



# PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION, HEALTH & WELLBEING FOR WOMEN FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

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The research was undertaken on Kaurna land, and we pay respects to Kaurna elders past, present and emerging.

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## Executive Summary

This report examines the experiences of women from refugee backgrounds in Australia and the intersection between their ability to access and sustain meaningful involvement in employment and the relationship of this to their health and wellbeing.

Work has long been recognised as a path to health, wellbeing, and social inclusion. For women from refugee backgrounds who are building a new home in a foreign country in which they will rarely have pre-existing networks and support, work is especially critical for providing them with income, community, meaning, support and wellbeing. However, there is a high unemployment rate amongst refugees globally and in Australia. For women from refugee backgrounds, the challenges in accessing and sustaining paid employment are more entrenched and systemic than for refugees more generally or for other cohorts of migrants in Australia. There is also a dearth of research examining the experiences of women from refugee backgrounds in relation to their employment, health, and wellbeing.

In this report we examine the findings from a three-year project funded by the federal Department of Social Services investigating the pathways to employment for social inclusion and health and wellbeing for women from refugee backgrounds. The aim of this project was to uncover the barriers and facilitators to employment through surveying the existing, albeit limited, literature, analysing the Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) quantitative dataset, and by following the employment trajectories of women from refugee backgrounds over three years through a qualitative longitudinal analysis. We also conducted interviews and focus groups with employers and service providers. Cumulatively, these strands of the research have enabled us to build a compelling and rich understanding of the experiences of women from refugee backgrounds in the Australian labour market.

The analysis of the BNLA data which followed participants for five years (waves) found that the proportion of refugee women who had participated in paid work prior to arriving in Australia and were currently in paid work across each wave of the study was much lower than for refugee men. Although employment rates for refugee women increased with additional years of living in Australia the proportion of refugee women who were employed only caught up with the wave 1 rate of male refugee employment four years after settling in Australia, and remained at less than 13 per cent at wave 5. Employment for refugee women in Australia was concentrated in occupations that are lower-skilled than was the case before migration. Refugee women had low rates of full-time employment, and much lower average employment income per week compared to refugee men.

The BNLA analysis also found that there was a high degree of uncertainty for refugee men and women when they first settled in Australia as to how to look for a job, and for almost a quarter of refugee women job opportunities in Australia were worse than they expected before arriving in the country. Knowledge of how to look for a job improved after living in Australia for an additional four years, but 38 per cent of refugee women still felt that they would not know how to look for a job at all, and 25 per cent of women in wave 5 reported that a lack of employment opportunities was something that still made settling into their life more difficult. Other difficulties in obtaining a job reported by refugees were also persistent through to wave 5 and the most commonly reported reasons included no Australian

work experience, inadequate English language competence, lack of necessary skills/qualifications and inability to secure a job in an occupation in which they had overseas experience. More respondents reported no suitable jobs as a reason for difficulty finding employment at wave 5. A fairly low proportion of refugees sought assessment of their overseas qualifications in Australia. At least 12 per cent of refugee women commenced or completed study or job training in each wave of the BNLA and more than half of refugee women surveyed in wave 5 planned to do some kind of study other than English language skills. The descriptive analysis of characteristics associated with employment found significant relationships between self-assessed health, probable serious mental illness, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), difficulty travelling to places needed to go, English language proficiency and knowledge of how to look for a job and employment status.

Interviews and focus groups with refugee women, service providers, and employers found a range of barriers and facilitators to health promoting employment. Barriers included English language proficiency; limited skills, education and qualifications and issues with recognition of these; lack of local experience and referees; lack of appropriate jobs to fit with care responsibilities and study commitments (including English lessons); discrimination in seeking work and exploitation within jobs; temporary visas; and physical and mental health factors. A range of issues with accessing services in terms of eligibility (in particular in relation to visa status and time in Australia) were also identified and limitations to existing job network supports were reported alongside mixed experiences of other employment support services. Employers further identified that job providers assigned them workers that did not fit their requirements and did not provide ongoing support.

Employment facilitators identified in the interviews and focus groups were women's motivation to find employment and their strong work ethic. Social networks also offered women information and referral to employment and emotional and practical support once in employment. At a service level, access to volunteering opportunities and mentoring, and key relationships between services and employers were also important. Personalised tailored support that addressed pre- and post-migration stressors including mental health issues helped to assist women into employment and those that continued to support women (and their employers) after a job was acquired were most successful in securing sustainable employment outcomes. Employers with a strong ethos to help refugee women into employment were particularly successful in facilitating good employment outcomes, and workplace practices such as the provision of buddy shifts, the use of interpreters and translating important documents into key languages, creating open lines of communication between workers and employers/management and appropriate supervision and direction were all also identified as helping women once in work.

Our longitudinal analysis of participants identified that these facilitators and barriers could vary over time and that employment experiences were very interrelated with other life circumstances. Around half of the women had improving employment experiences where they either gained employment over the course of the study or were progressing along employment pathways through education; almost a third had generally negative or worsening experiences seeking work or in work; and the remainder had a mixture of positive and negative experiences.



This report uncovers the myriad substantial barriers facing women from refugee backgrounds when seeking to enter employment in Australia and to sustain meaningful involvement in the labour market over time. It is important that women from refugee backgrounds are supported into employment and do not permanently remain outside the labour market because of these barriers or become entrenched in low skilled employment which does not reflect their skills, experience, and aspirations. The report reveals the disturbing tendency to funnel women from refugee backgrounds into low-skilled work and the failure to address the multifaceted exploitation, ranging from wage theft to discrimination and racism, which is a feature of their involvement in the labour market.

There are, however, things we can do to address the systematic vulnerability of women from refugee backgrounds to facilitate their entry into meaningful and sustained employment in Australia. The report uncovers the strategies and mechanisms that service providers, employers and the women themselves have utilised to overcome structural barriers and secure a pathway into employment. To this end, we make 16 recommendations (outlined in Chapter 5) aimed at service providers, employers and government which provide a template for reducing the barriers and expanding the facilitators that enable women from refugee backgrounds to realise their labour market potential in Australia.

With refugees forming such a critical part of Australian society, it is clear from the research that this is a time of tremendous opportunity for women from refugee backgrounds as Australia rebuilds its economy and workforce after the upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there is also a risk that they will be left behind without an explicit focus on supporting their participation in the workforce. A national refugee employment strategy is required which encompasses concerted investment and commitment to building comprehensive, targeted, and personalised support for women from refugee backgrounds in all facets of their life.

A policy brief accompanies this report, summarising these key findings and recommendations. Please see Appendix 3.

## Chapter 1: The study

Extensive previous research has established that people with refugee or asylum seeker (hereafter ‘refugee’ unless specifically in relation to visa status) backgrounds face a range of challenges both prior to, and after resettlement in a new country [1-3]. Prior to resettlement, such challenges include death of, or separation from loved ones, physical or sexual abuse, and other forms of violence [4-6]. Upon resettlement in a new host country, people with refugee backgrounds face issues such as lack of employment and education opportunities, housing issues, language barriers, racism and discrimination, and social isolation [1, 2, 7-10]. These challenges make the resettlement process difficult [8, 11], and may negatively affect health and wellbeing [9, 10, 12-14]. Employment has been identified as a key predictor of health and wellbeing for people with refugee backgrounds, and a key priority after resettlement [15, 16].

### Aims

The project aimed to examine pathways to health promoting employment for women from refugee backgrounds.

### Background

Generally, the available national and international research shows that people from refugee backgrounds face many barriers to gaining employment and are employed at rates lower than the general population [3, 17]. Furthermore, women from refugee backgrounds are employed at lower rates, and face several additional barriers in gaining employment, when compared to their male counterparts [10, 18-23]. For example, Feeney [20] identified that many women from refugee backgrounds in Australia face challenges learning English, including accessing English language education, as well as gaining qualifications, particularly where they are responsible for caring commitments in the family. Research has also found that the likelihood of women from refugee backgrounds finding employment is impacted by the views held in their home countries; specifically, if women working is viewed unfavourably, this negatively affects labour force participation including in their host country [24]. Other identified barriers include a lack of appropriate, culturally safe employment services, discrimination from potential employers, social isolation whereby women may not have the incidental contacts or social capital to find work, and temporary visa status which is unattractive to employers [18, 25].

As noted above, research with refugee populations has highlighted that finding employment is considered a top priority for many refugee women upon resettlement [26]. Importantly, studies have shown that employment leads to a range of positive outcomes including building social connections, financial stability, and English language proficiency, as well as promoting positive health and wellbeing [3, 27, 28]. In relation to health and wellbeing, a number of previous studies have highlighted the impact of unemployment in particular on the wellbeing of people from refugee backgrounds upon resettlement [16, 17, 26, 28, 29]. For example, a 10-year longitudinal study, by Beiser and Hou [30]





reported that when refugee people of South East Asian backgrounds living in Canada were struggling to integrate into the Canadian labour force, a high rate of major depression was reported. However, as stable employment was gained, the rate of major depression declined. Studies have also shown that post-migration stress, and particularly unemployment, can increase the risk of developing mental health problems such as anxiety and depression [13, 15]. Ozturk and colleagues [31] identified that unemployment can add to a sense of loneliness and deteriorating self-esteem for people from refugee backgrounds, which is compounded because resettling in a new country and adapting to a new culture can invoke feelings of isolation. Physical and psychological impacts have also been identified as a result of being unable to support families financially, and where employment status does not match the level of qualifications that refugee women may have [2, 31-33].

Overall, then, the available research demonstrates that — while employment is an important priority for people with refugee backgrounds following resettlement — rates of employment remain low, particularly for women. Emerging research has identified a range of barriers facing people with refugee backgrounds in gaining employment, particularly employment which is health promoting. Additionally, research has pointed to relationships between employment (particularly unemployment status) and health and wellbeing. However, the precise barriers and facilitators to employment for women with refugee backgrounds specifically remain under-explored, as does the particular relationship between employment and health and wellbeing for this group.

## **Project background**

The project was conducted between 2018 and 2021 and was supported by a Reference Group made up of representatives from settlement services, community organisations, employment support services, and vocational training institutions, as well as a Community Advisory Group made up of members of refugee communities (see Appendix 1). These two groups met with the researchers several times each year to discuss the project's progress and to gain insights from members in relation to interview questions, recruitment, translations, and the results.

## **Methodology**

The study used a mixed-methods approach. Specifically:

1. Analysis of the Building a New Life in Australia longitudinal dataset
2. A qualitative three-year longitudinal study of refugee women's experience in the labour market
3. Interviews with service providers and employers
4. Workshop consultation

These are outlined in more detail below.



## Building a New Life in Australia analysis

An analysis of the Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) longitudinal dataset was undertaken. The BNLA study aims to trace the settlement journey of humanitarian migrants in order to better understand the factors that positively or negatively influence people's settlement processes. The BNLA study collected information from people who either arrived in Australia with a permanent humanitarian visa or were granted a permanent humanitarian visa between May and December 2013.

BNLA was commissioned by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and is managed by the Australian Institute for Family Studies. The in-scope population for the survey comprised adult humanitarian migrants settling in Australia within the target timeframe who had been issued with a permanent humanitarian visa. The study aimed to include 1500 migrant families, 70 per cent of whom were in offshore sub-groups and 30 per cent on-shore participants to reflect the distribution of government grant applications [34].

There are five waves of data available in the BNLA. Wave 1 data were collected between October 2013 and March 2014 and additional waves were subsequently conducted on an annual basis. This report uses data from all five waves of the BNLA. It focuses on waves 1 and 5 to provide an overview of education and employment characteristics of refugee women, focuses on waves 3 and 5 for descriptive analysis of characteristics associated with a higher or lower likelihood of employment. Wave 5 data were collected between October 2017 and March 2018, therefore comparisons data from different waves enable comparisons of settlement processes and outcomes shortly after settling in Australia with outcomes after additional years of living in Australia.

A total of 4,053 migrant families were identified from the Settlement Database as potential participants in the study. The cohort of families initiated for contact comprised 2,769 families, of which 2,031 families were successfully contacted, yielding a contact rate of 73 per cent [35]. A total of 85 per cent of successfully contacted families completed a survey in wave 1, comprising 1,509 Principal Applicants, 755 Secondary Applicant adults and 135 Secondary Applicant adolescents [34]. This provided a total of 2,399 respondents. Wave 1 respondents included 1,307 men and 1,092 women.

The cohort of migrant families initiated for contact in wave 5 included 1,446 families, of which 1,215 were successfully contacted (83 per cent). Ninety-four per cent of successfully contacted families completed interviews. A total of 1,881 surveys were completed in wave 5, 1,144 of which were Principal applicants. Wave 5 respondents included 995 men and 886 women. More detailed information about the BNLA project is available on the DSS website (<https://www.dss.gov.au>) or the Australian Institute for Family Studies website (<https://aifs.gov.au/projects/building-new-life-australia>).

### Qualitative three-year longitudinal study of refugee women

The study included a longitudinal focus on women's experiences via qualitative data. Data were collected through individual interviews conducted over a two-year period commencing in May 2019.



Forty-two women participated in the first wave of interviews, with 30 women participating in all three waves of the longitudinal study.

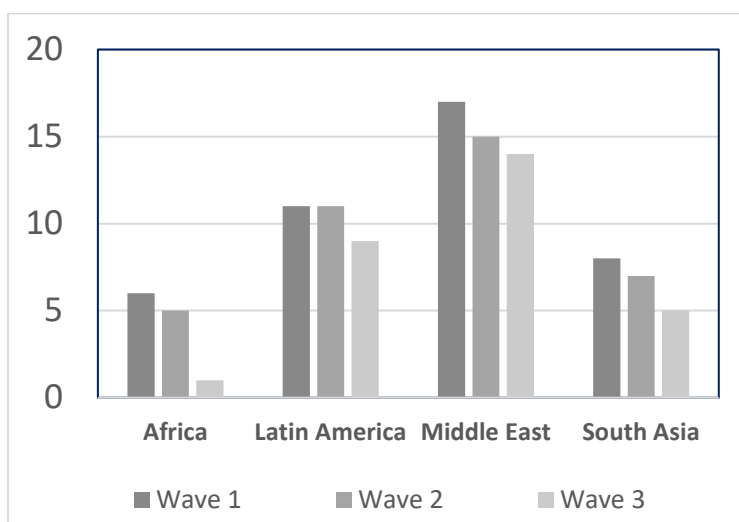
Interviews were conducted either in-person or via telephone link. When conducted in-person, interviews were held in a range of locations according to participant preference, such as in homes or in public spaces such as cafes. Interpreters were made available to participants in their preferred language or conducted in English if participants chose this option. Participants were given a \$50 Coles/Myer voucher following each interview to thank them for their time.

***Participant characteristics (at time of first interview):***

- Age ranged from 18 to 49 yrs (mean=31yrs)
- Current visa:
  - Humanitarian (N= 22), Women at risk (N=7), Partner (N=5) Temporary visas (N=8; 5 Safe Haven Enterprise Visas, 2 Bridging Visas and 1 provisional partner visa)
- Household structure:
  - Fairly even representation of married/partnered, single, living with children, separated from family overseas
- Time in Australia ranged from six weeks to nearly seven years
- Number of women interviewed across waves and number employed:
  - First wave: 42 interviews with women with just under 40 per cent employed
  - Second wave: 38 women were re-interviewed with 35 per cent employed
  - Third wave: 30 women were re-interview for the third time with just under 50 per cent employed
- Overall, 24 of the 42 women had worked since being in Australia.

The Figure below shows the regions of origins of the women across the three waves:

**Figure 1: Region of origin of participants**



## Service provider and employer interviews

Additional data were collected via individual interviews with employers and service providers working with women from refugee backgrounds. These employers and service providers were not specifically focused on refugee women; however, all had at least some experience in working with this cohort. In some cases, service providers were specifically focused on employment for people from refugee or migrant backgrounds.

Service providers participants:

- 12 Service providers (10 women, two men)
- Refugee focused and mainstream services/organisations
- Settlement services, Education and training, employment, employment and mental health

Employer participants:

- 14 Employers (10 women, four men)
- Care sector (disability/aged care); service industries (retail/cleaning/interpreting); horticulture; food production
- Most employed large numbers of workers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds with two specifically employing women from a refugee background (disability care/interpreting)

## Workshop consultation

The final data collection point for this study was through consultation with stakeholders. This consultation process included dissemination of findings to these stakeholders at a workshop held on 30 June 2021. Preliminary findings from the project (analysis of the BLNA data and interviews with refugee women, service providers and employers) were presented and attendees were invited to take part in focus group discussions to gather their perspectives on the findings and the preliminary recommendations. Attendees from a range of refugee and non-refugee focused service providers, community organisations, representatives from state and federal government departments, employers of women from refugee backgrounds, and community members attended the workshop. Thirty-five individuals took part in four separate focus group discussions (three face-to-face and one via Zoom) with an additional follow-up interview covering the same questions conducted with an additional service provider who could not attend.

## Analysis

Interviews and focus group discussions were audio recorded (with informed consent) and transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. In this report, we use pseudonyms for the refugee women participants.



## Chapter 2: Quantitative findings from the BNLA

The BNLA study collects information on a range of topics. The scope of the ‘employment and income’ topic in the BNLA includes: current employment status, employment characteristics, prior occupation and work experience, experience of unemployment in Australia, income and government benefits received, and financial stress. Many of these characteristics would be expected to change after humanitarian migrants have been settled in Australia for a longer period. The BNLA also includes topics on education and training, health, community support, English language proficiency and demographics. We identified the characteristics likely to be associated with employment from the literature examining refugee employment for men [36-38] and by exploring data available in the BNLA topics.

In this report we first present quantitative evidence on employment status and key employment characteristics, comparing the experiences of humanitarian migrants in wave 1 and wave 5. We also compare employment status and occupation in waves 1 and 5 to pre-arrival experiences to provide further context for humanitarian migrants settlement experiences. The relationship between characteristics likely to be associated with employment and employment status is then investigated via tabulations of factors of interest by employment status.

### Employment status

- At wave 1, respondents reported their employment status before migration. Before migration, 30 per cent of women did paid work in a job, business or on a farm (Table 1). The figure for men was much higher, with more than 72 per cent of men reporting that they were employed before migration.
- In wave 1, only 12 women were currently working, representing one per cent of the sample. The proportion of male refugees in paid work was higher than that for women, but was still very low, only 10 per cent of the sample (133 men were currently working).
- Employment rates were much improved in wave 5. Almost half of refugee men (46 per cent) reported that they were employed, compared with 12.5 per cent of refugee women (111 respondents). The employment rate for refugee women was still very low in wave 5, but it had caught up with the wave 1 employment rate for refugee men.

**Table 1: Did you do any paid work/Are you currently in paid work?**

<i>Pre-Arrival</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	948	72.5	332	30.4	1,280	53.4
No	349	26.7	753	69.0	1,102	45.9
Don't know/Missing	10	0.8	7	0.6	17	0.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,307</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,092</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>2,399</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Wave 1</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	133	10.2	12	1.1	145	6.0
No	1,162	88.9	1,068	97.8	2,230	93.0
Don't know/Missing	12	0.9	12	1.1	24	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,307</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,092</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>2,399</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	453	45.5	111	12.5	564	30.0
No	534	53.7	769	86.8	1,303	69.3
Don't know/Missing	8	0.8	6	0.7	14	0.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>995</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>886</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,881</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5

### Transitions in employment status

- 106 of the 133 refugee men (80 per cent) who were in paid work in wave 1 were also in paid work before migration. Only 106 of the 942 men (11 per cent) who were employed before arriving in Australia were also employed in wave 1. There are 27 refugee men who were in paid work in wave 1 who did not do any paid work before migration (representing eight per cent of the sample who did not work). (Table A1a, Appendix 2)
- Transitions in employment status for women refugees from pre-arrival to wave 1 followed a similar pattern to the transitions for men, albeit with much smaller numbers. Eight out of 11 women who were in paid work in wave 1 were also in paid work before migration (Table A1b, Appendix 2). Only eight out of the 327 migrant women (three per cent) who were employed before migration were also employed in wave 1. Three women were in paid work in wave 1 who did not do any paid work before settling in Australia.
- Sixty-six out of the 83 men (80 per cent) who were employed in wave 1 remained in employment in wave 5. After an additional four years living in Australia 387 men obtained paid work who were not in paid work in wave 1 (representing 85 per cent of men who were employed in wave 5) (see Table A2a, Appendix 2).
- The same improvement for refugee women as was observed for men, but the transitions are rather more striking for women due to the very small number in paid work in wave 1. Three out of seven women who were employed in wave 1 also had employment in wave 5. After an additional four years living in Australia 107 women obtained paid work who were not in paid work in wave 1 (representing 97 per cent of women who were employed in wave 5). (Table A2b, Appendix 2)



- After an additional four years living in Australia 350 out of the 716 men (49 per cent) who were in paid work before migration were in paid work in wave 5. A much higher 102 men were in paid work in wave 5 who did not do paid work before migration (representing 39 per cent of men who did not work). There were 350 men in paid work (77 per cent) in wave 5 who also worked before migration (Table A3a, Appendix 2).
- The improvement for women involves smaller numbers than for men. For refugee women, 61 out of the 265 (23 per cent) who were employed before migration were also employed in wave 5 (Table A3b). There were 50 women in paid work in wave 5 who did not do paid work before settling in Australia (representing eight per cent of women who previously did not work). Sixty-one of the 111 women (55 per cent) who were employed in wave 5 had been employed before migration (Table A3b, Appendix 2).

