, now in Pakistan, to Australia. He received assistance with his applications from Northern Settlement Service to provide legal support and help with collating relevant evidential documents. However, his two applications have been refused by DoHA. Ali has trouble understanding why his applications for family reunion have been twice refused, referring to the difficulties associated with the process including providing evidence that his family is in life-threatening danger in Afghanistan,

"I just want to try to get my family here…We all send the documents to Australian immigration and they're saying 'yes, we accept they are registered with UNHCR and we accept that they are in Pakistan, but we don't accept they are being threatened or they be in danger or something like that in Afghanistan' …but that's the thing that we cannot prove…how you can have filming or a document of that situation when people with guns come to your doorstep and you have to prove to immigration so immigration can approve your application?"

The family reunification process has been difficult, stressful and frustrating for Ali and his siblings, with long processing timeframes and disappointing outcomes,

"It always takes long, they [DoHA] are always asking for different documents and then at the end of the day they say no and they refuse it and that's stressful you know."

Despite these family reunification setbacks, Ali and his siblings have experienced a relatively positive and successful settlement in Australia. They were supported immediately from arrival for the first month with accommodation and assistance navigating shopping, public transport and job access. Ali and his siblings had relatively good English language skills and an understanding of Australian culture because of Ali's work with the Australian army in Afghanistan.

While Ali reflects that his life in Australia is good – *"So far, I'm happy here and it's all good"* – with him and his siblings having a job and a house in Australia, the impact of family separation has been a particularly stressful part of the settlement process. Ali's younger sister attempted suicide following their arrival in Australia and the other sibling suffered from feelings of loneliness. Ali carried the burden of care and support for his siblings in this difficult time. He feels life in Australia would be less stressful if his family left behind could join him.

"If my mum is here, all my siblings can go to study, we would have less stress, with feeling normal, something like that."

6.2 Case study 2: Adonay

Adonay left his wife and four children behind in Eritrea when he travelled to Australia as well as his parents and other extended family. He has been separated from them for a period of 10 years now. The long journey to Australia took Adonay from Eritrea, via Sudan and Indonesia, before he arrived to Christmas Island by boat in 2015. He was at sea for four days and nights without food before his boat was intercepted by the Australian navy who transferred all passengers to Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre.

Adonay was first issued with a three year Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) which restricted him from working in Australia, but he has now been on a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) for the past year and able to work. Adonay is happy that he can now work to support his family in Africa, who are now living in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. Given that Adonay arrived by boat after 2012 and that he was first a TPV and now a SHEV holder, his access to the family reunion process is restricted. Adonay is therefore unable to initiate this process for at least the SHEV's five year period. Adonay is further restricted from traveling outside of Australia on the SHEV, unless he receives permission from DoHA, so it is almost impossible for him to see his family.

Adonay travelled to Australia alone and has no family in Australia. Making friends since his arrival has been hard, although Adonay feels supported by his friends, work colleagues and church community as he deals with his family separation. The burden of family separation is with him every day,

"The main thing that disturbs me that I can't control is missing my family. Every day and every night, I think about them."

Although he is in regular, weekly contact with his family in Ethiopia by phone, this does little to ease feelings of missing them. In fact, contacting family does not always bring about positive feelings,

"Again, when I contact them… I regret myself that if I were with them or they were with me, I could help them like that or I could share with them… it's hard."

Adonay feels uncertain about his ability to reunite with his family in the future. He knows he is prevented from accessing the family reunion process because of his current visa conditions. He is hoping that he will next be transferred to a prescribed permanent residence visa, however, he is not sure if this will allow him to initiate family reunion proceedings.

"I escaped to save my life and to get a better life, to get the rights of human rights and then we're genuine refugees, genuine asylum seekers, we don't have any crime, we don't have anything… We passed through the legal process at the UN refugee camp, even my family… so I'd like to get the right of my family, the right of family reunion and to get a certain life."

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