

# Family separation and the impacts on refugee settlement in Australia

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, governments, researchers, non-government organisations, service providers and international institutions have become increasingly concerned with how to best support the settlement of refugees in UNHCR resettlement nations. Anxieties about the formation of a refugee underclass and the intergenerational impacts of social stratification motivate such inquiries. Settlement is often viewed through either of two lenses; the biomedical frame or the social inclusion frame. These frameworks are complementary rather than exclusive. It is from this combined theoretical perspective that this paper explores the impacts of family separation on the settlement of refugees in Australia. Drawing on focus groups and in-depth interviews across three refugee background communities in metropolitan Melbourne, the paper finds that family separation has pervasive impacts on the wellbeing of the participants and on their capacity to participate and direct their own futures. Family separation is found to be a barrier to settlement and therefore a crucial consideration for the design and provision of settlement services to people with refugee backgrounds.

**Keywords:** refugee, families, refugee settlement, impacts of family separation

## Introduction

Families matter to all people. However, war, conflict, political instability and associated displacement typically compromise the unity and functioning of refugee families. Family members are commonly separated whilst fleeing danger. It may be a conscious decision as a matter of survival or an unintended consequence of volatile circumstances. Instances of separation are so commonplace that intact families are more often the exception than the norm (Williams 1995). However, family separation is not intended to be permanent and reuniting with family members is a priority for refugees (RILC 2009; RCOA2012).

Families with refugee backgrounds are complex and their configuration is a result of tradition and custom, but also of circumstances surrounding refugee experiences. However, immigration policies of the countries of resettlement can also add to this reconfiguration by determining who is a member of the family unit for resettlement and reunion purposes and who is not. The Australian Government, like most UNHCR resettlement nations (including the United States and Canada) select families for resettlement using the nuclear family structure. As a result, family members outside of this typology can find themselves excluded from the resettlement processes, resulting in long-term or permanent separation. Service providers, advocates and researchers have long observed that family separation is a common post-migration problem and a source of grief and loss. This is supported by recent quantitative studies (Nickerson et al. 2010; Carswell et al. 2011). However, there remain few qualitative studies in the Australian context exploring the impacts of family separation and the relationship to settlement. Without such contributions the important testimony of the refugees themselves is missing from the evidence base. This study aims to address this information gap.

The high prevalence of families separated through conflict or resettlement in Australia and the debilitating effects of this separation are supported by reports from the Refugee Immigration Legal Centre (RILC 2009), the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA 2009; 2012) and other service providers and agencies working directly with refugee background families (Farah 2007; VFST 2010; MRC 2011). This paper is concerned with the impacts of family separation on the wellbeing and settlement of persons from refugee backgrounds in Australia. It poses the question: *how does separation from significant family members affect the settlement of persons with refugee backgrounds in Australia?*

## Defining the family

There is no internationally accepted definition of *family* in the legal or political domains (Boyd 1989; Bould 1993; Emlen 1995). Although the Declaration of Human Rights (Article 16 (3)) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (Article 23(1)) state that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society, they do not define the 'family'. That there is no universally accepted definition of family makes sense – in society there is no

family constellation that seems to be theoretically required or even preferable. Moreover, cultural, social and religious norms influence the ways families are constituted (Lahav 1997). For example, polygamous marriages are accepted in some countries but not in others (Lahav 1997) and the size of the family differs from one region to another (Furlanos 1986). Families are dynamic entities that evolve over time through intra-relationships (the interactions between family members) and inter-relationships (the interactions between families and non-family members).

UNHCR recognises the complexity of refugee families and takes a broad and inclusive approach to the term. Under UNHCR Procedural Standards for Refugee Status Determination (UNHCR 2003) those persons recognised as belonging to the family unit are eligible for derivative status in accordance with their right to family unity. Individuals who obtain derivative refugee status receive the same rights and entitlements as other recognised refugees and should retain this status notwithstanding the subsequent dissolution of the family through separation, divorce, death, or the fact that a child reaches the age of majority (UNHCR 2003). The nuclear family and dependants are recognised foremost as being eligible for derivative status. However, the UNHCR also recognises other family members, and certain other individuals may also be eligible for derivative status under the right to family unity such as an adult applicant's dependent parents, dependent married children, dependent children who are over 18, other dependent relatives and foster children. The UNHCR recognises social and emotional dependency as a legitimate way that a person may be bonded to the immediate family. This is assessed according to the nature and duration of the relationship; living arrangements in the country of origin and in the host country; financial, legal or social responsibilities; any special needs or vulnerability; and care arrangements (UNHCR 2003).