### Worked in Australia ever

BNLA asked respondents who were not currently working whether they had ever done paid work in Australia. Analysis of the proportion of women who have ever worked in addition to those who are currently working provides a picture of refugee labour market activity since settling in Australia that captures fluctuations in employment status.

- In wave 1, there were six refugee women who had previously done paid work since arriving in Australia in addition to the 12 women who were currently working (Table A4, Appendix 2). For refugee men the number and proportion was higher, with six per cent of men who were not currently working having done paid work since settling in Australia.
- The proportion of both men and women who have done paid work but are not currently working was higher in wave 5, as would be expected. Almost six per cent of women and almost 16 per cent of men had previously done paid work since arriving in Australia but were not currently working. There was, however, a substantial proportion of refugee men and women who are not currently working and have never done paid work since settling in Australia. (Table A4, Appendix 2).

### Unpaid work

In addition to collecting information on paid work, BNLA also asks respondents whether they did any types of unpaid work either before migration or at the time of the survey. This is a multiple response question where participants can mark all types of unpaid work that apply.

- Fourteen per cent of refugee men and eight per cent of refugee women did unpaid work in a family business before migration (Table A5, Appendix 2). Almost 30 per cent of men looked after their family/home, as did 61 per cent of women. Eleven per cent of refugee men and almost six per cent of women did some other kind of unpaid work.
- The types of unpaid work undertaken after settling in Australia differed somewhat from unpaid work before migration. A much lower two per cent of men and three per cent of women did unpaid work in a family business in wave 1 compared with before migration. Twenty-four per cent of men and 56 per cent of women looked after their family/home. A larger proportion of

men and women responded that they did no unpaid work in wave 1; 69 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women (Table A5, Appendix 2).

- The types of unpaid work undertaken was little changed in wave 5 compared with wave 1 for refugee men. A larger proportion of refugee women reported doing no unpaid work in wave 5 (47 per cent). There was a corresponding reduction in the proportion of women who reported that they looked after their family/home between wave 1 and wave 5, from 56 per cent to 44 per cent (Table A5, Appendix 2)

## Employment characteristics

### Main occupation

BNLA collects information on main occupation before migration and main occupation in Australia for each wave. Data are reported on main occupation at the ANZSCO one-digit level in this report, which groups respondents according to which of the eight major occupation groups they are (or were) employed in.

- For male refugees, in wave 1 almost 29 per cent were employed as technicians/trades workers and more than 10 per cent were employed as machinery operators and drivers (Table A7, Appendix 2). This is similar to male employment shares in these occupations before migration (Table A6, Appendix 2). A much higher proportion were employed as labourers in wave 1 compared with before migration, and there were fewer men employed as managers or professionals.
- Almost all of the small number of refugee women in paid work were employed as community and personal service workers and labourers in wave 1 (Table A7, Appendix 2). Prior to resettlement, for refugee women, more than a quarter were employed as professionals before migration. Technicians/trades workers represented the next largest share of female employment (15 per cent), followed by labourers and community and personal service workers (Table A6, Appendix 2). The pattern of employment for both men and women refugees is suggestive of lower-skilled employment for refugees living in Australia compared with their occupation before migration.
- The larger numbers of both men and women who were employed in wave 5 provides a clearer pattern of the main occupations of employment (Table A8, Appendix 2). For male refugees, the occupations with the largest shares of employment are the same as in wave 1: technicians/trades workers (36 per cent), labourers (28 per cent) and machinery operators and drivers (almost 12 per cent). With the exception of men employed as technicians/trades workers, employment is concentrated in lower-skilled occupations. There were very few male refugees employed as managers and professionals in wave 5, and this was not the case for men before migration.
- For refugee women, the occupations with the largest shares of employment in wave 5 were community and personal service workers (33 per cent) and labourers (27 per cent) (Table A8, Appendix 2). Technicians/trades workers represented nine per cent of female employment, and seven per cent were employed as professionals. As with men, employment for women was





concentrated in lower-skilled occupations than was the case before migration. The decline in the number of women employed as professionals or technicians/trades workers post migration is particularly notable.

### Number of jobs worked

- A large majority of both men and women refugees worked one job in wave 1 (94 per cent and 92 per cent respectively). Multiple job holding increased slightly in wave 5 as numbers of both men and women refugees in paid work increased. Almost six per cent of men and almost five per cent of women worked two jobs in wave 5 (see Table A9, Appendix 2).

**Table 2: Total time in paid work in the last 12 months for those employed**

<i>Wave 1</i>	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Less than a week	11	8.3	1	8.3	12	8.3
1-4 weeks	17	12.8	5	41.7	22	15.2
1-2 months	21	15.8	2	16.7	23	15.9
3-6 months	30	22.6	1	8.3	31	21.4
More than 6 months	51	38.4	2	16.7	53	36.6
Missing	3	2.3	1	8.3	4	2.8
Total	133	100.0	12	100.0	145	100.0
<i>Wave 5</i>	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Less than a week	3	0.7	4	3.6	7	1.2
1-4 weeks	10	2.2	5	4.5	15	2.7
1-2 months	16	3.5	7	6.3	23	4.1
3-6 months	72	15.9	17	15.3	89	15.8
More than 6 months	337	74.4	75	67.6	412	73.1
None	2	0.4	1	0.9	3	0.5
Missing	13	2.9	2	1.8	15	2.7
Total	453	100.0	111	100.0	564	100.0

Source: BNL waves 1 and 5

### Total time in paid work in the past year

- In wave 1, most refugee women were newly hired. Refugee men had spent a longer time in paid work than women, with 38 per cent of men having worked more than six months in the 12 months prior to being interviewed (Table 2).
- Time spent in paid work in a year had increased for both men and women in wave 5 compared to wave 1. Ninety per cent of men worked for at least three months of the year and 74 per cent worked more than six months. Eighty-four per cent of refugee women worked for at least three months, and almost 68 per cent worked for more than six months in the previous 12 months.

## Contract type

- Many humanitarian migrants, both men and women, were employed on a casual basis in wave 1 (Table 3). The contract of employment of refugee workers is likely to be associated with their occupation of employment. Some lower-skilled occupations hire higher rates of casuals than is the case with higher-skilled occupations, including community and personal service workers and labourers.
- The proportion of refugees that were employed on a casual basis was lower for both men and women in wave 5 compared with wave 1. Men and women had higher rates of permanent or ongoing employment in wave 5. Almost 30 per cent of refugee women who were employed were employed on a permanent or ongoing basis and 16 per cent of women had a fixed term contract in wave 5. There was also growth in self-employment for both men and women between wave 1 and wave 5. These changes in contract of employment indicate that refugees may be able to seek more varied employment opportunities after living in Australia for longer and after obtaining more experience in the Australian labour market.

## Hours worked

- Refugee men had higher rates of full-time employment and lower rates of part-time employment than refugee women in waves 1 and wave 5 (Table 4). This is not surprising and mirrors the gender difference in hours worked in the general population. Refugee men and women reported higher rates of full-time employment in wave 5 compared to wave 1. A much higher proportion of women worked less than 15 hours per week in wave 5 (19 per cent) compared with men (six per cent).

**Table 3: Contract in job/main job, for those employed**

<i>Wave 1</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Self-employed	8	6.0	0	0.0	8	5.5
Fixed-term contract	6	4.5	3	25.0	9	6.2
Casual basis	84	63.2	5	41.7	89	61.4
Permanent/ ongoing	24	18.1	2	16.7	26	17.9
Other	6	4.5	1	8.3	7	4.8
Don't know/Missing	5	3.8	1	8.3	6	4.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Self-employed	52	11.5	9	8.1	61	10.8
Fixed-term contract	50	11.0	18	16.2	68	12.1
Casual basis	187	41.3	36	32.4	223	39.5
Permanent/ ongoing	147	32.5	33	29.7	180	31.9
Other	13	2.9	13	11.7	26	4.6
Don't know/Missing	4	0.9	2	1.8	6	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>453</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>564</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5



**Table 4: Hours worked per week in all jobs, for those employed**

<i>Wave 1</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Less than 15 hours	18	13.5	2	16.7	20	13.8
15 to 34 hours	27	20.3	5	41.7	32	22.1
35 hours or more	69	51.9	3	25.0	72	49.7
Missing	19	14.3	2	16.7	21	14.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Less than 15 hours	28	6.2	21	18.9	49	8.7
15 to 34 hours	118	26.1	44	39.6	162	28.7
35 hours or more	289	63.8	40	36.0	329	58.3
Missing	18	3.9	6	5.4	24	4.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>453</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>564</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5

### Job satisfaction

BNLA asked Principal Respondents about their satisfaction with their job (their main job in the case of respondents who held multiple jobs).

- Almost all refugee women reported that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with their job in Australia in wave 1 and wave 5 (Table 5). The numbers underlying the job satisfaction statistics for women are low. Higher numbers in paid work may reveal that not all refugees are satisfied with their job, as is the case for men. Twenty-four per cent of male refugees reported some level of dissatisfaction with their job in wave 1. There was a lower rate of job dissatisfaction for men in wave 5, approximately nine per cent.

**Table 5: How satisfied respondent is with job/main job**

<i>Wave 1</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very Satisfied	16	12.5	1	14.3	17	12.6
Satisfied	75	58.6	6	85.7	81	60.0
Dissatisfied	24	18.8	0	0.0	24	17.8
Very Dissatisfied	7	5.5	0	0.0	7	5.2
Don't know/Missing	6	4.7	0	0.0	6	4.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very Satisfied	101	26.4	11	19.6	112	25.5
Satisfied	245	64.0	40	71.4	285	64.9
Dissatisfied	31	8.1	5	8.9	36	8.2
Very Dissatisfied	5	1.3	0	0.0	5	1.1
Don't know/Missing	1	0.3	0	0.0	1	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>373</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>439</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5

## Employment income

- The distribution of employment income per week is difficult to discern with confidence for wave 1 due to low numbers in paid work, especially for women, though the data indicate refugee women received lower employment income per week than men, which would correspond with their lower average hours of work compared with refugee men (See Table A10, Appendix 2).
- The larger numbers of refugees in paid work in wave 5 and distribution of earnings also suggests that refugee men have higher employment income per week than refugee women. Employment earnings also appear higher for men in wave 5 compared with wave 1. There are higher proportions of men reporting weekly employment incomes that fall within higher income brackets. Twenty-three per cent of employed refugee women report earning less than \$300 per week in employment income in wave 5. Only 16 per cent of employed women earned more than \$800 per week from employment compared with 45 per cent of employed men. (See Table A10, Appendix 2).
- Average employment income per week for men in wave 5 of BNLA was \$839 compared with an average of \$626 per week in wave 1. This lends support to the observation that employment income for men appears to have been higher in wave 5 compared with wave 1. Average employment income for women was \$533 per week in wave 5 (See Table A10, Appendix 2).

BNLA asked respondents about their main source of income:

- Only 11 per cent of refugee men and two per cent of refugee women reported their own wage or salary as their main source of income in wave 1 (Table A11, Appendix 2). This is to be expected given the low employment rates in wave 1. Eighty-four per cent of men and 93 per cent of women relied on government payments as their main source of income.
- A much higher 38 per cent of men reported own wage or salary as their main source of income in wave 5, along with eight per cent of women. The increase in rates of employment in wave 5 also resulted in 11 per cent of women and two per cent of men reporting that their spouse, partner or parent's income was their main source of income. There was a corresponding decline in the proportion of men and women who relied on government payments for most of their income in wave 5.

## Finding employment

In wave 1, almost a third of male refugees who were not currently working had looked for work since arriving in Australia, and a similar proportion of men reported having looked for work in wave 5 (Table A12, Appendix 2). The proportion of refugee women who were not currently working and had ever looked for work increased from eight per cent in wave 1 to 19 per cent in wave 5.

## Knowledge of how to find a job

BNLA included a module on self-sufficiency which asked respondents about their experiences after arriving in Australia and how they were getting on with accessing information and other day-to-day



activities. One of these questions asked BNLA participants whether they would know how to look for a job if they had to.

- Wave 1 BNLA participants were very uncertain about how to look for a job (Table 6). Almost 42 per cent of refugee men and 68 per cent of refugee women said they would not know how to look for a job at all. Only three per cent of women in wave 1 felt they would know very well how to look with a job, compared with almost 11 per cent of men.
- Knowledge of how to look for a job improved in wave 5. Seventeen per cent of men and 38 per cent of women still felt that they would not know how to look for a job at all, but 33 per cent of men and 16 per cent of women said they would now know very well how to find a job in wave 5, and there was also an increase in the proportion of men and women who felt they would know fairly well how to look for a job in wave 5 compared with wave 1 (Table 6)

**Table 6: If you had to, would you know how to look for a job?**

<i>Wave 1</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Would know very well	137	10.5	32	2.9	169	7.0
Would know fairly well	208	15.9	73	6.7	281	11.7
Would know a little	371	28.4	212	19.4	583	24.3
Wouldn't know at all	542	41.5	742	68.0	1,284	53.5
Don't know/Missing	49	3.7	33	3.0	82	3.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,307</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,092</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>2,399</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Would know very well	330	33.2	143	16.1	473	25.2
Would know fairly well	262	26.3	169	19.1	431	22.9
Would know a little	230	23.1	232	26.2	462	24.6
Wouldn't know at all	165	16.6	333	37.6	498	26.5
Don't know/Missing	8	0.8	9	1.0	17	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>995</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>886</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,881</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5*

### Difficulties securing employment

- The overwhelming majority of both men and women refugees who were currently working or had ever looked for work reported that they had found it hard to get a job since arriving in Australia in wave 1 (Table A13, Appendix 2). Ninety-two per cent of men and 90 per cent of women reporting having had difficulties getting a job at wave 1.
- The proportion who had found it hard to get a job at wave 5 was a little lower compared to wave 1, but a very high 77 per cent of men and 84 per cent of women experienced difficulties getting a job. This suggests that the obstacles that make it hard for refugees to get a job are persistent. (Table A13, Appendix 2).

BNLA participants were also asked about the reasons why they found it hard to get a job. This is a multiple response question where participants are asked to mark all reasons that apply.

- In wave 1, the most frequently reported reasons refugee men and women gave for having had difficulty getting a job were no Australian work experience (56 per cent of men and 67 per cent of women) and that their English was not good enough yet (54 per cent of men and 53 per cent of women) (Table A14, Appendix 2). Other responses given by a high proportion of men and women were that they did not have the necessary skills/qualifications (35 per cent of men and 45 per cent of women) and that they could not get a job in the same occupation as they had overseas (30 per cent of men and 28 per cent of women).
- There were slight reductions in the proportion of men and women who responded in wave 5 that no Australian work experience and their English was not good enough yet were reasons they found it hard to get a job. Higher proportions of both men and women named no suitable jobs as a reason they found it hard to get a job in wave 5 compared to wave 1 (Table A14, Appendix 2).

## Education, qualifications and training

### Level of education

- Almost 18 per cent of male refugees have a post school qualification (either a trade or technical is slightly lower, 14 per cent. Almost 13 per cent of men and almost 20 per cent of women never attended school (Table 7).

**Table 7: Highest level of education completed before coming to Australia**

	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Never attended school	167	12.8	213	19.5	380	15.8
6 or less years of schooling	266	20.4	207	19.0	473	19.7
7-9 years of schooling	223	17.1	213	19.5	436	18.2
10-11 years of schooling	152	11.6	106	9.7	258	10.8
12 or more years of schooling	252	19.3	191	17.5	443	18.5
Trade or technical qualification beyond schooling	88	6.7	55	5.0	143	6.0
University degree	143	10.9	100	9.2	243	10.1
Don't know/Missing	16	1.2	7	0.6	23	1.0
Total	1,307	100.0	1,092	100.0	2,399	100.0

Source: BNLA wave 1

### Assessment and recognition of qualifications in Australia

Respondents were asked in wave 1 whether they had their qualification assessed in Australia and in waves 3, 4 and 5 the people who had not had their qualifications assessed in the previous wave (or wave 1) were asked if they had their qualification assessed since then.



- Thirty-two per cent of the 231 men who had a post school qualification had this qualification assessed in Australia at the time of the wave 1 survey. Almost 39 per cent of the 60 women with post-school qualifications had their qualification assessed in Australia by this time. The number answering yes to having had their qualification assessed since last being interviewed became smaller in each successive wave (Table A15 and A16 Appendix 2).
- Twenty-eight per cent of refugee men in wave 1 had their qualification either partially or fully recognised in Australia once it was assessed (Table 8). A much lower 15 per cent of refugee women reported that their qualification was recognised. A substantial proportion of both men and women reported that their qualification was currently being assessed. In wave 3, BNLA followed up with refugees who were waiting for their qualification to be assessed. A small number were still waiting for their qualification to be assessed.

**Table 8: Recognition of qualifications**

<i>Wave 1</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes, fully recognised	13	17.6	7	11.7	20	14.9
Yes, partly recognised	8	10.8	2	3.3	10	7.5
Not yet, it is currently being assessed	28	37.8	27	45.0	55	41.0
No, it was assessed but not recognised in Australia	17	23.0	8	13.3	25	18.7
Don't know/Missing	8	10.8	16	26.7	24	17.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Wave 3</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes, fully recognised	4	17.4	1	4.8	5	11.4
Yes, partly recognised	3	13.0	2	9.5	5	11.4
Not yet, it is currently being assessed	7	30.4	2	9.5	9	20.5
No, it was assessed but not recognised in Australia	3	13.0	6	28.6	9	20.5
Don't know/Missing	6	26.1	10	47.6	16	36.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: BNLA wave 1 and wave 3



## Study or job training

- In wave 1, 13 per cent of refugee men were either currently studying or doing job training other than English language classes or had completed study or job training since arriving in Australia (Table 9). A small proportion of both men and women commenced study or had done job training but had stopped. Twelve per cent of refugee women were studying or doing job training or had completed study or job training. The small number of men and women with completions may be reflective of the short time frame since arriving in Australia at wave 1.

**Table 9: Study or job training other than English language classes undertaken since arriving in Australia**

<i>Wave 1</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes - currently studying or doing job training	152	11.6	126	11.5	278	11.6
Yes – completed	21	1.6	7	0.6	28	1.2
Yes - commenced, but have stopped	33	2.5	15	1.4	48	2.0
No	1,085	83.0	930	85.2	2,015	84.0
Don't know/Missing	16	1.2	14	1.3	30	1.3
Total	1,307	100.0	1,092	100.0	2,399	100.0

*Source: BNLA wave 1*

From wave 2 onwards, BNLA followed up with refugees who were not studying in the previous wave to ask them if they had since undertaken study or job training.

- The proportion of refugee women who had undertaken or completed job training was approximately 12 per cent in waves 4 and 5, and a little higher in waves 2 and 3 (Table A17, Appendix 2). There was a higher proportion of both men and women who commenced study but had stopped from wave 2 onwards compared with wave 1. The proportion who completed study or job training in each wave remained small, but this may be due to length of courses given only people who were not studying in the previous wave were asked this question. Refugee men undertook study and job training at slightly lower rates than women, particularly from wave 3 onwards.
- Principal respondents in the BNLA were asked if they planned to do any study in Australia in future other than English language skills. A large proportion of both men and women refugees plan to study (apart from English language skills) — with 61 per cent of refugee women and 66 per cent of refugee men reported this in in wave 1. There was a decline in the proportion of refugees with study aspirations in wave 5, but a substantial proportion still wanted to study. Fifty-two per cent of women and 46 per cent of men planned to study in the future at wave 5 (see Table A18, Appendix 2).
- BNLA participants who indicated that they planned to study in the future were asked about the highest level of education they would like to achieve. In wave 1, 25 per cent of refugee men



and 33 per cent of refugee women wanted to obtain a university degree (Table A19, Appendix 2). Nineteen per cent of men and 24 per cent of women in wave 1 wanted to obtain a language, literacy and numeracy certificate.

