Settlement Voices

Amplifying the Unique Perspectives of Settlement Workers with Lived Refugee or Migrant Settlement Experience

September 2025

THE SOCIAL POLICY GROUP

SETS CoP

About

The Social Policy Group

The Social Policy Group (SPG) strives to make Australia's policies and systems better serve the diverse people and communities of Australia.

As a trusted partner of government, community leaders, and service providers, and a peak body for settlement and multicultural health, SPG is a recognised leader in best practice and thought leadership across critical areas such as gender equality, economic analysis, access to justice, and community sector capacity building.

The SPG facilitates the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program Community of Practice (CoP), which brings together service providers who support refugees and vulnerable migrants to enable sharing and learning, and improve outcomes for people supported through the Australian SETS Program and the wider community.

THE SOCIAL POLICY GROUP

The Social Policy Group conducted the *Settlement Voices* project as part of its role as a peak body for refugee and migrant settlement. This project gives us the opportunity to explore, better understand, and amplify the unique perspectives of settlement sector staff with lived experience of migration and refugee settlement.

Support services

The following chapters contain stories that may be confronting or triggering for some readers. If you are affected in any way, or require support, please contact any of these services:

Key organisations and helplines:

Lifeline: 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services via phone, text, and online chat.

- Call: 13 11 14
- Text: 0477 13 11 14
- Chat online: www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat/#

Beyond Blue: Information and support for mental health, including anxiety and depression, with phone and online chat options.

- Call: 1300 224 636

1800 RESPECT: Provides support for those experiencing domestic violence and sexual assault.

- Call: 1800 737 732
- Interpreter: 13 14 50

13YARN: Crisis support 24/7 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals.

- Call: 13 92 76

QLIFE: Provides support for LGBTQIA+SB individuals.

- Call: 1800 184 527
- National Relay Service: www.accesshub.gov.au
- Interpreter: ask@qlife.org.au

headspace: Provides support for young people experiencing mental health challenges, with services for work and study.

- Mental health support: 1800 650 890

MensLine Australia: For men seeking support with health, anger management, family violence and addiction.

- Call: 1300 789 978

Suicide Call Back Service: Nationwide service providing 24/7 phone and online counselling to people affected by suicide.

- Call: 1300 659 467

Acknowledgements

First Nations acknowledgement

The Social Policy Group acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across Australia as the First Peoples and the Traditional Custodians and owners of the lands on which we live and work.

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and the Turrbal and Jagera peoples, as the Traditional Custodians and Owners of the land on which our offices are situated. We pay our respects to their elders, past and present, and recognise their continuing connection to the land, waters, and communities.

As an organisation committed to advocating for social cohesion and the well-being of disadvantaged populations nationwide, we acknowledge and celebrate the diverse cultures, histories, and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to our country.

We extend our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia. We recognise their ongoing resilience, strength, and stewardship of the land and commit ourselves to ongoing efforts of reconciliation, understanding, and collaboration.

LGBTIQA+ acknowledgement

The Social Policy Group acknowledge everyone's right to freely identify and affirm their sexual or romantic orientation and gender identity, including terms such as lesbian, gay, transgender, non-binary, gender diverse, genderqueer, queer, aromantic, asexual, bisexual, pansexual, sistergirls and brotherboys. We support the rights of people born with intersex variations to be free from discrimination and mistreatment on the basis of their sex characteristics.

We pay our respects to our community's lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex and queer pioneers and acknowledge the lives of those LGBTIQA+SB persons who never made it to safety.

As an organisation committed to designing and advocating for inclusive social policy, we celebrate our community's diversity and work to eliminate all forms of discrimination throughout Australia's systems.

Victim survivor acknowledgement

The Social Policy Group acknowledges the significant impact of family and domestic violence on individuals, families and communities. We acknowledge the strength and resilience of the children, young people and adults who have, and are still, experiencing this violence and pay our respects to those who did not survive, and to their loved ones.

Thank you

The Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs

The Social Policy Group extends thanks to the Australian Government (Department of Home Affairs) for its support of The Social Policy Group as a Settlement Peak Body and the *Settlement Voices* action research project, as well as its support of, and engagement with, the refugee and migrant settlement sector. The *Settlement Voices* project is one of many examples where partnerships across community, government and research can contribute to more inclusive and responsive systems.

Advisory group

To the members of the project's advisory group, The Social Policy Group thanks you for your guidance, encouragement, and insight throughout the development of this project. Your contributions ensured that this project remained grounded in sector realities while holding space for reflection, complexity and future-facing thinking.

Thank you Angelica Svensson (AMES), Atem Atem (STARTTS), Emilie Abdallah (Wesley Mission), Julie Robert (SCOA), Nuria Lopez (Harmony Alliance), Olga Cherniak (Welcoming Australia), and Shannon White (MYAN).

Participants and organisations

This project would not have been possible without the generous contributions of the 20 settlement practitioners who shared their insights, reflections, and lived experiences of migration, displacement and resettlement in Australia. We are deeply grateful for their time, trust and commitment to strengthening the sector.

Together, their voices, expertise and leadership have helped centre the lived experience of settlement workers and make visible its critical role in shaping stronger, more inclusive communities and services. We extend our sincere thanks to the organisations and teams that supported the participation of staff and recognised the importance of amplifying lived experience voices. This includes the many frontline workers, team leaders, program managers and executives across the settlement sector who enabled interviews, shared feedback, and engaged with the project's aims. Thank you for your openness to dialogue and collaboration.

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Foreword

The Hon Dr Anne Aly MP

**Minister for Multicultural Affairs,
Minister for Small Business, and
Minister for International Development**

I am incredibly humbled to be appointed as the first stand-alone Minister for Multicultural Affairs appointed to the cabinet. Together with the new Office for Multicultural Affairs, we have the means to drive a cohesive approach to multicultural policy across government.

Multiculturalism is not about just one section of society. Each one of us belongs to an Australia that has been enriched by 65,000 years of First Nations culture and the successive stories, traditions and histories of those who have come across the seas.

That deep history forms the foundation on which successive waves of migration have added their own stories, traditions and histories, shaping the vibrant and diverse nation we are today.

Among them are refugees and migrants who bring not only resilience, but also skills, cultural richness, and a deep desire to contribute to their new homeland.

We must build a nation where every person — no matter where you were born, or where your parents are from — is given the chance to do just that — to participate equally in social, economic and political life.

Across the refugee and migrant settlement sector, we see countless individuals working tirelessly to welcome newcomers, walk alongside them, and help lay the foundations for a new life. Among these are lived experience workers, people who draw on their own journeys of migration, displacement or refuge to inform their practice.

The *Settlement Voices* report by The Social Policy Group is a timely and powerful contribution to our understanding of the refugee and migrant settlement workforce. It brings to the forefront the perspectives of lived experience workers - those who not only serve our communities but are part of them. Their stories, captured here with honesty and care, are both deeply personal and universally important.

As a first generation migrant, I recognise the power of lived experience. It shapes how we understand need, how we work together to build trust, and how we design responsive services that truly work for our migrant communities.