### **Australia's humanitarian program**

Australia's humanitarian program assists refugees and those in refugee like situations who are either already in Australia (onshore program) or are in need of protection but are overseas (offshore program). Under the onshore component, a person may have arrived in Australia with a valid visa and then claims protection/asylum or they arrive without a valid visa and are detained until their identity and status have been assessed and they have been granted a visa. Between 1999 and 2008 most people released from immigration detention received a temporary protection visa (TPV) which allowed three years of protection after which the applicant had to apply for reassessment of their case (FaHCSIA 2008). TPV holders were not eligible for family reunion and could only access limited service assistance (FaHCSIA 2008). Under the offshore component, resettlement either occurs through the Refugee stream or the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP). The majority of people in the former category are referred to the Australian Government by the UNHCR having already been recognised as refugees (DIAC 2011). Under the SHP a person must be outside their home country and be subject to substantial discrimination amounting to

a gross violation of human rights in their home country or immediate family of persons who have been granted protection in Australia (DIAC 2011). Applications for entry under the SHP must be supported by a proposer who is an Australian citizen, permanent resident or eligible New Zealand citizen, or an organisation that is based in Australia (DIAC 2011).

Australia resettles around 13 000 refugees annually, the majority of which are identified and referred to Australia by UNHCR (DIAC 2011). They are then selected, where possible, as family units:

a spouse or de facto partner of the family head; or dependent child of the family head or of a spouse of the family head; or a relative of the family head or of a spouse of the family head who: has never married or is widowed, divorced or separated; and i. is usually resident in the family head's household; and ii. is dependent on the family head (DIAC 2011).

Persons who cannot be resettled to Australia with their immediate family can be reunited under the split family provisions of the Humanitarian Program. Only immediate family members are eligible for reunion under these provisions (DIAC 2011). An immediate family member is defined as a spouse; dependent child or stepchild, that is, who has not turned 18 or has turned 18 and is dependent on the proposer (other than a child who has a partner or is engaged to be married); or parent which includes parents or step-parents if the proposer is not 18 or more years of age. They are generally granted a visa under the same category as the proposer (DIAC 2011). There is no need to prove persecution, discrimination or human rights abuses as their status is derived from the principal applicant.

To qualify for the visa DIAC must have been made aware of the family member before the date that the initial refugee or humanitarian visa was granted; the applicant must continue to be a member of the immediate family, and the applicant must apply within five years of the date of the visa granted to the family member in Australia (DIAC 2011). The most important aspect of the split family provisions is that it admits 'immediate family members' to join the proposer. Unlike the definition of a 'family unit' applied for resettlement purposes, dependent relatives are not eligible to join the proposer under these provisions (see Wilmsen 2011 for a more detailed discussion). These policy definitions of the family separate families that could be reunited.

### **Approaches to supporting settlement**

In recent years, researchers, non-government organisations, service providers and governments have become increasingly interested in what promotes settlement, with two key approaches developed – (1) a life events/biomedical approach (Montgomery 1996; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2003; Porter 2007) and/or a (2) wider social inclusion<sup>1</sup> approach (Montgomery 1996; Valtonen 1998; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2003). The former stresses the relationship between mental health and settlement whereas the latter emphasises the role

of participation in the wider community and access to services to facilitate settlement (although there is some overlap between the factors that promote settlement under each approach).

The key factors promoting adaptation or settlement from the life events/ biomedical perspective include immigration status (Silove & Ekblad 2002; Momartin et al. 2006); established social networks (Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg 1998; McMichael & Ahmed 2003; Schweitzer et al. 2006); family reunion/support; (Rousseau et al. 2001; Silveira & Allebeck 2001; Steinglass 2001; Silove & Ekblad 2002; McMichael & Ahmed 2003; Schweitzer et al. 2006); pre-migration trauma (Porter & Haslam 2005; Schweitzer et al. 2006); economic opportunities (Arorian 1990; Silove & Ekblad 2002; Porter & Haslam 2005); language (Arorian 1990); countering tendencies towards xenophobia/ racism (Silove & Ekblad 2002); permanent accommodation (Porter & Haslam 2005), educational opportunities (Silove & Ekblad 2002); mental health interventions (Silove & Ekblad 2002); and gender (Schweitzer et al. 2006).