- The highest proportions of both men and women in waves 1 and 5 wanted to obtain a trade, technical qualification or diploma. There was a slight increase in the percentage of men and women who wanted to obtain a language, literacy and numeracy certificate in wave 5 and a decrease in the proportion who would like to achieve a university degree.

## Employment and settlement

### Expectations about job opportunities in Australia

Wave 1 of BNLA included a series of questions about refugee's expectations as to what they thought their life in Australia would be like before they arrived and how their life actually was once they arrived. This included a question for Principal Respondents about whether job opportunities in Australia had been as they expected prior to settling in Australia.

- More than a third of refugee men felt that job opportunities in Australia were worse than they expected before coming to Australia (Table 10). Almost a quarter of women refugees said job opportunities were worse than they expected. Fifteen per cent of men and almost 13 per cent of women felt that job opportunities were better than they expected before coming to Australia. A quarter of men and 39 per cent of women either did not know or preferred not to say whether job opportunities in Australia met their expectations.

**Table 10: Expectations before coming to Australia: have job opportunities met expectations?**

<i>Wave 1</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Better than I expected it would be	158	14.9	56	12.5	214	14.2
Same as expected	281	26.5	109	24.4	390	25.8
Worse than I expected it would be	359	33.8	109	24.4	468	31.0
Don't know/Missing	264	24.9	173	38.7	437	29.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,062</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>447</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,509</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: BNLA wave 1*

### Difficulties settling into life in Australia

The BNLA module on life in Australia also asked about things that made settling into life in Australia more difficult. This included a question about whether lack of employment opportunities made life more difficult for refugees.

- In wave 1, a third of refugee men and 20 per cent of refugee women reported that a lack of employment opportunities had made settling into their life in Australia more difficult (Table 11). The total percentage of refugees who indicated experiencing difficulties settling due to lack of employment opportunities was little changed in wave 5 compared with wave 1. Twenty-six per cent of men and 25 per cent of women in wave 5 selected lack of employment opportunities as something that still made settling into their life more difficult.

**Table 11: Since arriving in Australia, has a lack of employment opportunities made settling into your life more difficult?**

<i>Wave 1</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	434	33.2	216	19.8	650	27.1
No	831	63.6	846	77.5	1,677	69.9
Don't know/Missing	42	3.2	30	2.7	72	3.0
Total	1,307	100.0	1,092	100.0	2,399	100.0
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	261	26.2	225	25.4	486	25.8
No	699	70.3	639	72.1	1,338	71.1
Don't know/Missing	35	3.5	22	2.5	57	3.0
Total	995	100.0	886	100.0	1,881	100.0

*Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5*

## Characteristics associated with employment

Our preliminary analysis of BNLA data on characteristics of employment for refugee women found that refugee women had low rates of employment in Australia, much lower than pre-migration rates of employment and lower than employment rates for refugee men. The low numbers of refugee women in paid work in wave 1 prevent disaggregation of employment status by characteristics affecting likelihood of employment. The tables in this section of the report therefore focus on characteristics associated with a higher or lower likelihood of employment for refugee women in waves 3 and 5 where there are higher numbers of refugee women employed. We have conducted chi squared significance testing for each of the tables reported in this section to further examine the observed relationships between employment and these characteristics.

A review of the literature on refugee employment found very little on factors associated with employment for women but suggested that poor health and English language proficiency were barriers to employment for refugee men, and that knowledge of how to look for a job and study and job training were enablers for employment [3-5]. This report examines the relationships between these and other characteristics and employment for refugee women.



## Self-assessed health

Refugees report a much higher rate of fair or poor self-assessed health compared with the general Australian population [39]. Table 12 presents reported self-assessed health status by whether in paid work for men and women refugees. Fair, poor or very poor self-assessed health is associated with a significantly lower likelihood of paid work for both men and women refugees. For refugee men, a higher share of those in paid work in wave 5 were in fair to very poor health compared to wave 3. For women, a lower share of working refugee women in wave 5 reported fair to very poor health compared with wave 3. There were similar shares of both men and women in paid work reporting fair to very poor health in wave 5.

**Table 12: Self-assessed health by whether in paid work (%)**

<i>Wave 3</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Self-assessed health</b>				
Good/Very good/Excellent health	87.9	54.8	74.2	51.9
Fair/poor/very poor health	12.1	45.2	25.8	48.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Self-assessed health</b>				
Good/Very good/Excellent health	82.3	51.7	81.1	51.0
Fair/poor/very poor health	17.7	48.3	18.9	49.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 3 and 5

## Mental health

Humanitarian migrants also have a high prevalence of mental health problems as a consequence of forced displacement and potentially experiencing traumatic events prior to resettlement [40]. Probable serious mental illness is defined as a score of 19 or above on the Kessler Screening Scale for Psychological Distress [40]. As with self-assessed health, probable serious mental illness is significantly associated with a much lower likelihood of paid work for men and women refugees (Table 13). In wave 5, less than six per cent of refugee women in paid work had probable serious mental health illness, compared to over 21 per cent who were not in paid work.

**Table 13: Probable serious mental illness by whether in paid work (%)**

<i>Wave 3</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Kessler score</b>				
No probable serious mental illness	94.2	80.9	86.9	75.9
Probable serious mental illness	5.8	19.1	13.1	24.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Kessler score</b>				
No probable serious mental illness	91.4	79.9	94.5	78.8
Probable serious mental illness	8.6	20.1	5.5	21.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 3 and 5

The prevalence of PTSD is high for refugee women and men in the BNLA but is more strongly associated with a lower likelihood of paid work for men in waves 3 and 5 (Table 14). There was no clear observable relationship between PTSD and paid work for refugee women in wave 3, however in wave 5 there was a significantly lower likelihood of employment for refugee women with PTSD.

**Table 14: PTSD by whether in paid work (%)**

<i>Wave 3</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>PTSD</b>				
No	80.8	65.8	67.2	63.7
Yes	19.2	34.2	32.8	36.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>PTSD</b>				
No	84.0	67.3	79.8	66.8
Yes	16.0	32.7	20.2	33.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 3 and 5

### Difficulty travelling to places needed to go

Limited access to transport has also been identified as a barrier to employment [41]. The BNLA includes a question about how respondents experienced difficulties travelling to places they needed to go. The statistics in Table 15 indicate that difficulty travelling to places they needed to go is associated with a significantly lower likelihood of paid work for refugee women and men. Respondents who always had difficulty travelling or had difficulty most of the time had a significantly and much lower likelihood of paid work in waves 3 and 5, indicating that lack of access to transport may be a significant barrier to employment for refugees. There is also little change between waves 3 and 5 in the proportion of humanitarian migrants who responded ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’ to difficulties travelling places they needed to go.

**Table 15: Difficulty travelling to places needed to go by whether in paid work (%)**

<i>Wave 3</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Difficulty travelling to places</b>				
Always	1.6	8.5	1.7	13.6
Most of the time	7.4	12.6	12.1	15.9
Some of the time	32.5	40.4	48.3	41.6
Never	58.5	38.5	37.9	28.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Difficulty travelling to places</b>				
Always	3.8	11.0	3.7	13.6
Most of the time	4.0	10.6	7.4	11.9
Some of the time	23.2	29.9	25.0	34.3
Never	69.0	48.6	63.9	40.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 3 and 5



## English language proficiency

Limited English language proficiency has been identified as a barrier to employment including in the academic literature examining predictors of employment for refugees (with a main focus on men) [3-5]. Higher oral language proficiency in particular has been noted to increase the likelihood of employment among humanitarian migrants [4, 5]. The relationship between oral language proficiency and the likelihood of paid work is illustrated in Tables 16 and 17. Understanding spoken English ‘very well’ or ‘well’ was associated with a significantly higher likelihood of paid work for refugee men and women in waves 3 and 5. Poorer understanding of spoken English was significantly associated with a lower likelihood of paid work. Understanding of spoken English increased between waves 3 and 5.

**Table 16: Understanding of spoken English by whether in paid work (%)**

<i>Wave 3</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Understands spoken English</b>				
Very well	10.2	6.2	11.3	6.3
Well	54.8	34.4	41.9	32.0
Not well	31.2	47.0	43.6	44.7
Not at all	3.8	12.5	3.2	17.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Understands spoken English</b>				
Very well	16.6	9.2	19.8	8.5
Well	55.6	39.9	50.5	36.1
Not well	24.3	37.8	28.8	36.9
Not at all	3.5	13.2	0.9	18.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: *BNLA waves 3 and 5*

The trend for proficiency in speaking English was similar to that observed for understanding of spoken English. Speaking English ‘very well’ or ‘well’ is associated with a significantly higher likelihood of paid work for refugee men and women. For refugee women, the relationship between proficiency in speaking English and employment in paid work appears stronger in wave 5 where there were a higher number of refugee women in paid work. Proficiency in speaking English also increased between waves 3 and 5.

**Table 17: Proficiency in speaking English by whether in paid work (%)**

<i>Wave 3</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Speaks English</b>				
Very well	8.3	5.0	12.9	3.7
Well	50.3	31.5	32.3	28.1
Not well	36.6	47.9	46.8	44.7
Not at all	4.8	15.6	8.1	23.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Speaks English</b>				
Very well	12.6	8.5	16.2	6.1
Well	52.8	33.0	46.0	28.7
Not well	30.5	42.1	34.2	41.6
Not at all	4.2	16.4	3.6	23.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 3 and 5

### Job searching knowledge

Knowledge about finding a job in Australia has been noted as having a direct impact on the probability of being employed [3]. The BNLA asked respondents about how well they would know how to look for a job. Knowledge of how to look for a job increased between wave 1 and wave 3 and increased again between wave 3 and wave 5 (see Table 6). Refugee men and women who did not know how to find a job, or knew very little, were significantly less likely to be in paid work (Table 18)<sup>1</sup>. Knowing very well or fairly well how to find a job was significantly associated with a higher likelihood of paid work. A lower share of refugee women knew how to find a job compared with refugee men and this might partially explain the lower rates of employment for refugee women.

**Table 18: Knowledge of how to look for a job by whether in paid work (%)**

<i>Wave 3</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Knows how to look for a job</b>				
Would know very well	35.6	11.8	23.0	7.1
Would know fairly well	35.6	22.2	34.4	15.1
Would know a little	24.7	36.6	31.2	26.6
Wouldn't know at all	4.2	29.4	11.5	51.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
<b>Understands spoken English</b>				
Would know very well	50.2	19.7	35.1	13.7
Would know fairly well	28.9	24.8	26.1	18.4
Would know a little	17.8	27.8	26.1	26.7
Wouldn't know at all	3.1	27.8	12.6	41.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 3 and 5

<sup>1</sup> Wave 1 was not included in Table 1 because the very low number of refugee women in paid work prevented meaningful disaggregation of knowledge of how to look for a job by employment status.





## Study and job training

A lack of Australian work experience and lack of necessary skills/qualifications were two of the most commonly reported reasons for finding it hard to obtain a job among BNLA respondents in waves 3 and wave 5, as well as in earlier waves (see Table A14, Appendix 2). Undertaking study or job training in Australia has been suggested to increase confidence of humanitarian migrants to participate in the labour force [41]. Studies of factors associated with employment for refugee men have found that completing study or job training increased the likelihood of labour force participation [37].

Table 19 presents the percentage of BNLA respondents who have undertaken study or job training since arriving in Australia by whether they were in paid work in waves 3 and 5. Undertaking study or job training significantly increased the likelihood of paid work for refugee women and men in wave 3 and wave 5. A much higher proportion of refugee women in paid work had undertaken study/job training by the time of waves 3 and 5 compared with refugee men.

**Table 19: Undertaken study or job training since arriving in Australia by whether in paid work (%)**

<i>Wave 3</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
Undertaken study or job training				
No	50.8	64.2	30.7	63.1
Yes	49.2	35.8	69.4	36.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Wave 5</i>	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>	<b>In paid work</b>	<b>Not working</b>
Undertaken study or job training				
No	39.7	60.3	18.0	54.0
Yes	60.3	39.7	82.0	46.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 3 and 5

This analysis of the BNLA data provides important information on the employment outcomes of this cohort of women from refugee backgrounds and some of the factors associated with being in paid work. The next chapter provides further insights into the facilitators and barriers to securing employment as well as experiences of women in work, and the impacts on their social inclusion and health and wellbeing.

## Chapter 3: Barriers and Facilitators to Employment

In this chapter we describe the barriers and facilitators to employment and impacts on health reported by the three groups of participants: women from refugee backgrounds; service providers working with women from refugee backgrounds; employers of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and workshop attendees (refugee and non-refugee focused service providers, community organisations, representatives from state and federal government departments, and employers of women from refugee backgrounds). The barriers and facilitators are discussed at three levels: individual/community; service/support; and labour market/employer.

A range of health and wellbeing impacts were reported by refugee women and service provider participants in relation to barriers and facilitators to employment. Existing health issues associated with pre- and post-migration stressors (i.e., experiences of persecution, displacement, culture shock, family separation, loss of resources and status, ongoing visa uncertainty, issues with housing) also interacted with the women's attempts to secure employment.

To begin, our findings revealed that more than 75 per cent of the refugee women worked in some capacity prior to coming to Australia (N=33), with around 35 to 40 per cent in paid employment in Australia across the three waves of interviews. Women described a range of motivations to work in Australia, including to build independence and confidence, support family and help others, keep occupied to prevent rumination, develop social connections, learn English, and build a future in Australia (education pathways/starting their own business).

*I find that work will give me balance of my wellbeing to help me, my confidence that I'm a woman of the new society so I need to share my skills (June\*– refugee participant).*

*\*all names are pseudonyms*

### Barriers to health promoting employment

#### Individual/community level

At an individual level, English language proficiency was identified as the most significant barrier to employment by refugee women and for refugee women with limited English language skills, attending formal lessons through AMEP and informal lessons through community organisations was considered a pathway to further education/training and part of their overall plan to secure employment.

*Language is the biggest barrier, because you can send in your resume anywhere, but to be able to express yourself and speak – it's harder (Alejandra – refugee participant).*



Limited skills, education and qualifications presented another barrier to employment, including low literacy levels in their own language, insufficient labour market knowledge, limited technological skills/computer literacy and no driver's licence.

*I have a certificate in aged care, I applied [to an aged care facility] and they asked me if I had a driver's licence but I don't, so they told me 'you can't do this job without a licence' (Kisosa – refugee participant).*

Women's core responsibility for care in the family underpinned a range of barriers to employment, and availability for employment. Women shared that they wanted to care for their children themselves, rather than place them in formal childcare because of the cost and because of concerns about how well their children would be cared for and whether they would experience racism or poor treatment.

*I did have childcare and it was costing me like right now, I'm telling you, the rules have changed with the Centrelink [...] so it's not easy. Like me now, I'm [scared of] childcare. If I get a job now, I will just try to work on weekend, maybe Saturday and Sunday (Abuk – refugee participant).*

Moreover, women from patriarchal-led cultures reported receiving limited support from their families and husbands to develop employment skills. Because of cultural norms, women were also noted as lacking in confidence and in skills of self-promotion.

*With the refugee women, for them specifically it is really about their confidence and their self-belief and always having a traditional, I guess, mindset of putting other people first and not thinking that they're worthy (Interview – service provider).*

*The women are the last ones in the food chain of the family, it's complex. But that's when the woman is vital to us [...] but at the same time is put as the last one when it comes to anything within the family, to be supported to get employment (Interview – employer, aged care).*

Poor physical and mental health was described by women and service providers as hindering women's capacity to seek or engage in employment. Contributing factors were pre-settlement experiences of trauma, post settlement stressors, family separation, domestic and family violence, and stigma in accessing health services.

*I think there's also no consideration taken to the fact that, you know, they might be on a bit of an incline where they're learning English and they're doing really well and they're applying for jobs, but then depression sets in when they're knocked back 1000 times and so, you've got to give them that time and space to overcome or have those supports in place for mental health (Workshop – service provider).*

Although refugee women with limited English language skills indicated that attending lessons was considered a pathway to further education/training and part of their overall plan to secure employment, the factors outlined above were also barriers to attending English classes; for example, limited or unsuitable childcare options, low levels of literacy/education in their native language, and compounding health issues.

*How can I learn a language now that I don't even have information on when these daughters are coming to meet me here? How can I work when my mind is not even here? Do you know that I go to my lessons and the first thing I want to do is just to run away (Valentina – refugee participant).*

### Service/support level

Access to employment services (mainstream and refugee focused) as well as the limitations of many services was identified by women, service providers, and in small group discussions at the workshop as hindering the development of employment-related skills, particularly English language skills, as well as access to employment. Overwhelmingly, Job network providers were reported as providing inadequate support. This lack of support was noted through pressure on refugee women to take unsuitable work, inadequate referrals to employment programs (because the programs do not meet mutual obligation requirements, staff turnover, and lack of awareness of programs), too many clients, and a lack of cultural and trauma awareness amongst staff.

*Sometimes I think it comes back to the providers' worker's ability to actually construct a resume for the clients and/or actually identify their skills. Like get to know them and identify their skills and read between the lines, rather than just some generic crappy thing that doesn't make you stand out (Workshop – service provider).*

*The employment services, be it Jobactive, DES, is not set up for time to time. They don't see culture. That's cut and dry. They do not see it. We are all stamped exactly the same. We're all little numbers that fit into little tiny boxes and we're not allowed to jump out. Yep. Rubbish (Interview – service provider).*

*Those clients need unlimited support to be able to understand what's happening in their lives. There is no current service that are doing that, the Job Actives don't have the capacity (Interview – service provider).*

*A lot of women have said to me, "Gee you're really patient, I go to a job service provider and they're just so impatient with me, you know, because of my language skills." So that's really frustrating for them (Service provider – workshop).*

In relation to settlement and refugee focused employment services, there were varying reports on how useful they are, particularly during transition periods (i.e., when individuals transfer to another service for eligibility reasons). Services indicated that it was predominantly men accessing settlement services for employment support, unless the program was designed for women specifically, and there were



significant issues with keeping women clients engaged and motivated after setbacks and lack of success, and because of the women's competing priorities (caregiving responsibilities, study). Several policy related factors were noted as barriers to successful engagement with services and services having the capacity to provide adequate support leading to employment. These factors were the competitive environment and lack of coordination between services, successful pilot programs not being refunded, and services being bogged down with bureaucracy — limiting their capacity to provide support to clients.

*Because all the agencies are trying to provide the service, they've been funded for they kind of just worry about what - kind of in siloes 'okay, I need to provide housing, so I just provide housing' and that's kind of not link up with anything else. When you look at it as a whole it's creating that sort of discrepancy between the services but also, it's affecting the whole functioning of the person as a kind of moving forward into the future (Interview – service provider).*

Moreover, women indicated limited awareness of available supports and how to access them. This point was reiterated in small group discussions at the workshop and was referenced in terms of the lack of transparent information about what services/programs are available and eligibility criteria.

*I don't know how to start and with who to talk. You know not everybody can –can talk that kind of stuff. So, you need people like more to support you and guide you more and be with you till, you know, until you get a job (Sara – refugee participant).*

The varying eligibility for programs and supports (e.g., restrictions based on temporary visas, having a certain level of English, being a carer to a family member with a disability, the previous cap on English language hours and timeline for accessing these) was also described as a barrier.

*Unfortunately, we cannot let them into the program. We've been trying sort of to be very flexible about that. With DSS we agreed that part of the eligibility criteria was that – we call it 'functional English' (Interview – service provider).*

Temporary visa holders in particular were ineligible for a range of resettlement services, employment support and education pathways (limited employment support in the first 12 months if studying English full-time and ineligible for government support to undertake tertiary study and must pay international student fees) and were described by several women as unattractive to employers.

*But, you know, it's really hard. The only problem with our visa is, you know, not being eligible for HECS because, you know, to pay for university fees – and they count us as international student (Ani – refugee participant).*

Of significance, service providers running employment programs and attempting to develop relationships with employers to facilitate work experience, volunteering opportunities or employment, noted the challenges of finding employers that were willing to take on these potential challenges by employing women from refugee backgrounds due to ‘unconscious bias’.