The *Settlement Voices* report surfaces important truths: that boundaries can blur, that burnout is real,

and that respect must be paired with responsiveness. These insights should shape not only how we support our workforce, but how we build more effective systems. The stories of practitioners from Bendigo to Western Sydney, from Cannington to Salisbury, remind us that compassion alone is not enough; good practice requires intention, design, and the courage to do things differently.

My vision for the refugee and migrant settlement workforce is one where the sector supports professional development pathways, trauma-informed workplaces, and forward-looking leadership. It also means listening to what settlement workers are telling us about what works, what doesn't, and how we can do better.

This report is an important step in elevating those voices. It offers insight into the challenges and aspirations of workers, in this case those with lived experience of migration and settlement in Australia, and it reminds us of what is possible when policy is grounded in human dignity and practice is guided by genuine connection. To the workers who shared their stories: thank you.

I thank every settlement worker for their service, strength and leadership. You are the backbone of this sector, and you are helping to shape a more inclusive Australia.

Chapter 00

Workers with lived migration and refugee experience in the Australian settlement sector

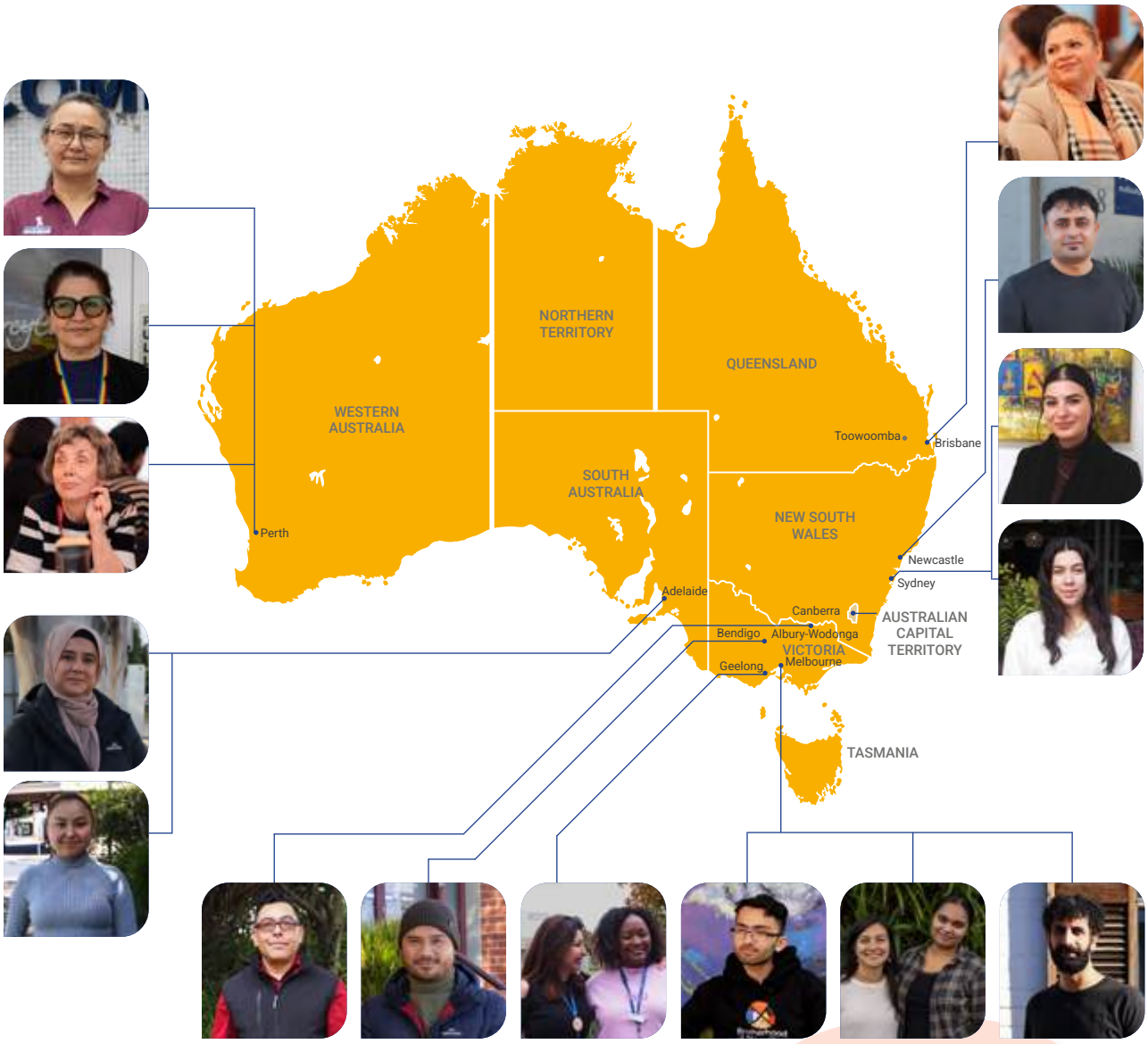
Settlement staff with lived experience of migration and displacement are central to the sector and to many people's settlement in Australia.

Settlement staff with lived migration and displacement experience make up a majority of the settlement sector. The National Settlement Workforce Profile 2023-24 (Settlement Council of Australia, 2024) found that 78 percent of settlement workers reported having lived experience of migration or forced displacement, or having a family member who has.

Lived experience workers bring unique knowledge and capabilities to their roles. They often navigate the challenges of balancing their community and professional lives, such as being sought out for help at community events or through late-night phone calls. Their deep understanding of community dynamics and language skills make them invaluable in settlement organisations and to the core work of supporting refugees and migrants to build their lives in Australia.

However, the unique perspectives of workers with lived experience are often overlooked, and their experiences can become lost within broader settlement narratives.

The *Settlement Voices* project is action research involving 20 frontline settlement workers from refugee or migrant backgrounds with lived settlement experience. The project aims to explore, understand, and amplify the unique perspectives of human services practitioners with lived settlement experience.



Workers with lived experience span various sectors and professions. It can mean having lived experience of disability in disability care, of surviving domestic and family violence (DFV) and working in DFV support, or of having lived experience of mental health issues and being a peer support worker.

There are also people with lived migration and refugee experience working across many sectors beyond settlement, where their lived migration experience contributes to their work, including in healthcare, professional services, and justice. Here, we focus on settlement staff with lived migration or refugee experience to Australia.

The in-depth conversations with 20 settlement staff in this report aims to uncover hidden insights, provoke thoughtful discussion within the space, shape settlement policy and practice for the better, and highlight the settlement staff that constitute the sector.