From the social inclusion or adaptation perspective, the factors that promote settlement include: timely resolution of immigration status (CCR 1998), employment opportunities commensurate with experience and qualifications (CCR 1998; Valtonen 1998; Mestheneos & Ioannidi 2002; Valtonen 2004; Dunlop 2005; Ager & Strang 2008), career counseling (Waxman 2001), recognition of qualifications and experience (CCR 1998), language assistance (CCR 1998; Waxman 2001; Mestheneos & Ioannidi 2002; Colic-Peisker 2003; Ager & Strang 2008), established social networks (CCR 1998; Korac 2003; Simich et al. 2003; Ager & Strang 2008), cultural orientation (CCR 1998), countering tendencies towards xenophobia/racism (CCR 1998; Mestheneos & Ioannidi 2002), educational opportunities (Valtonen 1998; Waxman 2001; Valtonen 2004; Ager & Strang 2008), appropriate housing (Ager & Strang 2008), health (Ager & Strang 2008), maintenance of culture (Valtonen 1998; Ager & Strang 2008), citizenship and rights (Bloch 2000; Valtonen 2004; Ager & Strang 2008), intact family (CCR 1998; Simich et al. 2003) and institutional inclusion (Mestheneos & Ioannidi 2002).

The Australian Government emphasises the social inclusion approach to settlement in both its understanding of settlement and in its design of support services. It defines settlement as: 'the period of adjustment that occurs following a migrant or refugee's arrival in a new country, as they become established as independent in their new society' (DIAC 2008). Accordingly the key components of settlement are 'somewhere to live, money to live on, information and orientation on services including schools, transport and health services ... access to employment and education, the development or enhancement of English language skills, the formation of individual and family social networks' (DIAC 2008).

Although the Australian Government does fund short-term torture and trauma counseling for refugees and humanitarian entrants, by and large its settlement services address the practical tasks of settlement including securing a job, finding accommodation and learning English. For example, the suite

of settlement services provided to a new arrival include: on arrival reception and assistance; accommodation services; case coordination, information and referrals; translation services and English language classes (Spinks 2009). The Australian Government then assesses successful settlement by the lesser use of these government services (Beer & Morphett 2002). Refugees and humanitarian entrants that are independent of the service system are assumed to have settled. According to DIAC (2008) some people may become independent within six to twelve months while for others it may take a number of years. Imbedded in this assessment is the false assumption that all refugees and humanitarian entrants can access settlement services. However, for many, other issues such as ongoing family separation may act as a barrier to accessing services. A refugee or humanitarian entrant may be independent in the sense that he/she is not accessing settlement services but may not be adjusted and established in his/her new society.

### **Impacts of family separation on settlement**

Few studies explore the relationship between family separation and settlement. Instead, researchers focus on the reformulation of relationships in the absence of family. In her 1999 and 2004 works with Vietnamese refugees settling in Canada and Finland, Valtonen considered the relationship between integration, societal participation and the institutional context. The reformulation of family structures as a coping strategy was discussed only as a minor theme in an analysis of integration. Similarly, Luster and colleagues (2008) explored the various surrogate relationships that developed between young Sudanese refugees due to the absence of family but do not relate this to broader settlement issues.

Other studies concentrate on the psychological effects of family separation. For example, a study of 63 resettled Sudanese refugees found that concern about family not living in Australia is commonly associated with depression, anxiety and somatisation<sup>2</sup> (Schweitzer et al. 2006). Another Australian study of living difficulties causing serious/very serious stress after release from detention found that 96 per cent (n=49) of participants declared worry about family in their home country or family separation as key concerns (Momartin et al. 2006). A study by Rousseau and colleagues (2001) of 113 refugees in Canada from Latin American and Africa concluded that the joint occurrence of trauma and separation had a significant impact on emotional distress and that family therefore plays a key role as an anchor of emotion and identity. Family separation was also found to compound post-traumatic stress reactions and bereavement (Rousseau et al. 2001). Similarly, Nickerson and colleagues (2010) asserted that of 315 Mandaean refugees living in Sydney those with immediate family in Iraq reported higher levels of PTSD and depression than those without family in Iraq. Finally, Simich and colleagues (2010) found that worry about family not in Canada was the greatest challenge in their first year in Canada. Clearly, there is need for more research on the relationship between family separation and settlement, particularly in the Australian context.