*I think there's a lot of job readiness programs. Obviously some clients have access to Job Active and that has its own issues, but I think you can help write a resume and help prepare for an interview as much as you can but if you don't get that interview then it doesn't – it's not helpful. So, I think the biggest challenge is trying to work out who's likely to be willing and open to employing someone from a refugee background [...] I think there's definitely structural barriers and language barriers, but then I guess is there any unconscious bias within an employer organisation (Interview – service provider).*

### Employer/labour market level

Employer and labour market level factors also presented a range of barriers for refugee women seeking and securing employment. In a broad sense, a lack of employment opportunities in South Australia was noted.

*Well, yeah. So it is one of those things when you do all that work with a client and you lift that confidence and the client's engagement and really lift the spirit, how I would say but then you come to the point where okay, let's put this practice work – the theory, into the practical thing and that's where the more barriers or more walls are lifting [about us] because in reality, there is not much work around. Especially here in South Australia (Interview – Service provider).*

A lack of local experience and difficulties accessing local work experience were highlighted as well as limited social networks to help navigate the labour market.

*I can find jobs easier in my country than here because I know people. I have [a] network, I have friends, I can have a referral. But here [it's a completely] different world (Mina – refugee participant).*

More specifically, refugee women and service providers identified the lack of available work in school hours, which is a wider gendered issue though perhaps felt more acutely by those with limited social networks to draw on for support.

*Yeah, that would be hard because there's no one to help. That is one of the problems, yeah, sometimes when I want to apply for a job when I see the time, the time doesn't match with my kids, so I just leave it (Claudine – refugee participant).*

*They realise they have to take care of their families. That's what I'm saying. They come in all excited, we do their resume, we spend time and then some of them it's like, oh ... (Interview – service provider).*



In addition, the non-recognition of skills and most qualifications, and the cost and time involved in going through the qualification recognition process, was identified as a key barrier to women obtaining employment in their area of expertise. The issue of women with qualifications becoming trapped in low-skilled work was also highlighted. This was overwhelmingly described as a waste of human capital by all participant groups as well as having impacts on mental health and wellbeing.

*I wanted to just assess my qualification so I went to [APRA] and everything when I came to Australia and then I find out I can't do it because you have to do a bridging course and I have to pay as international student to do the bridging course and it takes between six months to two years so you can imagine, you know ... (Anna – refugee participant).*

*Women who obviously have qualifications but can't get them recognised or can't find a job that's suitable to find, they sort of don't fit into the Job Active scene because they're very qualified, so where do they fit? (Interview – service provider).*

*I worked a lot with the Muslim community and it was just oh women, oh yeah childcare, oh cleaning and personalised care. Some of these women are standing there with master's Degrees and we're sort of like, come on, you know, at least try to find something somewhere in between [...] I think there's a big gap of advocacy for them (Workshop – service provider).*

Racism and discrimination in the labour market were also a barrier to securing employment, with women detailing a range of experiences with negative consequences for health and wellbeing.

*My scarf sometimes it's hard to get a job (Dadu – refugee participant)*

*The job offered to her because she's Australian. She's white, she has blonde hair. Yeah and because I'm like black hair and Muslim, like from Asia (Halima – refugee participant).*

*I've got experience from overseas and I've got qualifications and all of them are relevant to the point and she doesn't have any qualifications but they prefer her over me [...] I don't want to go there because it affects my feelings and I don't want to go there because, you know, there's no point of just beating myself up (Anna – refugee participant).*



Once in employment, instances of exploitation (racism, discrimination, underpayment, being given the most difficult tasks, short shifts) were described by some women and were also emphasised by service providers working with women from refugee backgrounds.

*A lot of people, you know, they've been working cash. You see a lot of employers, for example, abusing the migrants and refugees (Interview – service provider)*

*Whilst there would be some that would be employed by others in their same ethnic community I've seen particularly with some of the women I work with now, that leads to exploitation and not getting paid minimum wage or working, you know, extreme hours, so whilst, you know, I would say a lot of job network providers would talk about 'so, you know, there's a job in your ethnic community' or 'talk to your community, they might have businesses and need people' you might but you also might then be left open to exploitation (Interview – service provider).*

These experiences were also reported as having a range of negative consequences on the health and wellbeing of the women.

*The way he talked to me wasn't nice at all and I was really embarrassed in front of my colleagues [...] I had that feeling from him that he doesn't like but then, when it came to that point, he actually started yelling at me [when I finished work] I went to - just around the mall to walk for an hour and then go home. Because I didn't want my mum to see me crying [...] I'm actually really nervous when I go to work (Lilly – refugee participant).*

For employers, low-level English language skills and accents were reported as a major problem in terms of securing employment in the service industry and in industries with manual handling due to concerns around comprehension of OHS procedures.

*When it comes down to language, and especially with them being their English is a second language, it's also working out if I'm having difficulty understanding you, how is someone with dementia going to? And sometimes that's a real big barrier around that as well, whether they going to understand what you're saying to them when they don't even know half the time what someone is saying, that is clear (Interview – employer, aged care).*

*Communication would be a big one, more so just for their own safety. There's a lot of things that they have to sign and understand when they come on site [...] but before the SOPs and SWPs, which is a table that gives – it's a standard operating procedure, so it's how to do something. So, if they – if we can't be confident in that they've understood what they're reading and can sign their name to it, and do the training associated with it, we can't be confident that they'd be very safe on the floor (Interview – employer – food production).*



Finding the ‘right’ employees, with adequate knowledge, skills, and motivations was described as a barrier to employing women from refugee backgrounds.

*Language barriers, cultural barriers and probably skill sets in terms of technical skills, technology (Interview - employer, service industry).*

*It comes down to your interview questions - do they know about aged care and why they want to work in aged care, because sometimes they don't. And we find that it's probably one of the easiest certificates to get and then go into, so it's sussing out whether they're doing it for the right reasons [...] do they understand about elder abuse and what do they understand about our aged care standards and things like that [...] And you can tell from someone when you interviewed them and, whether they're Australian, Chinese, it doesn't matter to whether they get the job or not. It comes down to their skills basically, and what their knowledge is (Interview - employer, Aged care)*

For some employers, hiring women from refugee backgrounds had presented challenges for their organisation as well as the women due to mismatched expectations of the role of employees and cultural differences.

*We have others that have been permanent and don't understand, when you're permanent, you need to go to work, you don't get to pick and choose. The difference between permanent and casual is huge culturally, there's no real understanding (Interview – employer, aged care).*

Employers also reported that Job providers provided them workers without appropriate skills.

*Our big issue is safety and I find that a lot of the providers do not understand what we require and the [00:07:32] requires English and the ability to understand safety. We hope it changes in the future (Interview – employer – Commercial cleaning industry).*

Employers also identified the challenges they face attracting workers to regional areas, particularly in South Australia where the capital city (Adelaide) is considered a regional area for the purposes of fulfilling certain visa requirements (e.g., Safe Haven Enterprise Visa).

*Trying to get them to go straight to the Mallee. And I've said this to the government, it's crap, I think it's crap, the way South Australia is treated as regional as a whole. There are differences between Adelaide and the Mallee, and there needs to be a distinction so that people come and locate in those true regional locations, and they set up their roots there and they stay there (Interview – employer, horticulture).*

Temporary visas were noted in general as another key barrier to employment, particularly because of limited work rights for those without a permanent visa. For some women, this meant several years without work rights, which precipitated ongoing difficulties in the labour market once work rights were instated.

*exclusion from the labour market has really put people from those backgrounds behind, because when they do go into the market, people expect some background experience locally and some local referees as well. Which has been highlighted as a barrier (Workshop participant – service provider).*

In terms of incentivising work/study through the possibility of becoming eligible to apply for a non-refugee visa, the value of the temporary refugee visa (Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV)) was questioned by service providers given the unlikelihood of leading to a permanent visa.

*the SHEV as a pathway to permanency is a disaster. So people work five years and there's virtually no-one who is eligible after five years to apply for a skilled visa. Age problems, skills, education [00:13:15] required. You're competing with all these people overseas who have had a much easier opportunity to get that organised. And it creates incredible stress (Workshop – legal expert).*

## **Facilitators to health promoting employment**

Key factors facilitating refugee women's access to health promoting employment reflect many of the issues raised in relation to key barriers. Here we present the key facilitators at an individual/community level, service/support level, and labour market/employer level.

### **Individual/community level**

At an individual level, women's intrinsic motivations to find employment, noted above, was seen as a facilitator for employment. Most women, whether they were employed or not, described making plans and setting goals to enter the workforce at some stage, which was closely linked to improving and/or protecting their health and wellbeing.

*My dream is around take the course in aged care, work for a while with aged people and save enough money to start my own business (Carolady – refugee participant).*



Personal characteristics and behaviours (committed, good attitude, hard worker), that reflect the women's desires to integrate into the Australian community through employment were described as important to employers and were able to override limited English language skills.

*Good workers are hard to find and therefore if there is a language barrier or a barrier for communication or technology, they're happy to accept that and train them a little bit more on the job in that area because they know that they'll be a good worker, they'll know that they'll be committed, and they know that they just want to earn a living. , it's attitude that's looked at as well more so than certain skill sets (Interview – employer, service industry)*

Acquiring TAFE qualifications (certificate in aged care, disability care etc.) was another way in which women were able to secure employment.

At a community level, social networks with members of the same community (cultural, faith) were described by all participant groups as a significant means of acquiring information about work opportunities and support to apply for work (e.g., writing a resume, put in a good word).

*[Interpreted] I've got a helping network for them. They share some information about how things work here. Some of those offered us the opportunity to have a job, for example, come to my place, iron my clothes or clean my house, all those kinds of things (Carolady – refugee participant).*

*A lot of the jobs that people come to us are by word of mouth that one of them obtained a job with us (Workshop – employer).*

Community organisations/groups (refugee focused and non-refugee focused) were also reported as key to assisting women in building useful connections, and in providing advice, encouragement, and support to women in starting their own businesses.

*I met some good friends through Hope's Café. I made a friend that they are really good to us now and they have a publishing company. They don't publish many books, but I've done some projects for them. So, that's how I met them (Shiva – refugee participant).*

*[Community organisation employee] gave us the idea, why don't you establish business? You are very good in preparing the food. So we don't have this idea before [...] She follows us and it took around six - 10 months until I established my business (Ghazal – refugee participant).*

Broader family support (e.g., emotional and practical support from husband, older children and extended family) was another significant facilitator for women to engage in employment programs, study and employment.

*It's actually been a lot of the men that have got the jobs with us that then say, can you help my wife, can you help my sister, can you help my daughter? [...] So, we've now got multiple siblings, married couples in the programs (Interview – service provider).*

## Service/support level

At a service level, keeping women engaged and committed to a program was reported as important in boosting confidence and showing what is possible. Providing individualised and tailored support that considers the range of pre- and post-settlement factors, and gender related issues were noted as an important facilitator to employment as well as ensuring women are well prepared (e.g., training, clearances etc before referral).

*Because of Sonder they've come ready, prepared for the interview [...] The Sonder process was really actually, I liked what they did because they came more ready than someone working from, getting in from sick and coming in, because we find Sonder, they come in all their clearances, so we don't have to chase (Interview – employer, disability care).*

*What we want to do in that personal learning plan, it's very personalised, it's pretty much targeted to what they need, and; therefore, then they put the commitment into it, as well. Because that's what another success that we've seen is, the commitment. Because you would see people start and then they've had enough and drop out. But we haven't had that (Interview – service provider).*

*Engagement is the biggest one. Understanding that they're important and understanding that they can do with then they're no longer in a space where they have to be degraded [referring to women who have experienced cultural and gender-based restrictions on education and employment] when you see those women that come in and they're so confident in who they are and they're so - they know what they want. They get a job. Or they succeed in whatever they want to do and stuff like - there's no like, you know, for lack of a better word, they don't feel like there's chains on them (Interview – service provider).*

*We ran an information session first and there was an older woman, a mum probably in her late 40s and she came into the room and she saw a lot of young men and young women - having spoken to her on the phone individually, I thought she was a rock star - as soon as she walked into that room and saw everyone else, she went into her shell. But we were able to observe that and we specifically invested in her and she ended up walking away with a full-time role as well (Interview – service provider).*

Mentoring was highlighted as a critical element in assisting women to build confidence and gain employment and/or health promoting pathways to employment.

*Through our nonaccredited training, a bit of mentoring, we just gave that confidence boost that they needed. Now they're engaged in employment, they're very happy doing the work. Some of them are planning to go on further and do nursing and do more study. They've been really encouraged and motivated by the idea (Interview – service provider).*



Programs connecting women to education to work pathways were also noted as a key facilitator to employment. In addition, connections to employers through services as well as connections to other services assisting with starting small business (loans, advice etc), were reported.

*[Interpreted] Yeah, that's the case working organisation, so they help with settlements. So thanks to that man he referred them to another agency and that's how they found out about the credit and the loans, and all that (Isneida – refugee participant).*

Services that have operated successful employment support programs, indicated that having relationships with employers in order to facilitate opportunities to volunteer and undertake work experience had been a key part of placing women in jobs.

*Having relationships with employers, that's a number one [...] Not just any employer – employers who are accepting of migrants or refugees, who are willing to support them to help them grow in their new life that they are creating for themselves (Interview – service provider).*

*What we've been doing is developing close relationships with places to let people volunteer their services or do kind of work experience. Then a lot of them, they've been kind of – that led to employment (Interview – service provider).*

The importance of volunteering and work experience for women to gain local experience and improve their chances of getting a job was reiterated in workshop focus groups.

*it's a really important point, gaining that local experience to be attractive to employers, you know, whether it's through internships or volunteering and networking, there's a real need there to encourage women to get out there and network more as well, then to find where the opportunities exist to get that local experience (Workshop – service provider).*

In terms of facilitating employers to engage with women from refugee backgrounds, service providers also indicated that they offered a range of training course employers.

*What we do is we also offer employers free cultural awareness training if they employ one of our participants. So, that's another sort of draw card that we try and use [laughs] for employ - to encourage employers [...] There's one employer who's asked for all of their staff to do the cultural awareness training (Interview – service provider).*

It is also important to note, that women participants and service providers spoke in detail about the positive impact and importance of housing, health, and broader settlement support to refugee women.



## Employer/labour market level

From an employer/labour market level perspective, facilitators to successful employment were associated with considering the potential benefits of employing women from refugee backgrounds (as well as others from CALD backgrounds) and tailoring workplace policies and practices to accommodate and support these workers. To begin, however, employers indicated that it was important to simply give people a start.

*I do think giving them a start, allowing them to work and giving them that chance to start with, when other people don't, is really important because where do you start if you don't start? Yeah. That's a big thing (Interview – employer, care sector).*

Amongst the employers in this study, two were particularly inclusive of women from refugee backgrounds and this was central to their organisations' ethos.

*The office is mixed. There's Australians. And then three Kenyans, so it's a very mixed organisation. I think we have to be the most – yeah [...] And that's something we said, we will give the CALD a chance [and] we really wanted to make it a very inclusive and supportive environment for women (Interview - employer, disability support).*

*I make them believe that they can do much better than just going and peeling potatoes. And I'm not saying it's something degrading for anyone but because they come from a background, quite a few of them come from a professional background and they are meant to believe that here, because they don't speak English, because they don't understand the system, because of this, this and that, and they were not born here, they can't have similar jobs, same or similar jobs. So when they finally achieve that goal because someone told them, yes, you can do it (Interview – employer, Translation/Interpreting Agency).*

Beyond giving people a start, employer level facilitators included implementing: buddy shifts for workers; the use of interpreters and translating important documents into key languages; creating open lines of communication between workers; and employers/management and appropriate supervision and direction.

*The supervisors also speak multiple languages [but] when we do more detailed communications, [employee name] gets those communications translated into different languages (Interview – employer, food production).*

*We've got to have the right supervisors to do that supervision, to make sure it works properly, as opposed to relying on someone to read a document and follow the instructions (Interview – employer, food production).*



Providing organisational support for employees to upskill or develop their skills was also identified as a key employer — level facilitator.

*Most of our [...] staff, including myself, started in those low-level positions with less hours, but then the organisation was actually working with those staff to upskill them, to help them develop skills and knowledge (Interview – employer, settlement service).*

Service providers broadly agreed that educating employers about the potential benefits of employing people from refugee backgrounds had also proven successful in facilitating employment opportunities for refugee women.

*The work that we've been doing with employers to educate employers about [stigma] because especially in the north, you can see that people believe that migrants and refugees have taken, you know, jobs (Interview – service provider).*



## Chapter 4: Employment trajectories

In this section employment trajectories of women who participated in the study are discussed using case studies to illustrate, building on the facilitators and barriers identified in the previous section. Employment status of the women over the course of the study was linked to other aspects of their lives including: their living circumstances (whether they were partnered or single, and whether they had dependants); housing and cost of living pressures; separation from family overseas; physical and mental health; social networks and supports; visa status; English proficiency; the level of access to services; and their level of education or (lack of) recognition of overseas qualifications and experience. These factors are presented together with the employment status of these women over the course of the study. Forty-two women participated in the study and 30 continued to the final round of interviews. In this section we draw on data from these 30 women to discuss longitudinal factors affecting employment and vice versa. Five women are presented as case studies.

### Positive and negative experiences over time

Of the 30 women from whom data were collected over three interviews, 15 had generally positive or improving employment experiences; they either gained employment over the course of the study or were progressing along employment pathways through education. Nine of the 30 women had generally negative or worsening experiences either seeking work or in work, and six had a mixture of positive and negative experiences. Regardless, the fact that around one third of women had worsening or overall negative experiences suggests that there are significant challenges that refugee women face in work and seeking work. Employment as a stand-alone factor is a major focus of this study. However, for many women, there were intersecting challenges they faced, and the impact of negative experiences in one area of their life affected other areas. The ways in which employment can be enabled for women from refugee backgrounds in resettlement depends on a broad range of factors.

In this study, women's motivation to work was high, they reflected on the ways in which work impacted them both practically and emotionally, and they also faced significant barriers as detailed in the previous section of this report.

### Case studies

The following sections provide an overview of the experiences of five women in this study. All details are anonymised, such as age ranges rather than exact age, region of origin rather than country, and non-specific length of time in Australia. Five women were chosen to represent a range of factors such as family, health, age, cultural background, visa, and employment experiences. They are not exhaustive representations of the data, rather provide a general overview and some insight into the varying life experiences over time of women in the study. Interpreters facilitated interviews with Cherry and Deborah at all three interviews. All other interviews were conducted in English.



## Cherry

- Age: 30-35
- Region of origin: South Asia
- Family circumstance: Single, two young children, lives with extended family
- Time in Australia at first interview: 2-5 years
- Qualifications and work experience
  - Overseas — partial completion of tertiary degree, interrupted by refugee flight, worked in retail in country of asylum
  - In Australia — missed early English classes due to having two young children, started English at TAFE by the end of the study

### The first interview

Cherry's focus on raising her young children after her initial arrival in Australia led her to miss out on early access to English language learning via TAFE classes. She initially learned some English with a volunteer home tutor and through socialising with a mothers' group. Unfortunately, the home tutor stopped coming and her access to English language classes lapsed for some time. In her first interview Cherry spoke of the challenges in finding work due to the language barrier.

*'It's difficult to get a job in Australia because of the language barrier, that is why it's difficult'.*

Although Cherry spoke of her hopes to work as a nurse in the future, she also mentioned that she might instead find work at a factory because this was more achievable in the short term.

*'she would like to get a job because of both financially and sometimes she feel occupied with the work rather than staying at home alone'.*

At the first interview, Cherry had good social connections through her church and cultural community.

### The second interview

At the second interview, Cherry remained unemployed but spoke of wanting to work and study. She was planning to study English once her children were both at school or kindergarten as she would have more flexibility with time. She was living with extended family who were employed.

Although Covid affected her in terms of socialising, Cherry's extended family remained in employment, and she did not face financial hardship. She missed seeing people at church and mentioned feeling lonely. Cherry prioritised caring for her young children and continued to highlight the challenges in finding work due to her English skills.

*I want to work but then spend time with my children at the same time as well, but I don't have much options right now because I don't speak English.*

Compared to her attitude in the first interview, by the second interview Cherry had lost some hope for achieving her goal of becoming a nurse but she was keen to work in general.

*I can't be a nurse anymore so at least I can work in aged care.....Even after I learn English it will still be too hard for me to work to be a nurse ... I just want to work properly at a job, any job at all....I have a plan, I want to learn English and then other, get into a course for aged care. If I can't do that I want to get into a course that will allow me to be a helper for like school teachers and if that doesn't work out I want to work at Ingham.*

### The third interview

At the time of the third interview Cherry had begun English language classes, although they had been affected and delayed due to Covid. She was also practising English alongside extending her social network through a parents' group where there were many people from multicultural communities who had no common language other than English.