Settlement Voices

Amplifying the Unique Perspectives of Settlement Workers with Lived Refugee or Migrant Settlement Experience

Chapter 01

Refugee and role model: the power of seeing someone who's walked your path

Nay Chee Aung

Case Worker and Case Manager

Bendigo Community Health Service (BCHS)
Bendigo, Victoria

Nay Chee has been working with the Bendigo Community Health Service (BCHS) for 10 years. He is currently a case worker and case manager for both the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) and the Settlement, Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program. Nay Chee, who is Karen and grew up in a refugee camp in Thailand, arrived in Sydney in the early 2000s, where he and his family didn't experience strong settlement support. Only later did he see what settlement services could look like and the changes it could lead to for refugees and vulnerable migrants. *'I wanted to become the settlement worker that I never had.'* After moving to Melbourne, a retired English teacher and grandmother named Grace volunteered and helped Nay Chee's family access services, shop for groceries, and reminded them of appointments. *'Volunteers are the backbone of Australian society. They are so important in complementing professional services.'*

Lived experience staff act as role models. Newly arrived people see you and say, "Hey, he grew up in a refugee camp too. He was there for 20 years. He didn't speak English when he first arrived in Australia." And then people know they can succeed and become a nurse, a doctor, a social worker.

Connections and understanding: demystifying 'complex cases'

Nay Chee and his team's day-to-day settlement work is a whir of important activity. For Nay Chee, yesterday's work included responding to a crisis with a refugee family being given a notice to vacate their housing; connecting a client with the Centre for Non-Violence; organising furniture delivery for a newly-arrived family; and connecting with community leaders regarding community capacity building activities. Tomorrow, Nay Chee's day is likely to look entirely different. At the centre of it all, Nay Chee's own experiences of displacement and settlement help him to connect with clients, understand them, and anticipate their needs.

> ***'Sometimes, for clients from a non-English speaking background, if they do not speak English well, some service providers might automatically allocate them as "complex cases." But for staff with lived experience, it can be easier to make a connection, easier to understand their skills and what they can do even if they do not speak English well yet.'***

Binding agents: events and celebrations

Another benefit of having lived experience is the comfort that clients have in reaching out to bicultural and bilingual staff. It can be easier to build bridges. Even outside of work, Nay Chee noted that he and other lived experience staff will see clients and the community at cultural events and celebrations, at temple, at church, and during community activities. Even though work is not discussed in these spaces, being part of community life helps to build rapport, which undergirds long-term and strong relationships.

Boundaries and burn-out

There are two-sides to this coin however. Professional boundaries can be blurred. It's impossible not to stop and chat with clients, at the risk of being rude, or damaging relationships. While Nay Chee and the team undertake extensive professional training to know where boundaries are, clients don't. In a town of an estimated 120,000 people, there are approximately 4,000 Karen community members: a large and growing community, but still at a size where, Nay Chee exclaims, *'they know everything about me!'* If Nay Chee cannot pick up his work phone, a client might ask a fellow community member for his personal phone number. If Nay Chee cannot pick that up, they might call Nay Chee's family. *"'Hey, I'm trying to reach Nay Chee!'"* Once every now and then, this might be fine to handle. But if it happens too often, lived experience staff risk getting burnt out.

Supportive organisations, empowered workers

Nay Chee emphasised this is where settlement organisational practice is so crucial to support staff with lived experience. Nay Chee highlighted the importance of supervision, reassuring leaders, managers, and executives, who provide constant and ongoing support to staff. This includes through providing a variety of strategies for staff to manage relationships with clients, and how to best straddle professional work and being part of the community. Managers are very important in setting ground rules:

> ***'"Don't take your work home with you," "Don't work on weekends," "When you cannot help directly and need to make a referral, remind people of the policies and procedures that are in place and why," and "If worse comes to worse, blame it on me as a manager!"'***

Nay Chee also pointed to continual professional and learning development (PLD) training to support staff and prevent burnout, including PLD on compassion fatigue and professional boundaries.

If lived experience staff do not have enough supervision and support, then this will directly correlate to fatigue, burn-out, staff turnover, and lived experience staff leaving the sector for good. Nay Chee pointed to his decade at the one organisation and the low staff turnover as testaments to how organisations like BCHS do things right for staff with lived experience.

This is especially important because staff with lived experience often come with trauma. Lived experience workers might be triggered by loud sounds, confrontation, or common issues in the settlement space. When organisations are proactive about creating safe and supportive work environments, they reassure staff. While it is important for effectiveness and staff operations, treating staff with dignity is also a moral imperative.

> ***'In Myanmar, as an ethnic minority, we were treated like second-class citizens... I've heard different stories from elsewhere about qualified and experienced social workers being treated like language support or interpreters.'***

When organisations acknowledge lived experiences and the unique skills that lived experience workers hold, it gives those staff a real chance to professionally thrive and develop. It is then that settlement teams flourish and the power of lived experience in settlement provision is captured in improved settlement outcomes.

Chapter 02

Supporting people experiencing domestic and family violence

Farida

Coordinator

Communicare
Cannington, Perth, Western Australia

From humanitarian work in Pakistan's refugee camps to leading Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO) pre-departure sessions for families migrating abroad, Farida arrived with deep professional expertise. Yet, her own settlement experience was shaped by dislocation, trauma, and unmet expectations. Now a settlement worker at Communicare in Western Australia, she draws on both her frontline expertise and personal history of displacement to support others on their journey. Her story highlights the emotional complexity of rebuilding a life while helping others do the same. Farida's reflections challenge systemic assumptions about refugees and migrants, inform culturally safe approaches to domestic and family violence (DFV), and fuel her advocacy for more holistic and culturally responsive settlement services.

When I first arrived in Australia, I found it difficult and challenging to navigate the available services even though I had worked with organisations like IOM, delivering the AUSCO and COA programs to humanitarian entrants to prepare them for resettlement in Australia and Canada. I could speak the language; there was no language issue… But at the same time, when I came here, I struggled...

The other side of the system

Before arriving in Australia, Farida worked in Pakistan with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations agencies and International NGOs such as Mercy Corps International, supporting Afghan refugees in camp settings. She delivered health and hygiene education, water and sanitation programs in remote and underserved communities, and led gender empowerment initiatives in contexts where women had limited access to basic health, education, safety and essential services.

Later, Farida trained families preparing to migrate to Canada and Australia, delivering pre-departure sessions through the Canadian Orientation Abroad (COA) and AUSCO programs. She even travelled to Cairo to present on the importance of preparing families for life in a new country. By the time she arrived in Australia in 2008, Farida had already spent years helping others navigate the migration journey.

Farida's arrival in Australia was not the result of a planned migration, but a forced one. Under threat, she fled within days, leaving behind her home, and her immediate and extended family. With her children and a little support from a relative who had only recently settled in Australia herself, Farida suddenly found herself on the other side of the very system she had once helped to deliver. Farida remembered her first visit to Centrelink vividly:

> ***'I remember the first day I went to Centrelink to register. My baby was in the pram, and I felt so humiliated. Back home, I was an independent individual. I had never, ever asked anyone for $5 or even five rupees. I thought, "How am I going to stand here, line up, and ask for money?" The reality was, I was new in Australia. I didn't have a job. I had the responsibility of three children. My husband was still stuck in another country… "How am I going to do this?"'***

With over three decades of experience volunteering and working with refugees, Farida shared how her journey began: *'I was in Grade Eight when I started volunteering with a community-based organisation that was supporting Afghan refugee children. The organisation used the school building in the evenings to provide basic education, two-hour classes held twice a week. It was during the time when Soviet troops had entered Afghanistan, and thousands of Afghan refugees had fled to Pakistan.'*

The Afghan refugee children that Farida was supporting worked in small factories, made carpets to earn money in order to support their families. Later, in the 1990s, together with a group of friends, Farida helped establish a primary school for Afghan refugee children in Pakistan. These children were not allowed to attend public schools, and their parents could not afford private school fees. The school started with just a few children, but within eight years, around 400 refugee children were attending the school, and it grew from a primary school to a middle school.