## The study

The aim of this study was to explore the impacts of family separation and reunion on the settlement of refugees in metropolitan Melbourne, Australia. Qualitative data was collected through three focus groups and in-depth interviews with 15 individuals, involving a total of 41 participants. The three focus groups were already established groups of community representatives who had met regularly previous to the research under a program run by The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture. This program brought together representatives of the Sudanese, Afghan and Karen communities to provide advice that aimed to strengthen the wellbeing of families from refugee backgrounds. These participants were from refugee backgrounds and reflected the main composition of the humanitarian refugee intake over the previous two years (interviews and focus groups were conducted in 2008 and 2009). The majority of the interviews and all of the focus group discussions were conducted through interpreters (although not all participants in the focus groups relied on the interpreter). The participants had been in Australia for between two and five years. To capture the variation in experience of family separation and reunion, participants for the in-depth interview were selected as follows: (a) currently separated from family members and seeking family reunion; (b) recently reunited families and; (c) reunited for at least two years with family (see Table 1). They were referred to the researcher by members of the focus groups that had some knowledge of their particular circumstances of family separation.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants (N=41)**

Gender	Focus Groups	Interviews
Male	14	9
Female	12	6
Country of origin		
Afghanistan	10	5
Burma	9	5
Sudan	7	5
Age		
20-30	3	4
31-40	7	6
41-55	12	5
Family status		
Separated from extended family members	17	10
Separated from immediate family members	3	2
Intact family	4	3
Unanswered	2	0
Family reunion		
Proposed family member	16	6
Successful proposal	1	2
Unsuccessful proposal	15	4

Although this research aimed to engage persons at different stages of the family reunion process, including those who had been reunited, most participants still regarded themselves as separated from some family member. Therefore, an 'intact' family was defined as a family that regarded itself as whole and had no significant family members overseas. Indeed, the majority of participants were separated from their extended family members, as defined in terms of persons other than their children or spouse. The focus groups and interviews were led by structured questions; however, participants were also free to discuss other issues as they came to mind. Questions centered on five key themes: family separation; economic wellbeing; family support; barriers to employment and future outlook.

Transcribed interviews and focus group discussions were entered into NVivo (QSR International 2008) along with the participants' demographic data as case attributes. Coding was undertaken for key subjects discussed during interviews and focus groups, and were further developed into a coding structure. Using an analytical coding technique these codes were further delineated into nodes. The primary codes reflected the questions directing the interviews whilst the detailed nodes are based on content introduced by the participants. Primary codes adopted included: employment, family, future, household economy and impacts of family separation.

## Findings

The findings presented in this paper relate to one key code: the impacts of family separation. This section presents the nodes attributed to this code. These are the most common words and phrases used by participants and include: worry, sleeplessness and nightmares, poor concentration, guilt, health, financial responsibility, looking forward and planning for the future. It is important to note that in some cases a particular statement made by a participant may have a number of nodes attributed to it and so has been counted more than once. The particular quotes presented in this study are intended to portray common sentiments that appeared under each of the nodes.

### Worry

Worry involves a predominance of verbal thought activity, functions as a type of cognitive avoidance and inhibits emotional processing (Borkovec et al. 1998). Worry can also have a depressive affect (Borkovec et al. 1998). All of the participants separated from family members mentioned worrying about family overseas:

Persons who leave their relative in Sudan and you know my wife who left her Mum and Dad and sisters, we are not comfortable psychologically, we do not think that we left all our relatives or they call us, everyday we have to think about it. We are worried (*Sudanese male, 22 years*).

I try to make, I don't know, something, I tried to not thinking about nothing, yeah, then suddenly my family comes into my mind. The big thing right now I worry about my family not worry about nothing else  
(*Afghan male, 29 years*).

Now, I have that worry all the time I eat or walk or move around. It makes life difficult  
(*Afghan female, 36 years*).

Worry about family depended on their circumstances overseas and in particular the perceived level of safety. For example, Arim<sup>3</sup> is a former TPV holder who was separated from his wife and children for eight years and is now reunited. During these years, Arim's family moved between Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan in response to violence and threats to their safety. He spoke about how he felt while separated from his family:

I was worried about whether my wife had shoes or not, what my daughter will be? What has happened to my family? Have they got something to eat? Are they alive? Will they survive? I don't feel very clear for the future. Go to work, coming home just I don't want to sleep. ... Before my wife was coming the life was very miserable, I've got very very bad life. Like a dog sleep on a very bad mat. Life is very bad  
(*Afghan male, 42 years*).