*... in that mother's group they speak English. Most of them are non-English speak so they speak each other, and they have a conversation and it improve her English as well.*

She was clear about her goal to learn English, but she was also very clear that her work as a mother for young children was an important role. Although she was not seeking paid work yet, she aimed to do so in the future once her children were older. English remained the first priority on the pathway towards employment.

*She said that a paid job is very good, and she feels happy and feeling better than staying at home but now the children need her as well. She said that she is doing a good job, a very big job at home.*

Cherry had regained some hope for a future working as a nurse but remained focused on first learning English.



## Deborah

- Age: 40-45
- Region of origin: Latin America
- Family circumstance: living with two adult children, daughter in law, and husband
- Time in Australia at first interview: less than two years
- Qualifications and work experience
  - Overseas — extensive experience in the beauty industry as well as running a business with her husband
  - In Australia — English classes, beauty industry certificate course

### The first interview

During the first interview, Deborah was focused on initial settlement issues, particularly learning English. Deborah talked of her extensive work experience overseas, working in the beauty industry and running her own business. She was keen to get back to working in her areas of expertise.

*My goal is learn English, all of the grammar, the things that I have to acquire firstly. After that I think probably, I'm going to acquire the practising of English spoken and listened in a workplace. Particularly, about the area that I'm supposed to work, in the future.*

Deborah was aware of the connections between work and health and described her plans for looking after herself whilst also working towards her employment goals. Deborah described her worries for work and concerns that it would be difficult to find employment.

*I think if you are spiritually well you are going to be physical well ... That is the reason why that I am taking easy in this moment about my limitation with the language to work. Because it's obvious to me it's going to affect me in my wellbeing and spiritual wellbeing, as well. ...But my main concern is in the future, because I'm not 100 per cent sure that I am going to have a job in three months, in four months or seven months or in a year ... You know what I mean?*

She drew on social connection, especially with Adelaide's Latin community that helped her feel welcome and a sense of support and belonging. Her family was with her and this was also important to her.

### The second interview

Deborah expanded on her past experiences of work during the second interview, describing how work was important to her in terms of financial security but also that the work itself must be meaningful and be contributing to helping people.

*Because I like to get to know and relate to other people. I like helping and to be able to help somebody first, I need to meet the people. And I need to work to have the money to be able to help people, so both things are important to me.*

Deborah was unemployed at the time of interview, as was her husband. They had a detailed plan of how to build a business in Australia and Deborah described how she was methodically working through the requirements to open her own business.

Covid affected some of Deborah's social connections when she was unable to attend the local community centre. However, she continued to develop friendships through church and felt that she had good social networks through the Latin community, church, and within her family in Australia and overseas.

### The third interview

In the final interview, Deborah was very explicit about her short- and longer-term goals for employment. Being connected to work opportunities through social connections or through self-driven information seeking was crucial and bounded by English language.

*To be honest, because my English is not so good, I ask for help [from a settlement service] so they could help me to ask the information that I wanted. But all the information relating [the vocational] course, I look for it, and I found it myself .... To be honest, we only ask for help with things related with the language, because even my husband he found his job through a friend.*

English was a major barrier to seeking work early on for Deborah, but over time she attended and engaged with English language study and found it very helpful in terms of seeking employment and working towards her goal of opening a business.

*Okay, yeah, I found [the English classes] very good, very helpful. And now I feel like I understand more than when I started ... the first five, six months, I was struggling. But now, even I can understand you 90 per cent, 85 per cent of what you are saying.*

During the third interview, Deborah spoke in detail of the processes she had completed, and those she planned on completing, in order to open up her own business based in her home. She explicitly outlined how she found out about what was required through social networks and local and settlement services. She was planning to open it soon after the time of the last interview.



## Sally

- Age: 35-40
- Region of origin: Middle East
- Family circumstance: Single mother with one young child
- Time in Australia at first interview: less than two years
- Qualifications and work experience
  - Overseas — University qualifications, worked as a teacher and manager
  - In Australia — English study, cleaning and factory work

### The first interview

Sally was keen to draw on her extensive education and employment history and to find work in her field. She worked on improving her English proficiency as a first priority in order to look for work, and to pursue tertiary study.

*I didn't speak English good and I now study at TAFE and when I have improved English, good, and I speak English very good I think I want to go university and complete my certificate.*

She soon faced financial barriers to study and hence sought work to support her career progression.

*I stop because I can't pay money because I have hours for study and after I must pay money for complete my English. Because I didn't have money now I must stop.*

She was willing to work anywhere in the shorter term whilst working towards qualification recognition or requalification to meet Australian requirements. Sally was attending JobActive meetings but detailed how little help she was getting through them. In addition, she was frustrated that JobActive was so slow to respond to her requests for driving lessons (available to her as a refugee entrant) that although she did gain access to some lessons, she missed the opportunity to use up her allotted funds towards this as the time limit expired.

*I already have office for Job Active for government but never give me work ... I just go stay meeting maybe 30 minutes but it's never happening. I didn't want social worker and I just looking for any job.*

*... I already asked Job Active help me for resume because he can tell me – when I came first meeting this place told me he can give me a resume but until now — I ask it but I didn't [get help]*

*... I think not enough I go Job Active. I must [do] more. I must have more friends can help me.*

Sally spoke of the difficulties in finding work whilst also being the sole caregiver for her child. She had few social connections and felt that there was little help available through services. She was beginning to make social connections through church. She was connected to employment pathways through advice from her TAFE English language teacher who suggested a cleaning course that could lead directly to work.

### The second interview

By the second interview, Sally had finished the cleaning course and gained cleaning work. She was pleased to have an income, but she was frustrated at the barriers to learning English both through classes (financial barrier) and through talking with co-workers (she worked alone most of the time). Although Sally's English skills were much improved, she recognised that English was vital to finding employment. Her hopeful attitude was waning with facing ongoing barriers, however she had started a course in education support as a possible pathway back to her area of interest and expertise.

*I'm happy to make money because I need to pay my bills ... I'm happy to help myself, but at the moment I felt I lost time and I'm in the same place. I didn't improve English. It is hard when you see people and you are doing an interview and you couldn't answer.*

As a cleaner, Sally was pressured to work harder and threatened with loss of work if she didn't achieve within her paid allotted time. She was balancing study with paid work, but the employer pressured her to be continually available for work. Covid led to Sally losing cleaning work, but she was financially secure due to JobKeeper. Sally was keen to find alternative work and expressed her frustration at requiring certification for any kind of work and she found JobActive unhelpful and frustrating.

*I need JobActive help me. They didn't help me about — I told them, I'm happy to work anything, but anything that I said, they told me, you need experience. You need certificate.*

### The third interview

After losing her cleaning work, Sally successfully applied for work in a food factory through advice from an employment service. This job was challenging with 10-11 hour shifts and early starts. She reflected on job stress and relayed a story of a breakdown due to poor treatment from co-workers combined with the stress of the long shifts, sleep interruptions, and hard physical work. The impact on her mental health was significant and physical health issues were exacerbated by stress.

*my work is very hard. Everyone tell me Sally you lost your weight. Look at you. You seem tired ... You are not eating good because rush, rush after I come back home I prepare something for my son. I throw myself on the sofa ...*

Sally had stopped her studies due to the new job taking all of her personal resources. She was focused on finding work to pay for daily living and had lost hope of gaining work in her field of expertise.



*I can't manage everything. I can't look after myself. I can't work in the same time. I can't look after my son. I can't look after my [health] and my house. You know, it's a big situation for me. It's very big. ... too much. Yes. Too much.*

Sally found new work in a different food factory closer to home, with better pay, fewer working hours per shift, and shifts that fell during school hours which meant she could balance the work with care for her child. She was due to start the new job soon after the final interview and was hopeful that things would get better.

## **Fatim**

- Age: 25-30
- Region of origin: Africa
- Family circumstance: Partnered but partner is overseas, and living alone
- Time in Australia at first interview: More than five years
- Qualifications and work experience
  - Overseas — Year 12
  - In Australia — Year 11 and 12, certificate in aged care

### *The first interview*

Fatim reflected on working as a carer in people's homes, reporting half-hour shifts sometimes on opposite sides of the city. She persisted with the work as she hoped to get more secure work over time.

*That was my first job. I needed the job so badly ... I needed more hours — I don't need 30-minute shifts. So I was keep doing this so that they can have the courage to give me more shifts, ... So sometimes I would do 30 minute shifts three times a day. Imagine I have to go to the client's house. I'm not driving. So it was affecting me but I was there on time all the time.*

In addition, she faced significant rejection rates when applying for work. Gaining a driving license was difficult due to the cost which was a barrier to work as employers stated she must have a driver's licence.

*sometimes you apply for thousands of jobs and you can't even go for an interview; they will tell you that you didn't get the job, sorry. It's really frustrating.*

At the time of the interview she was working as a cleaner as it provided predictable and stable income whilst she pursued her other hopes for employment.



*I want permanent job; I don't want to be, you know, cleaning. I know it's good but that's not what I want to do. I'm just doing it because I need money otherwise I don't really want to do cleaning; I really want to do aged care.*

Fatim spoke of wanting to become a nurse but had to balance this with other urgent financial issues. Supporting her extended family in Australia and overseas was important. In addition, she initially had a temporary visa which prevented her from accessing tertiary study due to the international student fees. During her study placement in an aged care facility Fatim experienced overt racism from colleagues. She reported insufficient follow up from the organisation.

### The second interview

Covid impacted Fatim quite significantly, with a lack of work and income. Although she had some cleaning work, this lapsed during the height of Covid restrictions. She experienced financial stress.

*Since COVID-19 started it affects everyone you know ... It was so tough for me ... I had to call some organisation like Salvation Army, Anglicare, so they give me some support. They help me with food, and they give me some vouchers.*

Although her goal was to work in aged care, which she was certified to do, she continued to find a minimal amount of work as a cleaner through social connections to employers.

### The third interview

Fatim reflected on her work as a cleaner. She had enjoyed the work and the workplace and had been a supervisor within the business at times. However, Fatim had recently experienced mistreatment at work from a supervisor and subsequently did not work with that company and was unemployed. She described how she reported this to upper management but found the response inadequate.

*Then I report him. I wrote a letter and email. I wrote it and sent it to the owner of the company, the manager, there was a manager there. I sent it to him. He didn't reply to me. Then I reply to the owner of the company. Then he said he understands and I should forgive him, and I'm a good worker, I should work with them ... That guy doesn't respect me at all, so I decided to move because I want to work with someone who respects me, not someone disrespecting.*

Fatim reflected on her perceptions of employment services including through Centrelink. She did not find them helpful.

*But it's always the same thing, the government is trying to pay them [the employment service] so that they can help us to get a job. But they call you for appointment, it's the same thing, you will go there, they'll call but they will never find a job for you, unless you will find a job for yourself.*



She talked of how she had found connections to cleaning work a few times through friends. She wanted to find work in her chosen field which continued to be a challenge. She was hopeful that once she got a driving license that she would find work. It was important for her wellbeing that she gain secure and predictable work.

*you can't live in the country for [so many] years, always casual. I'm sick of that. I want a better job ... a full time job ... You can't just be doing casual over and over. I don't want that anymore.*

Fatim was keen to find ongoing permanent work and also had a goal to enrol in tertiary study. She was also waiting to be able to be reunited with her partner, whom she planned to marry, and for him to be able to live in Australia with her.

## Sara

- Age: under 20
- Region of origin: Latin America
- Family circumstance: No children, lives alone
- Time in Australia at first interview: Less than two years
- Qualifications and work experience
  - Overseas — Some work in office and factory environments
  - In Australia — studying SACE

### The first interview

In her first interview, Sara spoke of her difficulties understanding how Australian systems work and how she might be able to navigate them to gain employment. Although she had proficiency in English, she felt that accessing help via services was a challenge.

*I've got the language, not perfectly but I can understand ... I just need some guidance, some more support about it. You know, somebody who will tell me, 'listen, this is how this works and ... and let's do this and' you know?*

Sara was studying at school, enrolled in the English language program. She was volunteering at a local centre which she enjoyed as it enabled her to feel a sense of action and being involved. She had worked for many years prior to coming to Australia and liked to be working and getting to know people.

*the government was saying we won't have to work as soon as we come to Australia but because we Latin, right, we grow up back to our country and like we were working, you know? We didn't grow up like sit down and just wait for people to give us things*

She felt somewhat frustrated that she couldn't find the support she wanted in seeking work.

*... my case manager you know ... you have to insist on meeting with them ... Every time I ask for it I just, you know 'just wait' and 'I know' and this and they never call me and never say anything.*

Sara was very frustrated that she wasn't able to bring her partner to Australia as she was led to believe this would be possible before she accepted the offer to migrate via the resettlement scheme.

### The second interview

Sara had moved on from the initial English language program and enrolled in senior school. She was keen to complete these studies and described possible pathways to tertiary study and employment.

*I'm still young and I still have a lot of time and it's better for me to do everything [in terms of study] now. And then when I finish everything, then I will go for the next thing.*

Sara had connection to her family overseas which was at times challenging due to worrying for them as well as trying to find her own way in Australia independently. She also reflected on some of the ongoing challenges she faced growing up in her home country and country of asylum. She had accessed some mental health support through refugee specific services and she was motivated to move on to the future through education and employment. Her past experiences were a motivator to find success in Australia but they juxtaposed with the impacts of ongoing contact with and worry for family left behind.

Sara described seeking work. She talked of her prior experiences of work as providing useful skills when looking for work in Australia. She sought support from the community through social connections.

*Right now, I'm trying to contact some community to help ... I wish I could know like a community where I'm able to ask them to help me about getting a job.*

Sara spoke of the supports she could access through her school (which was a public school with a culturally diverse student cohort) comparing it to friends' experiences.

*in the school, we have support work, and all those people who can help ... most of my friend go to TAFE and it's like, wow you guys get a lot of things, because we don't get those type of support.*

Sara spoke of the additional challenges to job seeking during Covid times, as well as the impact on her mental health due to being isolated.



### *The third interview*

By the final interview, Sara had reached out to find supports in a range of ways through her social networks. Her English proficiency was a major facilitator enabling her to communicate effectively and seek the support she wanted. She had found casual work in this way that was flexible to her study needs and she was pleased to be working. She reflected on how she needed to reach out and make connections in order to find the help she wanted.

*So if I go there, I know more people and connect to people even I don't have a government support but I have people who support me, who can lead me to this job and do this and you know?*

Sara was on a positive trajectory in terms of being currently employed and in terms of working towards future employment and a career through tertiary education goals.

## **Summary of employment trajectories and associated factors**

Women in this study had a wide range of personal histories and experiences. The five women presented here display some of these diverse experiences and illustrate how barriers and facilitators intersect for individuals over time. In the study, women who had significant prior qualifications and/or work experience overseas were frustrated by the lack of recognition in Australia, and this led them to seek work in other fields, as Sally's experience shows. Others were attempting to requalify in their field of expertise, either seeking education pathways or working to open their own business in that area, as Deborah's experience reveals. Others, such as Cherry who had significant work experience and partial completion of tertiary study overseas, were unable to access English language tuition which presented a major barrier. These three women present examples of the ways in which their prior skills and expertise were not able to be capitalised on due to barriers in place to qualification and/or work experience recognition.

Care for children was central for women who were mothers. Those who were single mothers were even more challenged by the multiple responsibilities of caretaking and seeking employment, such as Sally and Cherry who were unable to draw on their prior education and work experience. Women who did not have children also experienced challenges in seeking work due to discrimination in seeking work as well as poor treatment at work, such as Fatim. Women who had been in Australia for less than two years at the beginning of the study were hopeful they could pursue their goals through hard work, such as Sara, Sally and Deborah. Women who had been in Australia for longer were aware of pathways to their employment goals, but ongoing barriers continued to affect them, such as Cherry and Fatim. English language proficiency helped women to find pathways towards their employment goals, such as Sara. However, Sally's experience shows, English language proficiency was not enough to help her find health promoting work, and instead she continued to face challenges in leveraging her prior skills and qualifications and she continued to face difficult working conditions.

## Chapter 5: Recommendations

This report has identified many issues relating to the ability of women from refugee backgrounds to access and have sustained, meaningful involvement in paid employment in Australia and the relationship of this to their health and wellbeing. In this chapter of the report, we will respond to some of those issues by framing a series of recommendations for policy and practice in the employment of women from refugee backgrounds. Although all migrants face challenges in the Australian labour market, our recommendations focus on the particular needs and circumstances of women from refugee backgrounds given the additional barriers faced by many.

A report written by Harmony Alliance, which is Australia's national migrant and refugee women's coalition, analysed how the employment outcomes of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds could be improved in Australia [42]. The recommendations outlined in the report do not distinguish between refugee women and migrant women. Nevertheless, the report acknowledges the particular needs of women from refugee backgrounds:

**“[h]umanitarian migrants (including refugee women and women at risk) may require greater assistance to become job ready after arrival to Australia, such as recovering from trauma and building literacy, education and other skill levels ... Non-humanitarian migrants (including family, skilled and student pathways) in contrast, are likely to arrive better equipped to enter the workforce, with at least one member of the migrating unit likely to be job-ready or studying, as well as proficient in English.”**

*(Emphasis added.)*

Therefore, although our recommendations will (in most cases) be capable of broad application across all migrants seeking to access meaningful and sustainable paid work, we have sought to demonstrate the importance of these recommendations and their particular application to women from refugee backgrounds.

The recommendations are divided into three sections.

First, we consider adjustments to the various forms of services available to women from refugee backgrounds. Many of our recommendations build on existing initiatives and services, which require ongoing and sustained funding. Others require more wholesale reform. Implementing these recommendations will require cooperation between government and service providers.

Second, we explore a number of changes to the practice of employers in creating and managing employment opportunities for women from refugee backgrounds that we believe employers can, and should, implement themselves, along with the support and funding of government and service providers.



Third, we propose policy and regulatory reform to address the systemic barriers facing women from refugee backgrounds from engaging in paid work. Implementing these recommendations is the responsibility of government, as they would require legislative amendment and/or changes to public policy and practice.

## 1. Reforming services

As we have demonstrated in this report, refugee women face additional barriers and require greater assistance to access and enter into paid work in Australia. Refugee women who do not know how to find a job, or know little about how to find a job, are much less likely to be in paid work. This lack of knowledge of the labour market and job opportunities is likely to be different to other categories of migrants such as employer sponsored visa holders who arrive in Australia with pre-arranged employment or for international students and Working Holiday Makers who are typically younger, more mobile and have greater opportunity and access to casual paid work. Our research found that refugee women are more isolated from labour market opportunities and may have difficulties in knowing about and accessing relevant support services. For some refugee women this lack of knowledge and access remained as a barrier over time as the BLNA analysis found that even in wave 5 nearly two fifths of refugee women still expressed a lack of knowledge of how to find a job. Similarly, in the qualitative longitudinal study, many refugee women who participated in the study were unaware of available supports or were unable to access them due to caring and transport issues or were ineligible due to their visa or time in Australia. They also reported that job network providers gave inadequate support that failed to overcome the myriad barriers facing them in accessing work, including assisting them to form local networks, to understand Australian workplace culture and norms and to prepare resumes and cover letters. Service providers reported that refugee women lacked confidence in accessing work compared to other categories of job seekers and needed tailored assistance that met their specific personal and contextual constraints in entering and remaining in the labour market.

1. In this context, it is essential that there be a holistic approach between driving employment and health and wellbeing. Our research found that there were a range of service providers providing employment assistance, and those providers whose work was informed by holistic, wrap-around approaches were more effective in helping women into work. This was because these services typically understood the need to address the mental health and personal circumstances of individual refugee women as essential building blocks to ensuring both the transition into work and the sustainability of remaining in work over time. A failure to address underlying issues that women may have prior to employment — and particularly to provide ongoing mental health and other support — could result in ‘a ticking time bomb’ as underlying issues are likely to present once employment is secured.