It is clear that from very early on, Farida was passionate about supporting vulnerable groups. Her own experiences of displacement and settlement later in life have only strengthened her resolve to support those in need. She advocates for a nuanced understanding of refugees and migrants and the complex circumstances they have to navigate.

Missed opportunities

Farida pointed to a key limitation in settlement service design: the assumption that all refugees and migrants start from the same baseline of need. She critiqued, *'The system and the programs are developed like that. They dictate what you need… That is not the right approach.'* Homogeneous assumptions such as refugees' and migrants' education levels or capacity to navigate systems can lead to mismatched services, misused resources and poorer outcomes.

> ***'Yes, not all people come from a village, not all people come from a camp, people are coming from established lives.'***

Programs designed around deficits, rather than strengths, risk wasting valuable resources and miss opportunities to support people meaningfully. They also minimise the client's agency, self-identification, and self-determination. Services need to move away from rigid templates and towards models that ask first, who the person is, what they know, what they need, and what they bring.

Preparedness, resilience and self-worth

Farida also encountered racism and cultural hostility early in her settlement. One public incident, where she was abused for speaking in her own language, remains vivid: *'It was somebody at the train station… I was talking to my auntie in my language when the man started swearing badly. At first, I thought maybe he was intoxicated and not in his senses. He started slowly and then became louder and more verbally abusive. He was saying, "If you come to this country, you should speak English." Just as I realised he was actually swearing at us, the door opened and he got off the train.'*

Farida also shared her positive experiences that she had during her settlement journey, highlighting the kind and supportive people who helped her and ensured her faith in humanity remained intact. However, being singled out and humiliated in public was deeply upsetting for Farida, cutting at her sense of identity and belonging. These experiences now inform her practice. In her work, she actively prepares newly arrived clients for such challenges, not to instil fear, but to build their preparedness, resilience, and self-worth.

> ***'How traumatising this is for someone who has already left their family behind, lost their identity, and lost everything. They struggle with thoughts like, "What is this? Do I have less than you? Why do you treat me like this, telling me to go back to where I came from or swearing at me for no reason? I haven't done anything to you."'***

Farida understands the stigma and racial targeting that her clients face. On behalf of herself and her clients, she continues to actively resist the harmful stereotyping of people based on their background or appearance. *'We cannot stamp people because of their physique, because of their looks, because of their colour.'*

Domestic and family violence in settlement: doing things a little differently

After several years working in settlement services in Australia, Farida transitioned into specialised DFV service delivery, supporting women from multicultural backgrounds. She worked with DFV specialist services and women's refuges, advocating for and supporting women from both culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and mainstream communities. Over her career, she supported hundreds of CALD women facing complex DFV cases.

'I have always enjoyed my work helping people and supporting others, because I know I am making a difference in their lives. I have supported and advocated for vulnerable women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. My goal in providing this support is to do everything I can to prevent them from becoming another homicide case or part of the DFV statistics. While working in the DFV sector with CALD women, I realised there were significant gaps in how services are provided. Multicultural domestic violence services are a specialised area. They are not the same as mainstream DFV services. The level of DFV education and awareness, as well as the complex needs of refugees and migrants, is entirely different. I realised I can do a lot in this area.'

Farida observed that disclosure of abuse was rarely immediate or early on in a woman's settlement journey. *'DFV almost always emerged later in the settlement journey. It's not something that appears early on, because people are scared, they're stuck, and they're happy that they have a roof over their heads. But once this passes, a husband might not be letting them go to English classes. He doesn't help them with work around the house. And other things…. Maybe he says, "You cannot go there alone." So, there will be different forms of control. It will show up little by little.'*

Farida reinforced that in the beginning, people focus on meeting their immediate basic needs. The problems often start later with changes in family roles, unemployment, financial pressures, isolation, trying to navigate the community without support from family or friends, and mental health challenges caused by past trauma. The man in the family may begin to realise he is losing his traditional status as the provider. In trying to preserve that role, tensions grow, and different forms of control can emerge. Meanwhile, the woman may wish to become more independent, which further challenges the family dynamics.

This fear, combined with experiences of cultural stigma and an overall lack of systemic understanding, leads to delayed disclosure, often for years after arrival.

> ***'Refugee and migrant women are often scared and hesitant to disclose their experiences of DFV. There is a strong belief that it is a family and private matter that should not be shared. Many women are also fearful of authorities; they are scared their visa will be cancelled, and fearful of how their own communities might respond.'***

Farida argued that one-off briefings, which set out to inform new arrivals about Australian rights and laws, are not sufficient. Contextual and specific information must be offered at different stages along settlement journeys and repeated as necessary. Farida believed that information sessions should be part of a series, which starts with the basics, gradually expands, and provides information in an accessible and digestible way.

Farida insisted that culturally safe, trauma-informed support must go beyond intentions, beyond policy language, beyond the paper realm. *'When we say trauma-informed, when we say culturally appropriate, when we say inclusion… You need to provide a safe place. You need to provide the person with options. Most importantly, we need to provide support based on each person's individual needs.'*

This includes ensuring that same-gender workers are available when requested, understanding and having necessary alternatives where interpreters from the same community can cause harm, and ensuring clients' psychological safety when responding to DFV situations.

Farida acknowledged there are limitations of conventional Western approaches to DFV when applied to refugee and migrant communities. Language barriers, cultural stigma, visa dependencies, and community pressure often mean that women remain silent or unsupported. Western-centric interventions, while well-intentioned, could fail to meet the cultural or emotional realities of the victim-survivors Farida works with. By doing things a little differently, accounting for cultural understanding and sensitivity, fewer people fall through the cracks, and more people can be helped.

'Sometimes in Western society, we miss those things.'

When Farida returned to Communicare in 2022, she was glad to see that DFV had become part of the broader settlement model. *'I always mentioned that DFV is an increasing issue in refugee and migrant communities, and I experienced it while working with CALD women in the DFV specialist services. I wanted DFV to be included in the settlement program from pre-departure orientation, to the HSP, to the SETS program, for a holistic settlement approach.'*

Responsive and adaptive services

Farida stressed that all settlement journeys are complex, non-linear and shaped by a multitude of pressures; refugees and migrants arrive with layered experiences, intersecting needs, and shifting challenges.