Klee, a participant in the Karen focus group whose family is still in Burma spoke about his worry. At the time of the interview fighting had just reignited in the area where Klee's brother was living:

I am very indeed worried for them. And in Burma, the situation is not very good and it's never very good. So it's very difficult to live through  
(*Karen male, 32 years*).

A participant in the Afghan Focus Group spoke about what triggers her worry:

A couple of weeks back on television they showed a scene in Pakistan that some place got blown up and my brother in law was in that area. I am so much concerned and worried about him because he's done so much for me in the life  
(*Afghan female, 40 years*).

### **Sleeplessness and nightmares**

Participants commonly attributed insomnia and nightmares to their worries for separated family members. Eleven of the 12 participants in the in-depth interviews who were separated from family reported experiencing sleeplessness or nightmares. The following comment was typical of the participants' responses (note this quote was relayed through an interpreter):

‘Yeah that it’s affecting her so much because you know sometimes she doesn’t sleep, she take two days, three days to get a good sleep because of thinking about the family back at home’  
*(Sudanese female, 43 years).*

The Afghan participants in particular spoke about the nightmares they had endured in relation to separation from their family. It is important to note that all of the Afghan males interviewed had been in detention in Australia for between six months and four years. Research has suggested that persons detained for prolonged periods in immigration detention tend to sustain enduring harm (Coffey et al. 2010). It is likely that this experience also contributed to the nightmares of the Afghan participants in our study.

One participant retold a nightmare (through an interpreter) that he experienced while being separated from his wife and children and sharing a house with other Afghan men:

One night he had a very bad dream. He dreamed that someone took his wife and his kids and they want to kill them. He is shouting and everyone come and wake him up and ask what happened, why are you crying because you are a man you are not a woman, women cry? He said I am human, I am not a stone. I have to have some emotion  
*(Afghan male, 42 years).*

A participant who is in Australia without any family and is in the process of applying to be reunited with his mother, brothers and sisters recounted his nightmare:

And the most horrible thing was night time, you know? When you sleep. I thought that the flash, the flashing come from the sky and just grabbed my throat, you know, “get up!” I get up and there was nothing. I was trying to concentrate and find myself sweating, you know, what happened here?  
*(Afghan male, 27 years).*

### **Poor concentration**

Poor concentration is associated with traumatic experiences (Kinzie 1989). It can be a symptom of hyperarousal associated with a post-traumatic stress disorder or a symptom of a depressive disorder (Kimerling et al. 2002). Poor concentration was raised in all of the focus groups and by eight of the 12 participants involved in the in-depth interviews who were separated from family:

How can we concentrate on our classes, finding a job and even raising our children in Australia when we are worried about our family overseas? For example the situation in Iran is very bad at the moment. The Iran government treat us very badly and deport us back to Afghanistan to the Afghan government. There are cases where our family have been tortured  
*(Afghan male, 48 years).*

Poor concentration was most commonly discussed in relation to learning English. Participants spoke of being in class and their minds wandering to the situation of their families overseas. Some felt that this had impeded their capacity to learn English.

Even sometimes when I'm in the class, physically I'm in the class but my mind not the in the class. I'm going around  
(*Afghan female, 39 years*).

Arim who is separated from all of his family who are back in Afghanistan said:

'I didn't learn nothing. Just go and sit in the chair, just look at the paper, our teachers said "come on look up", every word he is writing just nothing'  
(*Afghan male, 29 years*).

Hala who is separated from her three daughters said:

I go to English course, but I don't learn much and perhaps that is because I am very worried about my children'  
(*Afghan female, 43 years*).

A participant in the Karen Focus Group spoke about forgetting the information learnt:

Even though I learn, and then I would keep forgetting because I had to think other matters, like family member who applied to come to this country but not successful. Also about my family members left behind. So these sort of things affect my learning  
(*Karen female, 30+ years*).

One participant reflected on the impact of family separation on young people at school:

Especially those who are still at uni or at high school, they are not concentrating because they feel like they are divided into two; the family back in Africa and living in Australia, so you are like living in two countries solving two problems at once  
(*Sudanese male, 26 years*).

## **Guilt**

Guilt was a common term used by participants to explain the cognitive or emotional experience of family separation. The theme guilt came up during interviews with seven of the 12 participants interviewed and two of the three focus groups in relation to being separated from family. This suggests that the participants feel some sense of responsibility or remorse for the separation that has occurred.