**Recommendation 1:** Sustained funding should be provided for well-publicised, accessible and personalised refugee-specific employment services that provide wrap-around services to address the individual needs of women from refugee backgrounds and have inclusive eligibility criteria including for those on temporary visas. This includes but is not limited to:

- in-house support for mental and physical health issues
- where necessary, appropriate referrals with follow up for mental and physical health issues
- addressing other barriers to employment where women with refugee backgrounds often face particular challenges, including transport, childcare and housing. An example here includes supporting women to obtain a driver's licence, including assisting with access to driving instructors who speak a variety of languages
- traditional employment development and support through assisting with resumes and cover letters and interview preparation
- ensuring access to interpreters in support services

2. There are substantial complexities in the background, experiences, and trajectories of refugee women. Many women in our study reported pre-settlement experiences of exposure to traumatic events, post-settlement stressors, family separation, domestic and family violence and stigma in accessing health services. For some refugee women, an additional barrier in accessing employment were patriarchal-led cultural norms which saw some receive little support from their families and partners or husbands to develop skills. Many women from refugee backgrounds themselves viewed their family and caring responsibilities as their core role, which can act as a barrier to securing employment. Targeted support services are needed to address women's diverse roles and aspirations both in terms of work and family.

**Recommendation 2:** All services working with women from refugee backgrounds should be trauma informed and recognise specific needs around gender. In some cases it might be more appropriate to have specific women's sessions/services but more generally a person-centred approach should have awareness of gendered barriers and facilitators to employment and the impact of the refugee experience.





3. Refugee women come from diverse backgrounds, and it is essential this diversity is captured in the way that services engage with refugee women. A broad cross-section of community stakeholders and voices should be involved in working with service providers to drive a greater understanding of cultural backgrounds and experiences.

**Recommendation 3: Services working with refugee women must have processes for community involvement in service design and ensure a broad range of community voices are included and consulted.**

4. English language proficiency is a key driver of labour market success for migrants.<sup>2</sup> Refugee women are no exception but typically are less proficient in English than other categories of migrants upon arrival in Australia and face additional challenges in becoming proficient. In the BLNA analysis English language proficiency was associated with employment outcomes for both men and women across the waves. In the qualitative longitudinal study, we observed many barriers to refugee women becoming proficient in English, including limited access to classes, childcare and other family responsibilities which made class attendance difficult, transportation constraints, which prevented getting to class and the costs associated with learning English, as well as the financial impediments to move immediately into employment. Service providers and employers reported that English language was a key barrier to the employment of refugee women and suggested that it was important that English language training was focused on preparing refugee women for the workplace.<sup>3</sup> It is important that women from refugee backgrounds can be referred to English language programs or access them directly through self-referral.

**Recommendation 4: Building on existing service provision, it is important that refugee women are given access to tailored English language support and training which prepares them for working in the Australian labour market and is flexibly delivered to address barriers and reflects varied literacy and education levels. English-language training options should include work-focused language development and modules around norms for workplace expectations in Australia.**

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<sup>2</sup> The Adult Migrant English Program is an example of a long-standing English language program to support migrants to learn English, see further: [43].

<sup>3</sup> The Harmony Alliance has recommended that language programs include accessing tailored English language learning opportunities to meet industry specifications, see [42]. An example of a program that seeks to do this is the Settlement Language Pathways to Employment and Training. Eligible migrants and humanitarians who have joined this program study English within the context of the Australian workplace, including learning about Australian workplace language, practices and culture, gain work experience and engage in vocational training, see further: [44].



5. Refugee women should not be funnelled into low-skilled work but rather provided with broad access to opportunities at all skill levels in the Australian labour market. The qualitative longitudinal study found that refugee women, despite often having academic and professional qualifications and work experience in their home country, were typically employed in low-skilled, low-wage work in Australia in industries such as hospitality, cleaning and aged care. This stemmed from a lack of access to broader opportunities because of poor professional networks in Australia, a lack of flexibility in working hours and no local work experience. Particular effort needs to be made to facilitate refugee women into existing networks and support services. Additionally, refugee women, consistent with other categories of migrants, also face substantial barriers in having their prior skills and qualifications recognised in Australia.<sup>4</sup> Cumulatively, these attributes have tended to lead to the funnelling of refugee women into low-skilled work, a fact not helped by the targets for service providers to place job seekers in any form of paid work rather than work suitable and appropriate to their level of skills and experience. For refugee women who are typically juggling the pursuit of work with substantial caring and other home responsibilities, it is essential that there are targeted initiatives to support this group into meaningful and sustainable work that addresses this context.

**Recommendation 5: Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds should be provided opportunities to develop relevant skills and professional experience and to have their overseas-gained experience, skills and qualifications valued and recognised. Although there have been examples of successful programs to develop pathways for some refugee women to pursue a professional career, the approach to date has been piecemeal and there needs to be a more consistent and comprehensive approach to recognising prior experience, skills and qualifications and supporting refugee women to develop meaningful and sustainable careers.**

6. Mentoring provides an alternative recruitment opportunity for women from refugee backgrounds as it allows them to develop important connections and networks which can assist their entry into the labour market. Participants in our study highlighted mentoring as a critical element in assisting women to build confidence and gain employment and/or health promoting pathways to employment. Mentoring is particularly vital for refugee women who typically lack local networks and contacts. Service providers should engage with communities and employers to provide mentorship and support which could occur through mentoring programs and workplace-funded internships. It is important that mentoring is concrete and that women are assigned an appropriate mentor who will establish a meeting and support plan with their mentee. For refugee women, mentoring could be done flexibly through home visits, child-friendly environments and be tailored to address the particular challenges facing this cohort. An example of this is the Asylum Seeker

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<sup>4</sup> UNHCR recommends recognition of professional and academic qualifications as a key aspect of improving the transition of refugees into the workplace, see further. [45].



Centre Employment Service which provides one-on-one coaching from volunteer job advisors who assist in the job search and offer ongoing mentorship to asylum seekers in new job roles.<sup>5</sup>

**Recommendation 6: Women from refugee backgrounds should be provided with support to enter into tailored and targeted mentoring relationships and build networks that could lead to employment.**

7. Employment-related support should also address the aspirations of some women from refugee backgrounds to establish their own business, recognising that this can often be a successful model enabling women with family responsibilities to earn an income. Participants in our study reported that connections to services that provided advice and practical assistance on how to start a small business were critical in understanding how to access a loan, grants and other support in Australia. This might also occur through developing collectives of women to help with building confidence and sharing resources on how to start and operate a business. A report by the Centre for Policy Development advocates making microfinancing available for women from refugee backgrounds, stating that, ‘it is likely that there is an unmet demand for business loans among humanitarian migrants in Australia. Humanitarian migrants are the most entrepreneurial people in Australia, with 10 per cent of their income coming from business earnings. ... fostering these small businesses in a carefully designed manner could lead to improved economic outcomes’ [43]. In relation to female refugees, the report notes, ‘[w]hile further investigation and evaluation is warranted, home-based businesses and opportunities to foster business experience among female humanitarian migrants would appear well suited to microfinance support’ [43].

**Recommendation 7: Women from refugee backgrounds with entrepreneurial aspirations should be able to access practical and financial support for establishing a small business. This support needs to encompass childcare support and access to the childcare subsidy in the business development stage, mentoring in setting up a small business and concrete advice and assistance in securing financial support, setting up a business, applying to register a business and complying with tax and other regulatory requirements.**

8. Women from refugee backgrounds are often unaware of their workplace rights under Australian law. The *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth), Australia’s main industrial legislation, provides a strong safety net across all workplaces which stipulates minimum pay and conditions. A system of awards governs most low-wage, low-skill work and the National Employment Standards are 11 minimum employment entitlements that have to be provided to employees. Requests for assistance can be made to the Fair Work Ombudsman, Australia’s workplace regulator, to enforce non-compliance with Australian labour standards. All employees are entitled to join a trade union as freedom of association is a core tenet of Australian labour law. Our study found these attributes

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<sup>5</sup> Asylum Seekers Centre, *Employing a Person Seeking Asylum* <https://asylumseekerscentre.org.au/employment/>

of the Australian labour law system are unique and unfamiliar to most refugee women and thus are unlikely to be enforced in practice through women from refugee backgrounds making complaints or accessing legal remedies (see also [46]). As a vulnerable cohort typically engaged in precarious work in the labour market, refugee women are susceptible to exploitation by employers. We observed that refugee women in our study experienced workplace exploitation and discrimination, including underpayment, excessively short or long shifts, overwork, harassment at work and a limited awareness of work rights and avenues to report grievances. Our interviews with service providers confirmed this power imbalance and the vulnerability of refugee women in the workplace. The Seasonal Worker Program, which provides for migrants from the Pacific to temporarily enter Australia for harvest work, is an example of how worker induction involving the Fair Work Ombudsman, unions and relevant community groups can work to ameliorate worker vulnerability.<sup>6</sup>

**Recommendation 8: Service providers should be given funding to provide an induction to refugee women on their workplace rights, entitlements and available support services such as the Fair Work Ombudsman and unions. Once placed in employment, refugee women should be allocated a support person within the service provider or an external professional mentor outside of the employer who can provide ongoing support and assistance.**

## **2. Improving and building employers' capacity and practice**

Employers have a critical role in providing opportunities for women from refugee backgrounds into the labour market and ensuring that this cohort are able to access meaningful and sustainable work. Providing incentives and supports to employers so that they can assist refugees through a range of alternative recruitment strategies is essential for ensuring there are pathways into employment for women from refugee backgrounds. Alternative recruitment strategies could include access to placements, internships, mentoring programs, task-based interviews, paid trials, voluntary work and post-employment follow-up program. However, it is important to acknowledge that alternative recruitment pathways and in particular unpaid work in the form of internships or work experience can lead to exploitation [48].

9. Employers, and in particular their human resources departments, should gain a more in-depth understanding of the value of overseas work experience and support should be given to employers to assist them on how to think laterally about the qualifications and skills that are required for a particular role. Support for employers should continue once they have employed a woman from a refugee background as there are likely to be ongoing language barriers, cultural barriers and issues relating to mental health, transport and childcare which often become apparent after the commencing of an employment relationship. As part of this support for employers, it is important to share 'success stories' in employing refugees in order to educate and raise awareness among

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<sup>6</sup> For a description of how this induction program works in practice, see: [47]



business leaders. Relatedly, this could involve addressing misconceptions and creating a positive public narrative around refugee employment and involve industry-specific positive case studies of refugee workforce integration that could be widely shared and readily replicated.

**Recommendation 9:** Employers should be provided with support to recruit women from refugee backgrounds (including for appropriate volunteering opportunities that enhance employability). Ongoing support is also required to assist the employer and the employee after an employment relationship has been formed. Employers should be provided with information on the challenges faced by refugee women and the types of structural and substantive supports that employers can provide to assist women with their transition into the workplace.

10. Our study found that both during the recruitment phase and once in employment, women participants had experienced instances of exploitation, in particular in relation to racism and discrimination. There is a need for employers to develop positive workplace cultures which promote diverse ways of facilitating the inclusion of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds at all levels. The Harmony Alliance report recognises that there may be unconscious biases toward refugee and migrant women that may be gender and/or cultural specific [42]. Unconscious bias training within companies was described in their report as potentially being a useful tool to counter this problem. Notably, women from refugee backgrounds who participated in our study reported that when instances of racism and discrimination occurred, it had substantial and detrimental effects on their health and wellbeing.

**Recommendation 10:** Employers should be provided with training to assist in the recruitment and employment of refugee women from diverse backgrounds and to address exploitation, racism, discrimination, and unconscious bias both in recruitment and ongoing employment, including for volunteers.

11. Our study found that women from refugee backgrounds may need additional workplace and mental health support once in paid employment. Employer participants in our study also reported that in some instances hiring women from refugee backgrounds had presented challenges for their organisation as well as the women due to mismatched expectations and cultural differences. Employers who developed strategies for integrating women from refugee backgrounds into the workplace and providing them with additional support reported better outcomes and more sustainable employment. This was also true of employers who tailored workplace policies and practices to accommodate and support women from refugee backgrounds in the workplace.

**Recommendation 11:** Employers should be supported to develop concrete inclusion strategies for women from refugee backgrounds including buddy shifts, the use of interpreters, translating important documents into key languages, appropriate supervision and other supports to enable employees to upskill or develop their skills. This may also include flexible working policies which allow women to work from home or work short shifts in tandem with school hours, and access to culturally-safe wellbeing programs.

### 3. Addressing regulatory and policy constraints

Although there is general acceptance amongst policymakers that employment is an important aspect of the integration of refugees in Australia, there is no overall strategy on how to achieve this in practice.

12. As our study and other research attests, people from refugee backgrounds face substantial barriers in accessing paid employment and remaining in employment over time. These include but are not limited to, English language challenges, temporary visas, lack of skills and/or (recognised) qualifications, labour market factors, issues with service access and a range of factors associated with gender, culture and health-related issues. It is important that women from refugee backgrounds are supported into employment and do not permanently remain outside the labour market because of these barriers or become entrenched in low-skilled employment that does not reflect their skills, experience and aspirations.

**Recommendation 12:** Federal and state governments need to work together to develop a national refugee employment strategy which addresses the barriers to employment for refugees and provides strategic funding and support for initiatives that facilitate entry into the labour market. This strategy needs to account for the particular challenges faced by refugee women and develop specific plans to address this.

13. In our study, women participants reported that they needed Jobactive providers to provide individualised and personalised support that took into account their circumstances, including pre- and post-settlement factors and gender and culture-related issues. Given the challenges that women from refugee backgrounds face, it is important that providers in the New Employment Services Model framework offer services that wrap-around the myriad complexities attached to being able to secure work and remain in work over time. This is not limited to the provisions of English language training and assistance with skills development or resume preparation but, importantly, the development of individualised care-coordination action plans for clients which takes into account an individual's needs from the beginning of their interaction with the provider. The role of providers is not merely transactional (i.e., to place women into paid work). Other studies have also observed the deficiencies of Jobactive of being able to address properly the specific needs of refugees and other migrants within a general national program [44]. Without specific funding, transparency and rigorous oversight, it is questionable whether providers will develop targeted and tailored support services and resources for refugee women.

**Recommendation 13:** The Australian government should ensure that the New Employment Services Model (NESM) provides enhanced support to women from refugee backgrounds and that employment service providers for refugees are experienced, culturally-safe organisations, and have appropriately trained staff and small enough case load numbers to ensure a personalised wrap-around service can be provided. Disincentives for providers in facilitating women into self-employment and for women in picking up small amounts of work need to be addressed. The framework needs to be evaluated, including from the perspective of refugee women and employers.



14. Understanding where job vacancies exist and which employers have a track record of successfully recruiting and employing women from refugee backgrounds is important for matching employers and prospective employees. This needs to occur at two levels: first, through the development of a jobs portal for employers who are seeking to recruit refugees. This could include the listings of job opportunities and the sharing of useful resources between employers. Second, this could enable women from refugee backgrounds and those who support them into work to draw upon an established network of employer contacts when seeking to secure work for women from refugee backgrounds. This is important for addressing information asymmetry as many refugee women are not aware of where job opportunities exist and are therefore more likely to find (and remain) in exploitative work because of the difficulties in accessing paid work. An example of how this model works in practice is in the horticulture labour market which largely draws upon a temporary migrant workforce. In this industry, the Federal government funds the Harvest Information Service which provides jobseekers with information on how to access harvest work and hosts a portal whereby employers can register job vacancies.

**Recommendation 14:** The Federal government should fund the development of processes for facilitating connections between women from refugee backgrounds and prospective employers through creating and maintaining a database of refugee-friendly employers that might have positions available.

15. Our study found that temporary visas were a key barrier to employment, particularly because of limited and contingent work rights for those that arrived in Australia without a valid visa. For some women in our study, this has meant several years without work rights, which precipitated ongoing difficulties in the labour market once work rights were instated because of a lack of local work experience despite having resided in Australia for some time. Additionally, our study found that temporary visa holders were also ineligible for a range of resettlement services, employment support and education pathways and the temporary nature of their visa was often seen as unattractive by prospective employers. Our study also found that specific work conditions within different temporary visas created vulnerabilities for women from refugee backgrounds as these conditions framed their access to the labour market and non-compliance with the conditions could lead to serious, punitive immigration-related consequences. For example, women on Safe Haven Enterprise visas, are additionally vulnerable because of a need to secure paid work or be in a study program for three and a half out of the five-year term of their visa in order to transition to permanent residency [49].

**Recommendation 15:** The Federal government should review all visa arrangements for refugees and asylum seekers and should remove time limit restrictions and work conditions that restrict the ability of refugees and asylum seekers to engage in the labour market. The Federal government should provide clear pathways to permanent residency independent of employer sponsorship or periods of work.



16. Women participants in our study faced various barriers to accessing work, including stemming from their role as the primary carer for dependent children. There were frequent reports of limited options in childcare places and hours and difficulties in arranging childcare. These were seen as clear constraints in accessing and remaining in paid work. The study also found that women from refugee backgrounds faced substantial difficulty in obtaining recognition for prior skills, qualifications and experience which meant they were often funnelled into low-skilled work by job placement providers. Recent reforms to lift the hours and time limits for English-language classes are a welcome development and point to the importance of developing support programs that are easy to access and do not have arbitrary time limits on how and when they can be accessed. Employment support may also be required for a longer period after arrival in Australia (eligibility for many supports ceases after 5 years) for some women depending on their circumstances, where caring and other responsibilities can mean they do not seek employment for a number of years after resettlement.

**Recommendation 16: The Federal government should address structural impediments to securing meaningful and sustainable employment for women from refugee backgrounds. These include but are not limited to:**

- **improving skills and qualifications recognition from overseas jurisdictions**
- **providing access to appropriate social security supports to ensure women have the opportunities to pursue education and training that will expand their future employment opportunities**
- **providing flexibility in any Centrelink obligations to seek employment to ensure that it is reasonable considering the language, literacy and technological skills of the client and does not compromise the opportunities for refugee women to engage in education and training**
- **ensuring that clients of NESM providers are correctly classified so that they receive suitable levels of support, or where relevant are supported to access an appropriate Disability Employment Service (DES) provider**
- **facilitating greater access to childcare by improving access to childcare and out of school care places and reducing the cost of childcare for women from refugee backgrounds**
- **extending eligibility for support programs, which is not time-bound and open to all refugees and asylum seekers**





## Conclusion

This report has examined the pathways into work for refugee women and the relationship between work and refugee women's wellbeing and health. It has found that there are substantial barriers and constraints for women from refugee backgrounds in accessing paid work and the support services which can assist them into the labour market.

There is, therefore, a pressing need to tailor policies and practices to the unique and particular needs of women from refugee backgrounds in accessing and sustaining meaningful paid work in Australia. This report has provided rich, qualitative data as to the experiences of refugee women which can be used to develop more tailored and strategic responses to the particular employment barriers and facilitators which exist for this cohort. This should be part of a new national refugee employment strategy which encompasses concerted investment and commitment to building comprehensive, targeted, and personalised support for women from refugee backgrounds in all facets of their life.