Farida is critical of service models that expect individuals to follow rigid, linear pathways, which fail to adjust for trauma, cultural expectations, or the unpredictability of forced migration. To Farida, viewing clients solely through eligibility frameworks or program templates is dangerous. Instead, she calls for flexibility, humility, and responsiveness.

> ***'When refugees and migrants come to a new country, they have hundreds of things on their plates: unemployment, financial hardship, the loss of loved ones, navigating a complicated system with new rules and regulations, language barriers, racism, adjusting to a new culture, changed family dynamics, family back home, parenting...'***

Farida emphasised that program eligibility timeframes should be flexible, because issues often arise over time, especially DFV, mental health and child developmental concerns. At the start of the settlement journey, people need to focus on learning about the new culture and navigating the system. *'It should not be: "We already provided you with a service. You cannot come back." No, people's settlement takes time. It takes time to process things. It takes time to understand things.'*

According to Farida, systems must remain open and ready to receive clients at different points in their journey, not just during intake or initial settlement periods.

Farida's vision for responsive services is tempered by her understanding of the immense pressures workers face. But she also insisted that perfection should not be the goal. Instead, settlement workers should approach service delivery with a willingness to listen, adapt, and meet people where they are.

The common cause, the common goal

Farida believes that lived experience should be meaningfully embedded in program design, policy and leadership. She calls for inclusive decision-making structures that draw on the insights of workers who understand both sides of the settlement journey: *'You need to consult the relevant people who have lived experience, who have work experience in the area… it will influence the outcomes of the program.'*

Additionally, Farida raised concerns about the limits of short-term programs and funding cycles. Farida noted, *'short funding periods of one-year, two-years, three-years…,'* do not give space for trust-building. They also do not allow the tailored engagement that is needed to achieve meaningful outcomes for clients, and they interrupt or undermine service delivery over time. Short-term funding also perpetuates job insecurity for settlement workers relative to workers in other industries. *'[Workers] say, "Okay, after one or two years this program is going to finish," so they will start looking for other jobs…'* After investing in training, employees often seek other opportunities because of the lack of job security. Given that workers from refugee and migrant backgrounds comprise a significant portion of the settlement sector workforce, who now support others navigating journeys similar to their own, this job insecurity disproportionately impacts refugees and migrants.

When funding cycles are short and funds are limited, service providers are incentivised to compete rather than collaborate. Farida values specialists working together, under a shared goal of supporting refugee and migrant communities. *'It's the common cause. We have a common goal of supporting refugees and migrants, to support their sense of belonging and agency. We need to get together, to walk together, to achieve this target together.'*

For Farida, the future of the settlement sector lies in flexible, needs-based models that are grounded in the insights of those with lived experience. She continues to advocate for workforce pathways that recognise and value lived experience, enabling staff, the sector, and the communities they support to truly flourish.

But I think there's a point where it's like, all right, you've heard it all, and you know it all, let's actually fix the institutions. Let's restructure the way that things are working themselves, so that [lived experience workers] don't have to keep telling the same story.

- Shamiram

Chapter 03

Leadership and policymaking: youth in settlement

Aisha Mahdi

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For Aisha Mahdi and Shamiram Yalda, previously youth workers at MYAN NSW, lived experience isn't just a background detail: it's a tool for understanding, a bridge for connection, and a lens that shapes how they advocate for systemic change.

Aisha, born in Sudan and arriving in Australia as a child, and Shamiram, an Assyrian born in Australia to refugee parents from Iraq, were both part of the MYAN NSW team, where they worked directly with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Both have been academically trained in fields related to migration, politics, and media. They brought to their roles not just cultural understanding and multilingual skills, but deep personal awareness of what displacement and resettlement can mean in practice. Aisha has since commenced working in Qatar, and Shamiram is undertaking her Master degree in Spain, but both are staying connected to MYAN NSW and the multicultural-youth specialist work the organisation does.

From Sudan to Egypt to Australia: family, research, youth support, and policy work

Aisha was born in Sudan, and her mother and father started their migration journey by first leaving Sudan to Egypt (for people leaving the country, they had to first either go to Libya or Egypt). Aisha's family stayed in Egypt for three years, and then moved to Australia in 2001 when Aisha was three-and-a-half years old.

Aisha grew up in Sydney as the youngest in her family. While her older siblings, particularly her elder sister, carried much of the responsibility for supporting their parents and community, including form filling and translation. Aisha described having had a comparatively *'easier ride.'* As an adult, those support responsibilities shifted to her. She acknowledged the contributions of her siblings and reflected on how growing up in that environment shaped her sense of care and responsibility.

Aisha completed a Master by Research focusing on politics, immigration studies, and sociocultural analysis. For her thesis, Aisha travelled to Sudan and interviewed family members on their experience of her family leaving, the impact it had on them, and their feelings about migration now. She conducted comparative interviews with Sudanese community members in Australia about leaving family behind, their connections to Sudan to this day, and the impact of their settlement journey.

Before joining MYAN NSW, Aisha worked as a case manager supporting vulnerable communities. At MYAN, she served as a Youth Engagement Specialist and had also previously acted in a policy and communications role. Her work involved designing upskilling programs for young people, especially those from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds, and translating frontline insights into systemic change. Drawing on young people's lived experiences, Aisha contributed to policy submissions and advocacy efforts that aimed to reshape the broader systems affecting refugee and migrant youth in New South Wales.

Active lived experience upholding Assyrian heritage and other advocacy efforts

'I come from an Assyrian background. I was born in Australia, but my parents and brother migrated together to come to Australia, and their migration journey was pretty difficult. They started in Iraq, that was where they were born, where they grew up. Then they went to Jordan, then Bulgaria, then Greece, then Australia,' outlined Shamiram. Shamiram explained that her family's journey was challenging and disruptive. She grew up in a single-parent household, which she said played a huge role in the work that she did and the way she understood young people in similar situations.

Outside of her prior work with MYAN NSW, Shamiram was an active volunteer within Assyrian community organisations. She contributed as a journalist with the Assyrian Cultural and Social Youth Association, writing on cultural heritage, identity, and preservation. With the Assyrian community having endured mass violence, displacement, and cultural erasure, this work was deeply personal and politically important. The Assyrian Cultural and Social Youth Association advocates for genocide recognition and heritage protection, issues that often intersected with her work at MYAN, particularly given the significant number of Assyrian, Chaldean, and Iraqi young people participating in programs and school outreach across Western Sydney.

Before joining MYAN, Shamiram also volunteered with Amnesty International, contributing to early campaign efforts for a Human Rights Act in Australia. At the time, national momentum behind the Act was limited, but Shamiram found purpose in pushing for a legislative framework that recognised intersecting human rights issues often overlooked by government policy. This formative advocacy experience continued to inform her intersectional and rights-based approach to youth engagement and policy work.

Language, cultural background and 'living experience'

Shamiram and Aisha agreed that language skills are a key strength often interwoven with lived experience. Aisha noted that there is a comfort and trust that such skills foster, because new arrivals know they will be understood. Young refugees and migrants often go into mainstream services, such as Centrelink, with a goal but come away frustrated because there were breakdowns in communication, often tied to language differences.