One participant who is trying to support his sick sister in Sudan said:

I am in a very bad situation because my sister is sick in Sudan and I don't want to neglect her and I feel guilty, because when I walk around the city, I see this health system structure and I start to imagine my sister having some sickness over there. So

that made me feel guilty that I have done something wrong to them, but I haven't done anything wrong to them  
(*Sudanese male, 26 years*).

A Karen participant began the process of resettlement on behalf of her family when they were in the refugee camp in Thailand. However, due to medical reasons not all of her family was accepted to Australia and they are now separated. She spoke of feeling that her family blamed her for the separation:

Sometimes I feel guilty, like it's my responsibility. Yeah it seems like I'm being blamed, that you know, because of the risk you know, of our lives and we happy in the camp helping the communities and being together but we also looking for the future... And so they decided to pressure me like you are the one who's initiated this coming to the third country and sometimes until now my mum would say yeah, you are the one who wanted to come out and started to blame me for what happened  
(*Karen female, 31 years*).

### **Health**

Some participants said that depression could result from the prolonged separation from their family members. This was more than just sadness, worry or guilt, but a persistent state that could significantly impair daily activities and health. One participant reported being medically diagnosed as depressed. She was separated from her mother:

I guess I was having some depression, because I'm thinking about my mum and all this thing when I had my baby. And I couldn't sleep at night and all this, and then I went and I saw my doctor. And then the family doctor gave me some medicine for depression, and then I stopped feeding the baby  
(*Sudanese female, 27 years*).

Family separation and its association with depression was discussed by the Karen and Afghan focus groups.

Her grandfather had two children both of them already in this country, and also only two people left [in the refugee camp in Thailand]. So her mother had to go back and look after them ... and you know, her children also suffered because the mother not around and they feel depressed so it affects the children as well  
(*Karen female, 30+ years*).

Participants also described many physical problems which they attributed to ongoing separation. Eleven of 12 of the interviewees who were separated from family spoke about the physical symptoms they associated with worrying about their family members overseas. Individuals in each of the focus groups also identified this relationship. A link between the emotional and physical body was a common comparison made:

Let me give you an example. Imagine you are sitting in this meeting and your car is in the car park and the meter is running out. All you can think about is that your meter is running out and you can't concentrate on the meeting. Consider if this was your family. That you were worried about their safety. It affects your whole system. The physical and emotional system  
(*Afghan male, 55 years*).

I constantly feeling unwell with the physical health and yeah it's like my heart was tight and yeah, my breathing and you know, my stomach is kind of holding onto something  
(*Karen female, 31 years*).

### **Financial responsibility**

Remittances were one of the main issues discussed by the focus groups and all of the participants in the in-depth interviews. Whilst the amount and frequency of remittances varied, participants estimated that anywhere between 19 and 65 per cent of their monthly income was sent overseas. Typically participants put themselves under considerable financial strain and even sacrificed basic necessities in order to provide financial support to their families overseas:

After all these expenses and sending back the money, I probably have less for our family [here in Australia] than sending [as remittances]  
(*Karen female, 31 years*).

Remittances received by family members overseas are often critical to their survival. One participant said:

I have to, no choice because if I don't send money she [her mother] hasn't got anything to eat  
(*Afghan female, 39 years*).

Another said:

The responsibility of this is a heavy burden: for us to send the remittance to them it leave us in a very big struggle  
(*Sudanese male, 26 years*).

The responsibility of financially supporting family overseas limits the participants from pursuing a better future for themselves and their families. Eight of the 12 participants separated from family members had either not attended English class because they needed to find employment, had stopped studying a vocational course to find employment or had put career plans on hold. Participants typically had casual jobs involving manual labour, which did not require much English and did not fully utilise their skills. Two participants began nursing degrees in Australia, only to have to find low-skilled employment so that they could send money overseas. Another planned to become a policeman just as soon as he was reunited with his family, but until then he needed to remit money to them. Two other participants had started university

degrees only to leave to look for work to earn money to send to families. One participant, who had almost finished high school in Afghanistan and was an avid reader and published poet, described the dilemma in the following terms:

There was a scholarship offered to me, a free scholarship from the organisation I think who were supporting asylum seeker, you know? And because of my family and I have to support them financially, and emotionally ... So I couldn't accept that offering, you know?