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## Appendix 1: Reference and Advisory Group members

### Reference group members (and affiliations at the time)

Mary Awata - Anglicare SA  
Tess Demediuk – AMES Australia  
Sandra Dzafic – Australian Refugee Association  
Bryan Hughes – Australian Refugee Association  
Joanne Kerr – Maxima Employment  
Helena Kyriazopoulos – Multicultural Communities Council of South Australia  
Tony Snelson – National Union of Workers  
Ismael Lara - Sonder  
Jan McFeeter – AMES Australia  
Kasia Nanky – Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), TAFE SA,  
Michael Schulz – AMES Australia  
Alexandra Segura – Welcoming Australia  
Shellie Strike - Immigration SA, Department for Trade and Investment  
Carole Strong – Welcoming Australia  
Janeke Wille – Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia

### Community Advisory Members:

Ukash Ahmed  
Hani Ashtari  
Awit Kuoc

## Appendix 2: Supplementary tables from BNLA analysis

**Table A1a: Transition in whether did paid work: Pre-arrival and Wave 1: Men, Frequencies**

	Wave 1		
Pre-Arrival	Currently in paid work		
Did you do any paid work?	Yes	No	Total
Yes	106	836	942
No	27	320	347
Total	133	1,156	1,289

Source: BNLA wave 1

**Table A1b: Transition in whether did paid work: Pre-arrival and Wave 1: Women, Frequencies**

	Wave 1		
Pre-Arrival	Currently in paid work		
Did you do any paid work?	Yes	No	Total
Yes	8	319	327
No	3	747	750
Total	11	1,066	1,077

Source: BNLA wave 1

**Table A2a: Transition in whether currently in paid work: Wave 1 and Wave 5: Men, Frequencies**

	Wave 5		
Wave 1	Currently in paid work		
Currently in paid work	Yes	No	Total
Yes	66	17	83
No	387	511	898
Total	453	528	981

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5

**Table A2b: Transition in whether did paid work: Wave 1 and Wave 5: Women, Frequencies**

	Wave 5		
Wave 1	Currently in paid work		
Currently in paid work	Yes	No	Total
Yes	3	4	7
No	107	756	863
Total	110	760	870

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5



**Table A3a: Transition in whether did paid work: Pre-arrival and Wave 5: Men, Frequencies**

Pre-Arrival	Wave 1		
	Currently in paid work		
Did you do any paid work?	Yes	No	Total
Yes	350	366	716
No	102	163	265
Total	452	529	981

Source: BNLA wave 1

**Table A3b: Transition in whether did paid work: Pre-arrival and Wave 5: Women, Frequencies**

Pre-Arrival	Wave 1		
	Currently in paid work		
Did you do any paid work?	Yes	No	Total
Yes	61	204	265
No	50	559	609
Total	111	763	874

Source: BNLA wave 1

**Table A4: Since arriving in Australia, have you ever done paid work? (if not currently working)**

Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	58	6.2	6	1.4	64	4.7
No	869	93.0	434	98.6	1,303	94.8
Don't know/Missing	7	0.8	0	0.0	7	0.5
Total	934	100.0	440	100.0	1,374	100.0
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	84	15.5	43	5.6	127	9.6
No	444	81.9	714	92.1	1,158	87.9
Don't know/Missing	14	2.6	18	2.3	32	2.4
Total	542	100.0	775	100.0	1,317	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5



**Table A5: Types of unpaid work**

Pre-Arrival	Men		Women		Total	
	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%
Family business	187	14.3	92	8.4	279	11.6
Looked after family/home	386	29.5	667	61.1	1,053	43.9
Other	142	10.9	62	5.7	204	8.5
None	640	49.0	280	25.6	920	38.4
Total	1,307		1,092		2,399	
Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%
Family business	26	2.0	36	3.3	62	2.6
Looked after family/home	313	24.0	616	56.4	929	38.7
Other	38	2.9	21	1.9	59	2.5
None	903	69.1	415	38.0	1,318	54.9
Total	1,307		1,092		2,399	
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%
Family business	22	2.2	21	2.4	43	2.3
Looked after family/home	245	24.6	389	43.9	634	33.7
Other	35	3.5	14	1.6	49	2.6
None	631	63.4	417	47.1	1,048	55.7
Total	995		886		1,881	

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5. Note: Cases will not sum to totals due to missing values across the multiple response categories.

**Table A6: Main occupation before migration**

Pre-arrival Main Occupation	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Managers	77	8.1	21	6.3	98	7.7
Professionals	105	11.1	84	25.3	189	14.8
Technicians/trades workers	257	27.1	49	14.8	306	23.9
Community and personal service workers	42	4.4	30	9.0	72	5.6
Clerical and administrative workers	22	2.3	15	4.5	37	2.9
Sales workers	43	4.5	11	3.3	54	4.2
Machinery operators and drivers	91	9.6	10	3.0	101	7.9
Labourers	115	12.1	48	14.5	163	12.7
Unassigned	40	4.2	13	3.9	53	4.1
Don't know/Missing	156	16.5	51	15.4	207	16.2
Total	948	100.0	332	100.0	1,280	100.0

Source: BNLA wave 1



**Table A7: Main occupation reported in Wave 1**

Wave 1 Main Occupation	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Managers	6	4.5	0	0.0	4.1	6
Professionals	5	3.8	0	0.0	3.5	5
Technicians/trades workers	38	28.6	1	8.3	26.9	39
Community and personal service workers	9	6.8	4	33.3	9.0	13
Clerical and administrative workers	1	0.8	0	0.0	0.7	1
Sales workers	1	0.8	0	0.0	0.7	1
Machinery operators and drivers	14	10.5	0	0.0	9.7	14
Labourers	38	28.6	5	41.7	29.7	43
Unassigned	9	6.8	1	8.3	6.9	10
Don't know/Missing	12	9.0	1	8.3	9.0	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>145</b>

Source: BNLA wave 1

**Table A8: Main occupation reported in Wave 5**

Wave 5 Main Occupation	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Managers	4	0.9	1	0.9	5	0.9
Professionals	10	2.2	8	7.2	18	3.2
Technicians/trades workers	165	36.4	10	9.0	175	31.0
Community and personal service workers	35	7.7	37	33.3	72	12.8
Clerical and administrative workers	5	1.1	4	3.6	9	1.6
Sales workers	17	3.8	7	6.3	24	4.3
Machinery operators and drivers	52	11.5	2	1.8	54	9.6
Labourers	127	28.0	30	27.0	157	27.8
Don't know/Missing	38	8.4	12	10.8	50	8.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>453</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>564</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: BNLA wave 5

**Table A9: Number of jobs worked for those employed**

Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
One	125	94.0	11	91.7	136	93.8
Two	3	2.3	0	0.0	3	2.1
Don't know/Missing	5	3.8	1	8.3	6	4.2
Total	133	100.0	12	100.0	145	100.0
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
One	418	92.3	104	93.7	522	92.6
Two	26	5.7	5	4.5	31	5.5
Three	3	0.7	0	0.0	3	0.5
Eight	0	0.0	1	0.9	1	0.2
Don't know/Missing	6	1.3	1	0.9	7	1.3
Total	453	100.0	111	100.0	564	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5



**Table A10: Employment income per week**

Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
\$1-\$149	7	5.3	1	8.3	8	5.5
\$150-\$299	6	4.5	0	0.0	6	4.1
\$300-\$399	4	3.0	0	0.0	4	2.8
\$400-\$499	3	2.3	1	8.3	4	2.8
\$500-\$649	22	16.5	2	16.7	24	16.6
\$650-\$799	32	24.1	3	25.0	35	24.1
\$800-\$999	14	10.5	0	0.0	14	9.7
\$1000-\$1249	5	3.8	0	0.0	5	3.5
\$1250-\$1499	2	1.5	0	0.0	2	1.4
\$1500-\$1749	2	1.5	0	0.0	2	1.4
\$2000-\$2999	0	0.0	1	8.3	1	0.7
Don't know/Missing	36	27.1	4	33.3	40	27.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
\$1-\$149	14	3.1	7	6.3	21	3.7
\$150-\$299	20	4.4	19	17.1	39	6.9
\$300-\$399	26	5.7	5	4.5	31	5.5
\$400-\$499	28	6.2	11	9.9	39	6.9
\$500-\$649	45	9.9	18	16.2	63	11.2
\$650-\$799	64	14.1	21	18.9	85	15.1
\$800-\$999	82	18.1	12	10.8	94	16.7
\$1000-\$1249	60	13.3	6	5.4	66	11.7
\$1250-\$1499	18	4.0	0	0.0	18	3.2
\$1500-\$1749	30	6.6	0	0.0	30	5.3
\$1750-\$1999	5	1.1	0	0.0	5	0.9
\$2000-\$2999	7	1.6	0	0.0	7	1.2
\$3000 or more	2	0.4	0	0.0	2	0.4
Don't know/Missing	52	11.5	12	10.8	64	11.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>453</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>564</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5

**Table A11: Main source of income**

Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Own wage or salary	142	10.9	20	1.8	162	6.8
Spouse/partner/parent's income	11	0.8	20	1.8	31	1.3
Financial support	10	0.8	9	0.8	19	0.8
Government payment	1,097	83.9	1,014	92.9	2,111	88.0
Savings	13	1.0	6	0.6	19	0.8
Other	5	0.4	2	0.2	7	0.3
Don't know/Missing	29	2.2	21	1.9	50	2.1
Total	1,307	100.0	1,092	100.0	2,399	100.0
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Own wage or salary	373	37.5	70	7.9	443	23.6
Spouse/partner/parent's income	19	1.9	94	10.6	113	6.0
Financial support	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Government payment	522	52.5	675	76.2	1,197	63.6
Savings	19	1.9	7	0.8	26	1.4
Other	37	3.7	25	2.8	62	3.3
Don't know/Missing	25	2.5	15	1.7	40	2.1
Total	995	100.0	886	100.0	1,881	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5



**Table A12: Have you looked for paid work at any time during the last 4 weeks? (if not currently working and has looked for work)**

Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	297	77.8	58	63.7	355	75.1
No	85	22.3	32	35.2	117	24.7
Don't know/Missing	0	0.0	1	1.1	1	0.2
Total	382	100.0	91	100.0	473	100.0
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	124	72.9	98	66.2	222	69.8
No	46	27.1	50	33.8	96	30.2
Don't know/Missing	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	170	100.0	148	100.0	318	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5

**Table A13: Since arriving in Australia, have you ever found it hard to get a job? (if currently working or ever looked for work)**

Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	351	91.9	82	90.1	433	91.5
No	25	6.5	5	5.5	30	6.3
Don't know/Missing	6	1.6	4	4.4	10	2.1
Total	382	100.0	91	100.0	473	100.0
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	261	77.2	165	84.2	426	79.8
No	74	21.9	30	15.3	104	19.5
Don't know/Missing	3	0.9	1	0.5	4	0.8
Total	338	100.0	196	100.0	534	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5

**Table A14: Reasons respondents found it hard to get a job (if ever found it hard to get a job)**

Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%
No suitable jobs	86	18.7	13	14.6	99	18.1
No skills/qualifications	159	34.6	40	44.9	199	36.3
No Australian experience	257	56.0	60	67.4	317	57.9
Nothing in same occupation as overseas	138	30.1	25	28.1	163	29.7
Couldn't get interview	59	12.9	14	15.7	73	13.3
Unsuitable hours	21	4.6	9	10.1	30	5.5
Transport	65	14.2	14	15.7	79	14.4
Discrimination	25	5.5	9	10.1	34	6.2
Health reasons	22	4.8	2	2.3	24	4.4
English not good enough	246	53.6	47	52.8	293	53.5
Total	351		82		433	
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%
No suitable jobs	101	38.7	51	30.9	152	35.7
No skills/qualifications	95	36.4	63	38.2	158	37.1
No Australian experience	120	46.0	85	51.5	205	48.1
Nothing in same occupation as overseas	73	28.0	23	13.9	96	22.5
Transport	22	8.4	13	7.9	35	8.2
Discrimination	45	17.2	14	8.5	59	13.9
Health reasons	35	13.4	23	13.9	58	13.6
English not good enough	125	47.9	76	46.1	201	47.2
Total	261		165		426	

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5





**Table A15: Have you had your qualification assessed in Australia?**

Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	74	32.0	60	38.7	134	34.7
No	150	64.9	87	56.1	237	61.4
Don't know/Missing	7	3.0	8	5.2	15	3.9
Total	231	100.0	155	100.0	386	100.0

Source: BNLA wave 1

**Table A16: Have you had your qualification assessed since we last spoke to you?**

Wave 3	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	12	13.3	10	20.0	22	15.7
No	76	84.4	39	78.0	115	82.1
Don't know/Missing	2	2.2	1	2.0	3	2.1
Total	90	100.0	50	100.0	140	100.0
Wave 4	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	11	13.1	1	2.2	12	9.3
No	64	76.2	40	88.9	104	80.6
Don't know/Missing	9	10.7	4	8.9	13	10.1
Total	84	100.0	45	100.0	129	100.0
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	4	6.3	2	5.0	6	5.8
No	57	89.1	33	82.5	90	86.5
Don't know/Missing	3	4.7	5	12.5	8	7.7
Total	64	100.0	40	100.0	104	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 3, 4 and 5

**Table A17: Study or job training other than English language classes undertaken since previous BNLA interview (if was not studying in the previous wave)**

Wave 2	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes - currently studying or doing job training	107	10.8	97	12.3	204	11.5
Yes – completed	18	1.8	12	1.5	30	1.7
Yes - commenced, but have stopped	75	7.6	24	3.1	99	5.6
No	787	79.7	652	82.9	1,439	81.1
Don't know/Missing	1	0.1	2	0.3	3	0.2
Total	988	100.0	787	100.0	1,775	100.0
Wave 3	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes - currently studying or doing job training	70	8.0	91	12.0	161	9.9
Yes – completed	31	3.6	26	3.4	57	3.5
Yes - commenced, but have stopped	73	8.4	40	5.3	113	6.9
No	679	77.9	574	75.8	1,253	76.9
Don't know/Missing	19	2.2	26	3.4	45	2.8
Total	872	100.0	757	100.0	1,629	100.0
Wave 4	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes - currently studying or doing job training	62	7.0	71	9.7	133	8.2
Yes – completed	22	2.5	17	2.3	39	2.4
Yes - commenced, but have stopped	84	9.5	54	7.4	138	8.5
No	713	80.2	581	79.4	1,294	79.8
Don't know/Missing	8	0.9	9	1.2	17	1.1
Total	889	100.0	732	100.0	1,621	100.0
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes - currently studying or doing job training	50	5.7	62	8.3	112	6.9
Yes – completed	31	3.5	30	4.0	61	3.7
Yes - commenced, but have stopped	78	8.8	51	6.9	129	7.9
No	720	81.4	589	79.1	1,309	80.3
Don't know/Missing	6	0.7	13	1.7	19	1.1
Total	885	100.0	745	100.0	1,630	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 2, 3, 4 and 5



**Table A18: Plans to do any study in Australia in the future other than English language skills**

Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	698	65.7	271	60.6	969	64.2
No	330	31.1	157	35.1	487	32.3
Don't know/Missing	34	3.2	19	4.3	53	3.5
Total	1,062	100.0	447	100.0	1,509	100.0
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	375	46.0	217	52.4	592	48.2
No	405	49.7	166	40.1	571	46.5
Don't know/Missing	35	4.3	31	7.5	66	5.4
Total	815	100.0	414	100.0	1,229	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5

**Table A19: Highest level of education would like to achieve in Australia (if plans to study)**

Wave 1	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Secondary school (Grade 7-12)	27	3.9	11	4.1	38	3.9
Language, Literacy and Numeracy certificate	135	19.3	66	24.4	201	20.7
Trade, technical qualification or diploma	335	48.0	92	34.0	427	44.1
University degree	172	24.6	89	32.8	261	26.9
Don't know/Missing	29	4.2	13	4.8	42	4.3
Total	698	100.0	271	100.0	969	100.0
Wave 5	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Secondary school (Grade 7-12)	18	4.8	9	4.2	27	4.6
Language, Literacy and Numeracy certificate	92	24.5	58	26.7	150	25.3
Trade, technical qualification or diploma	174	46.4	85	39.2	259	43.8
University degree	78	20.8	51	23.5	129	21.8
Don't know/Missing	13	3.5	14	6.5	27	4.6
Total	375	100.0	217	100.0	592	100.0

Source: BNLA waves 1 and 5

## **Appendix 3: Policy Brief**

Please, see following pages.



POLICY BRIEF

# PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION AND HEALTH & WELLBEING FOR WOMEN FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

A/Prof Anna Ziersch, A/Prof Clemence Due, A/Prof Joanna Howe,  
Emily Miller, Dr Moira Walsh, Dr Joanne Flavel



THE UNIVERSITY  
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UNIVERSITY

# OVERVIEW



## PAID EMPLOYMENT HAS LONG BEEN RECOGNISED AS A PATH TO HEALTH, WELLBEING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION.

Women from refugee backgrounds who are building a new home in a resettlement country often have few pre-existing networks and little support. As such, securing appropriate paid employment can be especially critical for providing income, community, support and wellbeing. However, unemployment is high amongst refugees both globally and in Australia. For refugee women, the challenges in accessing and sustaining paid employment are more entrenched and systemic than for refugee men, or for other cohorts of migrants.

There is very little research examining the experiences of women from refugee backgrounds in relation to their employment, social inclusion and health and wellbeing.

This three-year research study conducted by Flinders University and the University of Adelaide (2018-2021) in Adelaide, South Australia (Kurna land) investigated pathways to employment for social inclusion, health, and wellbeing for women from refugee backgrounds. Supported by a Reference Group of service providers and Community Advisory Group of members of refugee communities, we conducted interviews and focus groups with refugee women, service providers and employers, as well as analysing data from the Building a New Life in Australia longitudinal study of refugees in Australia.

Together, these strands enabled us to build a compelling and rich understanding of the experiences of women from refugee backgrounds in the Australian labour market and to develop key recommendations for how to better support refugee women in their employment journeys.

*We are very grateful to the women who shared their experiences with us over three years, and the service providers and employers for their highly valued contributions. We would also like to acknowledge the project Reference Group and Community Advisory Group who helped to guide the project. We are also grateful for the input of Professor Alexander Reilly and for research assistance from Erin Green and Peta Callaghan.*

*This project was funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS - see [www.dss.gov.au](http://www.dss.gov.au)) and used unit record data from the Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) study conducted by DSS/AIFS. The findings and views here are those of the authors.*

*The research was undertaken on Kurna land, and we pay respects to Kurna elders past, present and emerging as traditional custodians with an ongoing spiritual and cultural relationship with this land.*

# KEY FINDINGS



- There are low rates of employment for refugee women and when employed, there is an overrepresentation of refugee women in lower skilled and lower paid insecure part-time work.
- Myriad substantial barriers prevent refugee women from entering employment in Australia and sustaining meaningful involvement in the labour market over time. These include challenges arising from literacy and English language proficiency, recognition of prior skills and qualifications, childcare responsibilities, discrimination and exploitation, temporary visa status, mental and physical health issues, and limitations to existing job network supports and employment support services
- A range of facilitators exist for refugee women in securing employment. These include a strong work ethic and motivation to work, significant engagement in education and training, social networks, access to mentoring and volunteering opportunities, provision of personalised tailored support, and employers with an ethos of employing refugee women and supporting them in the workplace.
- Women from refugee backgrounds need targeted support into employment so that they do not permanently remain unemployed or become entrenched in low skilled employment which does not reflect their skills, experience and aspirations. Support is also needed to ensure they are not exposed to exploitation such as wage theft and discrimination.



A NUMBER OF RECOMMENDATIONS WERE FORMULATED WHICH REFLECT THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY (SEE PAGE 8). THESE RECOMMENDATIONS ARE AIMED AT SERVICE PROVIDERS, EMPLOYERS AND GOVERNMENT AND PROVIDE A TEMPLATE FOR REDUCING THE BARRIERS AND EXPANDING THE FACILITATORS THAT ENABLE WOMEN FROM REFUGEE BACK-GROUNDS TO REALISE THEIR LABOUR MARKET POTENTIAL IN AUSTRALIA.



# METHODOLOGY



## Analysis of the Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) longitudinal dataset

Data from the BNLA study (2013-2018) were analysed as part of the project.<sup>1</sup> The BNLA study was commissioned by the Department of Social Services (DSS) to trace the settlement journey of humanitarian migrants to better understand the factors that influence people's settlement processes.

The study collected information from 2,399 people (1,307 men & 1,092 women) who arrived with, or had been granted, a permanent humanitarian visa between May and December 2013. The respondents were followed each year for five years (or 'waves') with 1,881 people (995 men & 886 women) still in the study in the final 'wave'.

## Qualitative three-year longitudinal study of refugee women

The study included a longitudinal focus on women's experiences via qualitative interviews conducted in three waves over a two-year period (2019-2021). Forty-two women from Africa (N=6, Middle East (N=17), South Asia (N=8) and Latin America (N=11) participated in the first wave of interviews, with 30 women participating in all three waves of the longitudinal study. Interpreters were available if required.

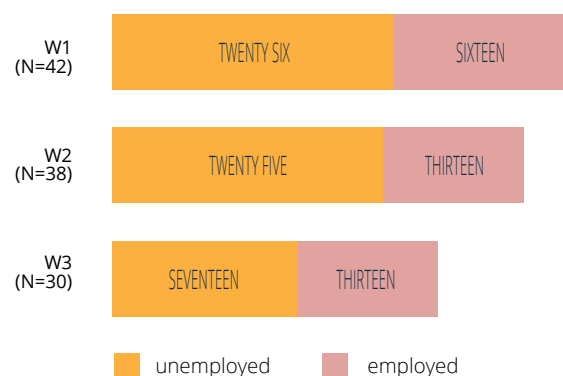
## Service provider and employer interviews

Additional data were collected via individual interviews with 14 employers (10 women, 4 men) and 12 service providers (10 women, 2 men) working with women from refugee backgrounds.

## Workshop consultation

Preliminary findings from the project were presented to workshop attendees, who were invited to take part in focus group discussions regarding findings and recommendations. Thirty-five individuals participated, including refugee and non-refugee focused service providers, community organisations, state and federal government representatives, employers of women from refugee backgrounds, and community members.