Cultural skills operate similarly. Cultural skills can help a lived-experience worker to recognise when a young person is hesitant to talk due to cultural or intergenerational trauma. Cultural knowledge can be a foundation for a trusting relationship: *'Our own cultural understanding of what is appropriate, what is not appropriate, what will make young people shut down and disengage, or what will make them feel safe and continue building a relationship with us,'* noted Aisha.

Then there is the power of *'living experience.'* Aisha and Shamiram were young lived-experience workers, supporting young people with lived experience. Shamiram noted that there is a sense of relatability, with everyone knowing they were growing up in the same era and as part of the same generation. In Aisha's experience working with newly-arrived young people, simply seeing someone with a similar background and experience helps them to believe that they can navigate new challenges and find successful pathways, which makes a world of difference.

Interfaith representation and visible inclusion

Many young people that MYAN NSW works with come from war zones and conflict areas where there has been religious persecution and sectarian violence. Because of people's past traumas and histories, there can be tension between religious groups.

When lived experience workers of different faiths work together, they are a visible embodiment of interfaith bridging; this helps to challenge deep-seated assumptions carried from conflict-affected countries and to foster social cohesion.

> ***'For example, young people coming from Iraq, Syria, Turkey, or other areas, might come with the assumption that there is distrust between people from a different religion, such as Muslims, because of historical persecution or because of ISIS'…'But when you come to an event and the two people facilitating it are Muslim and Christian, and they work really well together, it sets an example. Their experience is understandable. But we work well together, we respect each other, and we respect one another's religion. It's powerful. So multi-faith teams are a huge strength.'***
> ***- Shamiram***

Our stories are not our methodology

Aisha and Shamiram discussed a crucial caveat to the benefits of lived experience, noting that recommendations, support and advice must be based on professional frameworks and organisational values rather than solely be couched in opinions based on cultural background and personal experience. Shamiram reflected: *'There's been a lot of situations where I have to not give my own opinion based on my culture and my background and my experience, but rather, as a professional working with a young person, even though I do see a lot of similarity, because I am also a young person. I'm 22 years old… And so I always have to make sure that the recommendation, support and advice that I'm giving isn't based on my experience, as much as I would want it to be. It should be based on what the best outcomes are in alignment with our organisation.'*

Aisha warned that it can be tempting to make assumptions based on your own story, when in fact you need to listen. Aisha argued that lived experience workers have to let clients tell their own story, as there may always be things that are not yet known. Putting this another way, Aisha said, *'you don't use your story to advise,'* Aisha stressed, *'you use it to understand. [Your story] helps understand why a person might be reluctant to share, and helps to know when not to poke or ask certain types of questions.'* In this way, a story can guide a settlement worker towards sensitivity, understanding, and safety in their practice.

Expectations: implicit and explicit

> ***'You start filling out legal documents at a young age because you're the first in the family to be fluent in English, but it can be serious paperwork, whether it be divorce papers, whether it be death certificates, this is very intensive for an average person, let alone someone with lived experience, someone that is a young person… There's a lot of added stress and added things that go unrecognised.'***
> ***- Shamiram***

Aisha added that it is not just explicit expectations that are placed upon lived experience workers, but implicit ones. Though lived experience workers help clients who come from similar backgrounds to themselves, they are often all too aware that they are now in a position to help others, and no longer need that help.

For Aisha, it is a feeling that she must pay forward the benefits of a good education and now a good profession. Aisha shared that sometimes during the night, a person she has engaged with in the past who has since dropped out of contact, will pop into her head; she will think *"Where is that person? What are they doing right now? Are they okay?"* and thoughts will swim around her head that she hasn't checked up on them in a while and needs to circle back to them. This happens even when working directly with many new young refugees and migrants. *'It's about me having to accept that the work that I've chosen to do professionally also very closely interacts with my own personal life, because the people that I end up supporting and helping are people from my community… that's something that I always have to navigate.'*

Conflict abroad is conflict at home: the place for clinical support

Sudan has been experiencing one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Ongoing conflict cuts across the lives of many lived experience settlement staff. Family, friends, and networks: many are living through crises and conflicts. Aisha shared: *'I have family members in Sudan that are going through it right now. I have a family member who I'm trying to support to get out of the situation, to Australia, or just anywhere he can study. It has a mental, and emotional impact… All the time, I get family members, friends, people, always asking, "Do you have a way for me to get out?" You do what you can, but you can only do so much. We don't work with the Department responsible for visas. They don't really understand the difference between my role and that, just seeing that I work for an organisation that is funded by the government that supports refugees and migrants. You try to explain, but the message doesn't get across because they are in survival mode.'*

Aisha reflected on the influence that her mother has had in her life, helping Aisha to find a balance she can sustain. Her mum has always set the example that we can only do so much, that sometimes we are a professional and sometimes we are simply a person.

Lived experience workers are not just affected by incidents happening overseas, but also by events in Australia. Shamiram shared how affected she was by a high-profile violent attack at an Assyrian church. For lived experience staff, the impact is amplified: they feel it as a person, as part of a community, but they are also asked for support by their clients. When something like this happens, it is critical that staff are offered support and space. Shamiram noted that working in another job or industry, in some ways, might have been easier to cope, but by the nature of her work, the moment she clocks on, there are discussions about such incidents.

> ***'It was good I got support, because I don't know how much I could have supported young people at the time. Because I needed to support myself. This is not a job that you can emotionally detach from. You need to be close to 100% when you come to work, because you're going to be doing some heavy work. So supporting ourselves is a major priority. In order to really support a young person, you can't give them 100% if you are only at 20%. There are many ways in which MYAN NSW helps, including in clinical support and supervision, and therapeutic protocols… Every month we work with the clinical supervisor, and debrief.'***
> ***- Shamiram***

Shamiram reflected on what worked well for her after the incident. She said that being offered a one-on-one call to seek clinical support was helpful. In this call, she was able to speak about the incident, how it affected her at work, how to navigate the impacts at work, how to support herself and prioritise self-care, and how the best outcome for everyone is only possible when Shamiram looks after herself. *'Maybe there will be times we don't have much to say. But just being in that space, knowing that it's available is huge. Even if we don't need to use it. [Clinical supervisors] are unbiased, external to the organisation, and neutral.'*

Aisha agreed that there were important benefits to settlement staff accessing external perspectives. To Aisha, one's working life is one's professional realm, and for her, should often remain distinct from one's personal life. But of course, they bleed into one another when you are part of the community you work within. Therefore, accessing external clinical supervision allows staff to seek guidance and support, whilst maintaining their separation of selves; clinical supervision offers a third realm, in between, but distinct. Aisha contemplated: *'We have individual case management with younger people, some are more intense than others. Some require more crisis support than others. So, it's good we have these [clinical support phone] numbers. To say this was the incident, this is how I responded, I feel like I made the right choice, or I felt like I could have done this better, and the [clinical supervisor] will give you recommendations on how to navigate that next time and really put into perspective what you learned from the situation.'*

Aisha expressed the belief that high levels of support for lived experience workers were critical for the settlement sector as a whole. Aisha was resolute: *'If there is a lot of support, the outcomes that that staff member is going to produce are going to be much more powerful.'*

Trauma and triggers

Trauma comes with the territory. Shamiram was firm in her opinion that if an organisation is looking for cultural understanding, lived experience, language skills, and the like, then that organisation must be ready to support the traumatic experiences that may have been endured by a worker who brings all those skills and all that knowledge.