*(Afghan male, 27 years).*

A participant in the Sudanese Focus Group argued that family separation was having an impact on the educational attainment of young people more generally:

So with the failure of the family reunion also, it has failed young people who might pursue their studies, because they might go to the factory and work with manual labour and they will never save up any money for their education

*(Sudanese male, 26 years).*

### **Looking forward and planning for the future**

Five of the 12 participants involved in the in-depth interviews who were separated from family spoke about how the corrosive uncertainty of being separated from their families made it difficult to look forward and plan for the future. One in particular said:

I don't think forwards until the people that I have left behind are living the same level of what I'm living in

*(Sudanese female, 30 years).*

Hala's plans are also suspended until she is reunited with her daughters:

Being reunited with my daughters and then my son can work and then we can purchase a house here and have a good life

*(Afghan female, 43 years).*

A participant who had lost all of her immediate family apart from one son, from whom she was separated, from said her plans for the future were also on hold until they were reunited:

If my son is here I could go to the countryside, my son could fully concentrate on his studies and get a job, begin to groom his future, then do something good

*(Sudanese female, 43 years).*

Having all the family together was important to moving forward and planning for the future. Although the participants were generally hopeful for the future, their optimism was often related to the possibility of reunification with their families in the future. A participant in the Afghan Focus Group provided a good summary of many of the comments made by participants:

Once they come here ... then their employment and financial issues will be solved automatically because they have more hands around, more people around us, and whatever we plan here for the future will be more stronger plans and better plans (*Afghan female, 52 years*).

## Discussion

This article explores the impacts of family separation on refugees' wellbeing and participation in the wider community through combining the biomedical and social inclusion perspectives. The findings of this study suggest that family separation is detrimental to settlement both in terms of the impacts on wellbeing but also to participation and the pursuit of a self-determined future. However, before exploring this statement in more detail it is important to recognise that refugee and humanitarian entrants to Australia go through a variety of traumatic pre-resettlement experiences, not only family separation, and that these are likely to impact upon settlement. It is impossible to separate out the impacts of family separation from other traumatic incidences and to determine an exclusive correlation between family separation and difficulties faced in settlement. What this research does assert, however, is that the participants in this study identify a relationship between family separation, their wellbeing and the more practical tasks involved in settlement. Reflecting on these findings, I now explore these relationships in greater detail.

## Wellbeing

The biomedical approach emphasises the relationship between mental health and settlement. Under this approach, trauma and the role that family support can play in reducing that trauma are given greater weight than the more practical elements of settlement. Although the author was not in a position to clinically assess mental health, participants often described aspects of their mental health as being affected by family separation. Worry, sleeplessness, nightmares, poor concentration and guilt were prominent themes in the participants' accounts of how family separation was affecting their day-to-day lives. This adds to the findings of Simich and colleagues (2010) that the presence or absence of the social supports associated with home affected refugees' mental health during resettlement. A study of African families by Rousseau and colleagues (2001) found that the joint occurrence of trauma and separation impacted significantly on emotional distress. Indeed, the feelings described by the participants in our study could also be symptomatic of more serious disorders such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Research shows that concern about family is commonly associated with depression (Nickerson et al. 2010) and anxiety and somatisation (Schweitzer et al. 2006) and can compound post-traumatic stress reactions (Rousseau et al. 2001; Nickerson et al. 2010). However, it is important to note that only one of the participants in this study self-identified as suffering from medically diagnosed depression, although others did use the terms 'depression' and 'trauma' to describe how they were feeling.

The participants also discussed the relationship between family separation and their physical health. The stress of family separation was associated with headaches, stomachaches, breathlessness and other physical pain. The Afghan, Sudanese and Karen participants all made such linkages through the course of the study. The mind and body linkage is supported by a larger Australian study conducted by Schweitzer and colleagues (2006). In their study of 63 resettled Sudanese refugees in Australia, they found that concern about family overseas was the most common issue associated with anxiety and somatisation.

### **Participation and the pursuit of a self-determined future**

The social inclusion approach recognises the important role that participation in society plays in settlement and emphasises the practical aspects of settlement. Other authors have identified employment in particular as significant to successful settlement (see, for example, Bloch 2000; Colic-Peisker 2003; RCOA 2008). The participants in this study identified finding a job and associated activities such as learning English and vocational education as key priorities for settlement. However, employment signified not only economic independence but also enabled the participants to fulfill obligations to the extended family and kinship network. This is similar to the findings of community consultations conducted by RCOA in 2008 and the work of other researchers like Valtonen (1999, 2004) and Dunlop (2005).