## NUMBERS OF QUALITATIVE PARTICIPANTS IN EMPLOYMENT



# BNLA: QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS



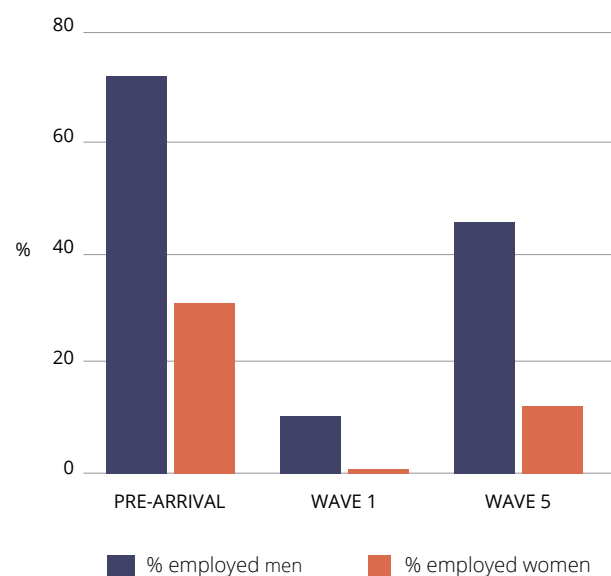
## Employment rates

- Employment of refugee women rose from 1% in the first year (12 women) in Australia to 12.5% (111 women) 5 years later. However, each year the rate was lower than for refugee men and much lower than the general Australian population (Figure 1).

## Employment type and income

- Most refugee women employed in Wave 5 were community and personal service workers (33%) and labourers (27%). Technicians/trades workers represented 9% of women's employment, and 7% were employed as professionals. Employment for women was concentrated in lower-skilled occupations than was the case before migration.
- In Wave 5 only 36% of the employed refugee women worked full time compared to 64% of employed refugee men. On average refugee women earned less money per week than men - 23% of employed women reported earning less than \$300 per week in employment income in Wave 5. In Wave 5 only 16% of employed women earned more than \$800 per week from employment compared with 45% of employed men.

FIGURE 1: REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT (% , BNLA)



## Contract type

- For those employed the majority were employed casually, though men and women had higher rates of permanent or ongoing employment in Wave 5 (Table 1).
- In wave 5, 30% of those women employed were employed on a permanent or ongoing basis and 16% had a fixed term contract. There was also a growth in self-employment for both men and women between Wave 1 and Wave 5. These changes in contract of employment indicate that refugees may be able to seek more varied employment opportunities after living in Australia for longer and after obtaining more experience in the Australian labour market (Table 1).

## Employment, health and settlement outcomes

- Almost a quarter of refugee women reported that job opportunities in Australia were worse than they expected before arriving in the country.
- Knowing how to look for a job in Australia improved over time but even after 5 years 38% of women still felt that they would not know how to look for a job at all.
- Health was associated with employment outcomes. In Wave 5 those reporting worse health were less likely to be working - 19% of refugee women who were in good/very good/excellent health were employed compared to 5% of refugee women who were in fair/poor/very poor health. In Wave 5, less than six per cent of refugee women in paid work had probable serious mental health illness, compared to over 21% who were not in paid work.
- 25% of women reported that difficulties finding work had made settling in Australia more difficult, even after five years of settlement

TABLE 1: CONTRACT IN JOB/MAIN JOB, FOR THOSE EMPLOYED (% , BNLA)

	MEN	WOMEN
<b>WAVE 1</b>		
Self-employed	6	0
Fixed-term	5	25
Casual	63	42
Permanent/ ongoing	18	17
Other	5	8
Don't know/Missing	4	8
<b>WAVE 5</b>		
Self-employed	12	8
Fixed-term	11	16
Casual	41	32
Permanent/ ongoing	33	30
Other	3	12
Don't know/Missing	1	2

# BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO SECURING WORK



REFUGEE WOMEN HAVE DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS IN TERMS OF THEIR PAST EMPLOYMENT HISTORY, EDUCATION AND SKILLS AND CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS AROUND WORK.

The interviews and focus groups with refugee women, service providers, and employers found a range of key barriers and facilitators to securing work and ongoing employment that were varyingly relevant for different groups.

The longitudinal qualitative analysis of participants' experiences identified that these barriers and facilitators could also vary over time and that employment experiences were interrelated with other life circumstances. Around half of the women had improving employment experiences where they either gained employment over the course of the study or were progressing along employment pathways through education; almost a third had generally negative or worsening experiences seeking work or being in work that was damaging for health and wellbeing; and the remainder had a mixture of positive and negative experiences.



## Barriers

- English language proficiency was crucial for employment, and barriers to developing English language skills included challenges accessing sufficient language tuition due to caring responsibilities, inadequate length or flexibility of classes, or additional work required for pre-literate learners.
- Skills, education and qualification requirements were a barrier, where employers required certification for particular jobs. Those women who had overseas work experience and qualifications encountered difficulties getting these recognised in Australia. Lack of local experience and referees was a barrier and meant many women without Australian work experience had no way to get this experience.
- Women with children were keen to find work that suited their families. There was a perceived lack of jobs to fit with care responsibilities and study commitments (including English lessons). Racial and religious discrimination in seeking work was noted by women, and discrimination and exploitation within jobs was also frequently mentioned, with some women experiencing work environments that placed them in physically challenging or risky situations. Reporting mechanisms were insufficient to manage these situations.
- Temporary visas limited access to employment services, as well as limiting other support services available. These visas at times restricted women's ability to seek work (when visas explicitly barred this) and also placed a large ongoing mental health burden on women who were concerned for their futures.
- Some women had caring responsibilities for family members with disabilities, which limited their options for study or for work. Others had their own health needs and although many were accessing health services for physical needs more generally, some were increasingly facing mental health challenges. Stressors affecting mental health were exacerbated by multiple layers of challenge including unemployment, discrimination, worry due to insecurity, or a range of pre- and post-migration difficulties.
- Limitations to existing job network supports and mixed experiences of other employment support services were reported. Employers said that job providers often assigned them workers that were not right for the job and did not provide ongoing support.



*I don't know how to start and with who to talk. You know not everybody can –can talk that kind of stuff. So, you need people like more to support you and guide you more and be with you till, you know, until you get a job.*

**Refugee participant**

*Communication would be a big one, more so just for their own safety. There's a lot of things that they have to sign and understand when they come on site [...] we can't be confident that they'd be very safe on the floor.*

**Employer, Food production**

*I worked a lot with the Muslim community, and it was just oh women, oh yeah childcare, oh cleaning and personalised care. Some of these women are standing there with Master's Degrees and we're sort of like, come on, you know, at least try to find something somewhere in between [...] I think there's a big gap of advocacy for them.*

**Service provider**

*A lot of people, you know, they've been working cash. You see a lot of employers, for example, abusing the migrants and refugees.*

**Service provider**

## Facilitators

- Women were very motivated to work and had a strong work ethic which was noted by women themselves as well as service providers working with women from refugee backgrounds.
- Women who lived with family members or who were in close contact with their broader community had good supports for wellbeing.
- Many women were studying and had clear goals for pathways to employment. Access to English language courses were important first steps for those learning English, and following on from that access to other types of study provided both a mechanism for improved employment prospects as well as an avenue to build wellbeing through hopes for the future.
- Social networks were key facilitators for information sharing, and women learned about potential jobs through these social connections. Social networks also helped women to learn where to go for emotional and practical support once they secured a job.
- At a service level, access to volunteering opportunities and mentoring, and key relationships between services and employers were also important. Women in close contact

with services discussed how these services helped them to access social networks, to develop understanding of Australian systems, to connect to education pathways, or to link to volunteering work or paid work in some instances. Services providing support for other settlement issues such as housing or health care were important as these factors intersected with employment pathways.

- Personalised tailored support that addressed pre- and post-migration stressors including mental health issues helped to assist women into employment and those that continued to support women (and their employers) after a job was acquired were most successful in securing sustainable employment outcomes.
- Employers with a strong ethos to help refugee women into employment were particularly successful in facilitating good employment outcomes, and workplace practices such as the provision of buddy shifts, the use of interpreters and translating important documents into key languages, creating open lines of communication between workers and employers/management and appropriate supervision and direction were all also identified as helping women once in work



*“Having relationships with employers, that’s a number one [...] Not just any employer – employers who are accepting of migrants or refugees, who are willing to support them to help them grow in their new life that they are creating for themselves.”*

**Service provider**

*“Because of [employment support service] they’ve come ready, prepared for the interview [...] we find [with] [service], they come with all their clearances, so we don’t have to chase.”*

**Employer, disability care**

*“Through our nonaccredited training, a bit of mentoring, we just gave that confidence boost that they needed. Now they’re engaged in employment, they’re very happy doing the work.”*

**Service provider**

*“I met some good friends through [community organisation]. I made a friend that they are really good to us now and they have a publishing company [...] I’ve done some projects for them.”*

**Refugee participant**



# RECOMMENDATIONS



## SIXTEEN RECOMMENDATIONS WERE FORMULATED TO ALIGN WITH KEY FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY.

Although in some cases these recommendations are capable of broad application across all migrant groups, they are particularly important for women from refugee backgrounds given the multifaced and specific barriers to employment they face, as well as their unique health considerations.

The recommendations for facilitating health promoting employment for refugee women are divided into three sections:

- adjustments to the various forms of services available to refugee women;
- ways for employers to create and manage employment opportunities for refugee women, and;
- policy and regulatory reform to address the systemic barriers facing refugee women from engaging in paid work.

## RECOMMENDATIONS, SECTION 1: REFORMING SERVICES

This section focuses on adjustments to the various forms of services available to women from refugee backgrounds. Many of our recommendations build on existing initiatives and services, which require ongoing and sustained funding. Others require more wholesale reform. Implementing these recommendations will require cooperation between government and service providers.

1. Our research found that there were a range of service providers providing employment assistance, and those providers whose work was informed by holistic, wrap-around approaches with ongoing support were more effective in helping women into work. This was because these services typically understood the need to address the mental health and personal circumstances of individual refugee women as essential building blocks to ensuring transition into work and the sustainability over time.

*Sustained funding should be provided for well-publicised, accessible and personalised refugee-specific employment services that provide wrap-around services to address the individual needs of women from refugee backgrounds, and have inclusive eligibility criteria including for those on temporary visas. This includes but is not limited to:*

- in-house support for mental and physical health issues
- where necessary, appropriate referrals with follow up for mental and physical health issues



- *addressing other barriers to employment where women with refugee backgrounds often face particular challenges, including transport, childcare and housing (e.g. supporting women to obtain a driver's licence, including assisting with access to bi-lingual driving instructors)*
- *traditional employment development and support through assisting with resumes and cover letters and interview preparation*
- *ensuring access to interpreters in support services*

**2.** There are substantial complexities in the background, experiences and trajectories of refugee women. Many women in our study reported pre-settlement experiences of exposure to traumatic events, post-settlement stressors, family separation, domestic and family violence and stigma in accessing health services.

*All services working with women from refugee backgrounds should be trauma informed and recognise specific needs around gender. In some cases it might be more appropriate to have specific women's sessions/services but more generally a person-centred approach should have awareness of gendered barriers and facilitators to employment and the impact of the refugee experience.*

**3.** Refugee women come from diverse backgrounds and it is essential that this diversity is captured in the way that services engage with refugee women.

*Services working with refugee women must have processes for community involvement in service design and ensure a broad range of community voices are included and consulted.*

**4.** English language proficiency is a key driver of labour market success for migrants. Refugee women are no exception but typically are less proficient in English than other categories of migrants upon arrival in Australia and face additional challenges in becoming proficient. Our analysis of the BNLA data found even a small increase in oral language ability had a substantial impact in improving access to employment.

In our qualitative study we observed many barriers to refugee women becoming proficient in English, including basic literacy, limited access to classes, childcare and other family responsibilities which made class attendance difficult, transportation constraints, which prevented getting to class and the costs associated with learning English, as well as the financial impediments to move immediately into employment.

*Building on existing service provision, it is important that refugee women are given access to tailored English language support and training which prepares them for working in the Australian labour market, and is flexibly delivered to address barriers and reflects varied literacy and education levels. English-language training options should include work-focused language development and modules around norms for workplace expectations in Australia.*

**5.** Our study found that refugee women, despite often having academic and professional qualifications and work experience in their home country, were typically employed in low-skilled, low-wage work in Australia in industries such as hospitality, cleaning and aged care.

*Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds should be provided opportunities to develop relevant skills and professional experience and to have their overseas-gained experience, skills and qualifications valued and recognised. Although there have been examples of successful programs to develop pathways for some refugee women to pursue a professional career, the approach to date has been piecemeal and there needs to be a more consistent and comprehensive approach to recognising prior experience, skills and qualifications and supporting refugee women to develop meaningful and sustainable careers.*

**6.** Mentoring provides an alternative recruitment opportunity for women from refugee backgrounds as it allows them to develop important connections and networks which can assist their entry into the labour market. Participants in our study highlighted mentoring

as a critical element in assisting women to build confidence and gain employment and/or health promoting pathways to employment. Mentoring is particularly vital for refugee women who typically lack local networks and contacts.

*Women from refugee backgrounds should be provided with support to enter into tailored and targeted mentoring relationships and build networks that could lead to employment.*

- 7.** Humanitarian migrants are the most entrepreneurial people in Australia, with 10 per cent of their income coming from business earnings.<sup>2</sup> Participants in our study reported that connections to services that provided advice and practical assistance on how to start a small business were critical in understanding how to access a loan, grants and other support in Australia.

*Women from refugee backgrounds with entrepreneurial aspirations should be able to access practical and financial support for establishing a small business. This support needs to encompass childcare support and access to the childcare subsidy in the business development stage, mentoring in setting up a small business and concrete advice and assistance in securing financial support, setting up a business, applying to register a business and complying with tax and other regulatory requirements.*

- 8.** Women from refugee backgrounds are often unaware of their workplace rights under Australian law. We observed that refugee women in our study experienced workplace exploitation and discrimination, including underpayment, excessively short or long shifts, overwork, harassment at work and a limited awareness of work rights and avenues to report grievances. Our interviews with service providers confirmed this power imbalance and the vulnerability of refugee women in the workplace.

*Service providers should be given funding to provide an induction to refugee women on their workplace rights, entitlements and available support services such as the Fair Work Ombudsman and unions. Once placed in employment, refugee women should be allocated*

*a support person within the service provider or an external professional mentor outside of the employer who can provide ongoing support and assistance.*

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS, SECTION 2: IMPROVING AND BUILDING EMPLOYERS' CAPACITY AND PRACTICE**

Employers have a critical role in providing opportunities for women from refugee backgrounds into the labour market and ensuring that this cohort are able to access meaningful and sustainable work. We recommend a number of changes to the practice of employers in creating and managing employment opportunities for women from refugee backgrounds that we believe employers can, and should, implement themselves, along with the support and funding of government and service providers.

- 9.** Providing incentives and supports to employers so that they can assist refugees through a range of alternative recruitment strategies is essential for ensuring there are pathways into employment for women from refugee backgrounds.

*Employers should be provided with support to recruit women from refugee backgrounds (including for appropriate volunteering opportunities that enhance employability). Ongoing support is also required to assist the employer and the employee after an employment relationship has been formed. Employers should be provided with information on the challenges faced by refugee women and the types of structural and substantive supports that employers can provide to assist women with their transition into the workplace.*

- 10.** Our study found that both during the recruitment phase and once in employment, women participants had experienced instances of exploitation, in particular in relation to racism and discrimination. There is a need for employers to develop positive workplace cultures which promote diverse ways of facilitating the inclusion of women from refugee backgrounds at all levels.



*Employers should be provided with training to assist in the recruitment and employment of refugee women from diverse backgrounds and to address exploitation, racism, discrimination and unconscious bias both in recruitment and ongoing employment, including for volunteers.*

- 11.** Our study found that women from refugee backgrounds may need additional workplace and mental health support once in paid employment. Employers who developed policies and practices for integrating women from refugee backgrounds into the workplace and providing them with additional support reported better outcomes and more sustainable employment.

*Employers should be supported to develop concrete inclusion strategies for women from refugee backgrounds including buddy shifts, the use of interpreters, translating important documents into key languages, appropriate supervision and other supports to enable employees to upskill or develop their skills. This may also include flexible working policies which allow women to work from home or work short shifts in tandem with school hours, and access to culturally-safe wellbeing programs.*

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### **RECOMMENDATIONS, SECTION 3: ADDRESSING REGULATORY AND POLICY CONSTRAINTS**

Third, we propose policy and regulatory reform to address the systemic barriers facing women from refugee backgrounds from engaging in paid work. Implementing these recommendations is the responsibility of government, as they would require legislative amendment and/or changes to public policy and practice.

- 12.** Although there is general acceptance amongst policymakers that employment is an important aspect of the integration of refugees in Australia, there is no overall strategy on how to achieve this in practice. As our study and other research attests, refugees face substantial barriers in accessing paid employment and remaining in employment over time.

*Federal and state governments need to work together to develop a national refugee employment strategy which addresses the barriers to employment for refugees and provides strategic funding and support for initiatives that facilitate entry into the labour market.*

*This strategy needs to account for the particular challenges faced by refugee women and develop specific plans to address this.*

**13.** In our study, women participants and service providers reported that Jobactive providers gave inadequate support that failed to overcome the myriad barriers facing women from refugee backgrounds in accessing work. They said that employment providers needed to provide individualised and personalised support that took into account their circumstances, including pre- and post-settlement factors and gender and culture-related issues.

*The Australian government should ensure that the New Employment Services Model (NESM) provides enhanced support to women from refugee backgrounds and that employment support service providers for refugees are experienced, culturally-safe organisations, and have appropriately trained staff and small enough case load numbers to ensure a personalised wrap-around service can be provided. Disincentives for providers in facilitating women into self-employment and for women in picking up small amounts of work need to be addressed. The new model needs to be evaluated, including from the perspective of refugee women and employers.*

**14.** Understanding where job vacancies exist, and which employers have a track record of successfully recruiting and employing women from refugee backgrounds is important for matching employers and prospective employees.

*The Federal government should fund the development of processes for facilitating connections between women from refugee backgrounds and prospective employers through creating and maintaining a database of refugee-friendly employers that might have positions available.*

**15.** Our study found that temporary visas were a key barrier to employment, particularly because of limited and contingent work rights for those that arrived in Australia without a valid visa and restrictions on eligibility for employment support services, but also indirectly through impacts on mental health which subsequently affected employment options.

*The Federal government should review all visa arrangements for refugees and asylum seekers and should remove time limit restrictions and work conditions that restrict the ability of refugees and asylum seekers to engage in the labour market. The Federal government should provide clear pathways to permanent residency independent of employer sponsorship or periods of work.*

**16.** Women participants in our study faced various barriers to accessing work, including stemming from their role as the primary carer for dependent children, difficulty in obtaining recognition for prior skills, qualifications and experience, and limited periods of eligibility for employment support.

*The Federal government should address structural impediments to securing meaningful and sustainable employment for women from refugee backgrounds. These include but are not limited to:*

- *improving skills and qualifications recognition from overseas jurisdictions*
- *providing access to appropriate social security supports to ensure women have the opportunities to pursue education and training that will expand their future employment opportunities*
- *providing flexibility in any Centrelink obligations to seek employment to ensure that it is reasonable, considering the language, literacy and technological skills of the client and does not compromise the opportunities for refugee women to engage in education and training*
- *ensuring that clients of NESM providers are correctly classified to receive suitable levels of support, or where relevant are supported to access an appropriate Disability Employment Service (DES) provider*
- *facilitating greater access to childcare by improving access to childcare and out of school care places and reducing the cost of childcare for women from refugee backgrounds*
- *extending eligibility for support programs, which is not time-bound and open to all refugees and asylum seekers*

# CONCLUSION

WITH REFUGEES FORMING SUCH A CRITICAL PART OF AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY, IT IS CLEAR FROM THE RESEARCH THAT THIS IS A TIME OF TREMENDOUS OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS AS AUSTRALIA REBUILDS ITS ECONOMY AND WORKFORCE AFTER THE UPHEAVAL OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

However, there is also a risk that they will be left behind without an explicit focus on supporting their participation in the workforce. A national refugee employment strategy and a range of other improvements to service provision, employer capacity building and regulatory and policy reform is required to build comprehensive, targeted, and personalised support for women from refugee backgrounds in all facets of their lives to ensure they can access genuine pathways to sustainable employment and wellbeing in Australia.



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