For Shamiram, there are two elements to mitigating unnecessary triggers. Firstly, it is lived experience workers understanding their own limits, and communicating those to peers and management, where necessary. Secondly, it is peers and management listening when a task or event is flagged by a staff member, and making necessary accommodations.

Sharing the load

> ***'It's important to have lived experience workers, but it's also important for lived experience workers to feel like the responsibility is shared with everyone… The resettlement experience is not just all in the hands of someone with lived experience. It needs to be a collective effort.'***
> ***- Aisha***

Both Aisha and Shamiram were in firm agreement that lived experience and non-lived experience workers have essential roles to play. Neither can sustain best practice without the other. At the peer-to-peer level, workers need to listen to one another, collaborate, and share the load.

There are a number of reasons this helps enable good settlement outcomes. Aisha explained that a client will eventually transition away from settlement services, so working with settlement staff without lived experience is a good way to prepare a client for recieving support from mainstream services. Aisha emphasised: *'Eventually they'll go into the real world and have to come face to face with people that don't share their lived experience. And that is going to be a culture shock.'*

Aisha also stressed the importance of dividing workloads among lived experience and non-lived experience counterparts to avoid staff burnout. Aisha understood that often intentions were good when non-lived experience workers pushed clients onto her, with the belief that they could not provide the same level of support without shared language, culture, or experiences of displacement and resettlement. However, Aisha encouraged her non-lived experience counterparts to consider how they could support clients instead of immediately handing clients over to her. Aisha gave the example of the value of interpreters, with whom non-lived experience workers should develop close working relationships with so that they can service CALD clients. Aisha reinforced: *'Whoever is employed has the capacity, has the knowledge, the expertise to do best practice work. Where they can't, the organisation needs to facilitate that. So yes, shared training, shared resources, and shared responsibility. The same expectations of a lived experience worker, really should be of all staff members.'*

Aisha noted that settlement staff will not always be there, and that clients need to feel safe regardless of who supports them. *'Whether settlement workers have lived experience or not, it should still be the same outcome.'* Shamiram has a similiar view and believes that sharing the load should be a *'structural priority,'* with less pressure applied to individuals themselves. Organisations need to accommodate all lived experiences, so a client is not looking for a certain type of worker, but for the organisation as a whole. Training and resources are key. *'Because Aisha will go, I will go, people will go. Years will go on, decades will go on. [Settlement services] will still exist.'*

Pathways to decision-making and influence

Shamiram expressed the need for action at the systems level. Lived experience within settlement organisations is valuable, but lived experience in decision-making environments could be transformative. Shamiram spoke about how she wants to see more people with lived experience in positions of influence, whether it is in policymaking or senior government positions.

> ***'I think that people with lived experiences are not just good for direct support, they're also great for advisory positions and leading the sector's decision making.'***
> ***- Shamiram***

Shamiram said that pathways to influence and leadership, for today's lived experience workers, would harness a dual power, whereby decisions can be informed by those who have experienced displacement and settlement, as well as informed by those who have worked on the ground, in the sector.

According to Shamiram, lived experience has to go beyond the organisational level, expanding its reach beyond case-by-case change, to the systems that all refugees and migrants must navigate. Reform has to come from the top. *'One day, your [organisational] position will end, and then what? Then people with lived experience don't have a voice. If the institutions [are mandated] to recognise and accommodate for people's lived experience, then we don't actually need to keep hearing stories and keep telling stories.'*

Chapter 04

Community volunteer-driven settlement support

Mohamed Abri

Refugee Community Group Sponsor

Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP)
Melbourne, Victoria

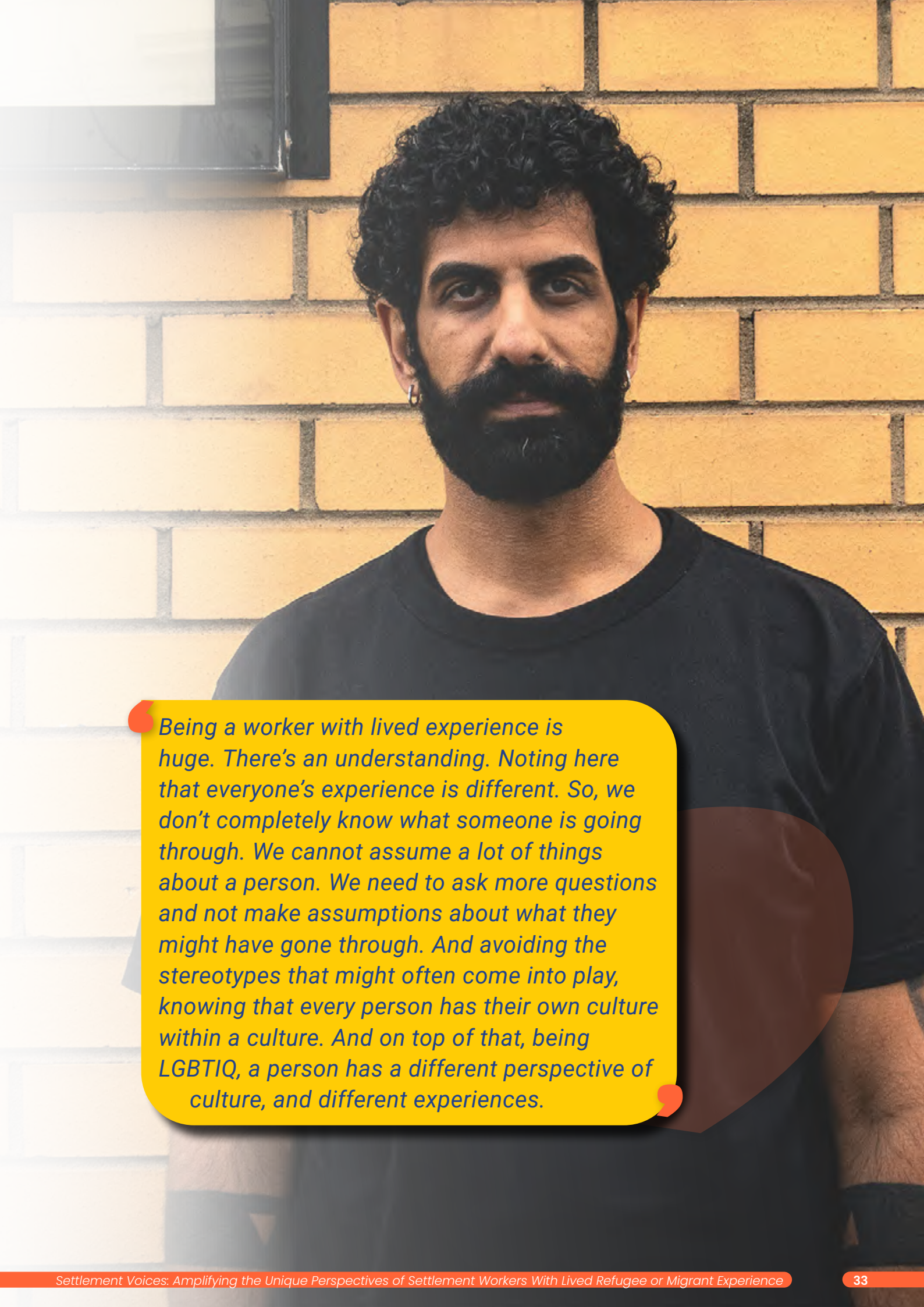
Sponsoring, guiding and empowering communities