The empirical data collected in this study suggests that separated families find it more difficult to enter the labour market. The reasons for this are numerous. In relation to the stress and worry of being separated from family, participants felt immobilised and were simply unable to participate as they may have wished. Similarly, those attending English classes felt they were unable to gain the language skills required to find employment because they could not concentrate on their studies. Participants spoke about constantly thinking about the family situation back in the country of origin and despite being physically present in class, being mentally elsewhere.

On a more practical note, some participants mentioned that without the extended family structure to provide childcare, they were unable to attend English classes. This is similar to Bloch's (2007) finding that, of 400 refugees, more than 53 per cent of the women interviewed were not looking for work because of family and/or childcare commitments compared with five per cent of men. In the absence of the extended family to help with care giving, women are limited to the domestic sphere and are isolated from the wider community (Bloch et al. 2000). English language is also essential to progressing beyond entry-level employment.

Family separation also placed most of the participants under relentless financial strain. In order to meet the financial needs of loved ones overseas, participants who could work took on jobs that did not meet their skills or aspirations. Such marginal jobs lack security, a decent wage, training and promotion prospects and can increase exclusion (Phillimore & Goodson 2006). To feel like a valued part of society, long-term settlement requires that a job commensurate with skills

and experience can be secured. Aspirations of higher education for some of the participants were also put on hold so that money could be earned to support family in refugee-like situations. In short, the empirical data describe how family separation acts as a barrier for people with refugee backgrounds to direct their own futures and limits their agency in this process.

## **Conclusions**

Family separation is a typical feature of refugee families living in Australia. This research suggests that such separation manifests in a number of biomedical forms: worry, sleeplessness, nightmares, poor concentration, feelings of guilt and depression and in physical symptoms such as headaches, pain and difficulty breathing. However, the absence of family members also impacts on the more practical tasks of settlement by reducing participation in the work force, English classes and vocational training. Family separation places significant financial strain on families who have low incomes that are already stretched. Overall, separation from families inhibits refugees from taking advantage of new opportunities in Australia and to plan for the future.

The Australian Government emphasises the social inclusion approach to settlement. It tends to promote the practical tasks of finding housing, employment and language training as the keys to settling into Australian society. However, the experiences documented in this paper reinforce what service providers and advocates have observed for many years – that family separation impacts upon wellbeing and interferes with the capacity of refugee and humanitarian entrants to participate fully in settlement. The findings of this research are significant for the design and provision of settlement services. In emphasising the practical tasks of settlement, the Australian Government casts issues such as family separation as peripheral. However, this research suggests that family separation can be a major barrier to settlement. Such issues need to be seriously addressed across the service sector. Organisations like the VFST (and its state counterparts) have long recognised the complexity of settlement and broadened their roles. VFST's model is one of recovery, under which the mental health needs of survivors of torture and trauma are supported whilst advocating for and assisting their clients with the more practical settlement tasks. It is a hybrid framework of service provision capturing both the biomedical and social inclusion aspects of settlement. There is an approach that could be explored for expansion across the service sector.

## **Epilogue**

Since the completion of this research, the Australian Government has introduced a program of Complex Case Support (CCS) for refugee and humanitarian entrants settling in Australia. This program delivers specialised and intensive case management services to refugee and humanitarian entrants with exceptional needs and is specifically targeted at supporting clients whose needs extend beyond the scope of other settlement services. Exceptional needs are mental health (including torture and trauma services); physical health; family violence

intervention; personal, grief or family relationship counseling; special services for children or youth; and support to manage accommodation, financial or legal issues (DIAC 2012). Settlement service providers can refer people into the program, as can individuals or members of the community (DIAC 2012). Whilst this is an important progression in addressing the complexities of settlement, it is unclear if or how family separation will be dealt with. By taking a broader approach to settlement assistance; however, it is hoped that issues like family separation will be picked up and addressed by CCS coordinators – although, this of course cannot substitute for family reunion.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Social inclusion involves the basic ideas of belonging, acceptance and recognition (Omidvar & Richmond 2003).
- 2 A tendency to experience and communicate somatic distress in response to psychosocial stress and to seek medical help for it (Lipowski 1998).
- 3 All names used in this research are pseudonyms.

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