Mohamed is a community sponsor for refugees under the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP). Mohamed and groups of community members sponsor LGBTIQA+ refugees under CRISP, which is delivered by Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia (CRSA) and the Australian Government. The community sponsorship model has been a key pillar of humanitarian resettlement in Canada for many decades. Mohamed noted his belief in the model, which has had powerful outcomes in Canada and already seen positive results since it commenced in Australia: *'CRSA, through CRISP, make sure that the person who resettles in Australia is matched with the group's skills and strengths. We received a lot of training through CRISP, and they even prepared us for different scenarios. They're very involved and detailed.'*

Mohamed shared how a refugee sponsored by Mohamed's group arrived in Australia at the start of 2024, and just two months later had already gotten their first job in hospitality, commencing work alongside their English classes and education.

> ***'Our group specifically work with LGBTIQ refugees, with many of us having lived experience with LGBTIQ identities and displacement backgrounds... It's been good because we know how to connect people to community, how to be able to give them the support that they need and understand their lived experiences.'***

Mohamed emphasised that every sponsored refugee is different, with their own stories, and how they bring different things to the table. *'One thing we learned from [this] person we sponsored is that she is very independent. She specifically told us: "I'm not a victim" and does not want to play that role. She's very autonomous. We have a role in empowering her and providing guidance for her to achieve success in settling, while also being careful to overcome power dynamics, knowing it is just support that we give and that refugees are amazing people and very capable.'*



Being a worker with lived experience is huge. There's an understanding. Noting here that everyone's experience is different. So, we don't completely know what someone is going through. We cannot assume a lot of things about a person. We need to ask more questions and not make assumptions about what they might have gone through. And avoiding the stereotypes that might often come into play, knowing that every person has their own culture within a culture. And on top of that, being LGBTIQ, a person has a different perspective of culture, and different experiences.

Intersecting identities

Mohamed highlighted further inherent strengths of lived experience in the settlement sector. Lived experience workers understand the unique challenges of LGBTIQA+ individuals who are displaced. Mohamed noted queer refugees often migrate alone and, due to safety reasons, often do not connect to their cultural or ethnic communities due to homophobia and transphobia.

'It's this very difficult intersection of identities, where people do not find that safety that others may find through connecting with cultural communities. So, when someone with lived experience fits both [these identities], it's actually a huge relief, both for them, and for us.'

When workers shared their own lived experiences with refugees and migrants, this helped break down barriers and provided space for people to connect and share. *'Talking and familiarity with the culture, that's people's first experiences coming here, so just having that comfort that they get when they know your story.'*

Awareness and acknowledgement

Having lived experience is not without challenges though. Mohamed discussed the uneven workloads that might fall on those with lived experience. A refugee or migrant can often approach lived experience workers more than others. Other members of a community sponsorship group, or settlement team, might also place higher reliance and expectations on lived experience workers and their expected expertise. *'The person you're working with might also turn to you more than others. I assume it's the same in other kinds of services. Especially when you speak their language, and you know their culture, and there's additional safety with having the same cultural lived experience and queer identity… we love to do this work, but it does add up.'*

There is also the crucial issue of managing mental loads. *'You do feel the emotions. You do want to help a lot more, because you've gone through similar experiences.'*

Being able to empathise with challenging situations and difficult decisions can be hard and heavy work. Mohamed noted that his community sponsorship groups include other sponsors with lived experience, which helps spread out the load.

Acknowledging the unique value of lived experience in settlement work will go a long way to help overcome these challenges.

> ***'For example, when someone arrives, they have a budget for settlement, and the question comes up around remitting money back to their country, which comes up a lot actually, it's very common. It's very human to want to send money back to your loved ones. We understand that need, but we also know that they need money here. Discussions as a sponsorship group and working with others have been useful, working together, because nothing is black and white.'***

'Honestly, even just awareness and an acknowledgement from the outset. For example, the mental load. That this will be something that happens. This could easily be added to the guides that we have, of which there are plenty. But organisations acknowledging this, especially services that have people with lived experience, acknowledging the additional load that they take on.'

Remunerating cultural loads and language skills

Whilst Mohamed is a volunteer, he noted that for paid lived experience staff, there could be opportunities for additional remunerated recognition. Mohamed cited organisations, including universities, introducing First Nations cultural load payments. *'I can see more organisations adding cultural liaison payments, and allowances for using your language, and cultural expertise. I've seen many other examples, for example, where there is one transgender person in the whole organisation and they get picked for every question about trans people and asked to go on every panel, and it's very tiring. So, in marginalised communities, there should be an allowance of sorts.'*

Mohamed brought up language allowance payments that have been or are being adopted by some councils. Language allowance payments are financial incentives for other-than-English language holders who enable diverse communities to be served. Mohamed argues that this kind of allowance should be available to all employees who speak a language other than English, whether or not they are speaking their mother tongue. The value of language skills lie in their utility for service delivery, not in how or when the language was learned.

Mohamed returned to the importance of recognition, awareness, and acknowledgement of lived experience for settlement outcomes.

> ***'Acknowledge that this is an extra skill set that people are bringing. It's an extra expertise. We need to acknowledge their contributions as they are. People are bringing community engagement, lived experience, expertise, and skill sets that are helping them provide services better. Once we start looking at these as advantages and skill sets, we can have a better future of not just hiring but having a better appreciation of lived experience workers, and better working conditions because there are extra workloads and involvement. But there's also better results and outcomes.'***

I'm a woman, I'm a single mum, I'm Arab. [For some cultures], this is too much... I focus on the results. I remind myself why I'm here.
- Zeina

You don't have to have all the answers, sometimes you just have to make people feel safe.
- Nancy

Chapter 05

Setting boundaries, building agency

Zeina Omran

Humanitarian Settlement Program Case Manager

Nancy Mkojera-Thomson

Family Violence Prevention Worker

Cultura
Geelong, Victoria

Getting here: long and winding roads

As the Syrian War escalated, Zeina was forced to flee her home in 2019. She applied for an Australian visa, taking shelter in Iraq while she waited the five years for her visa to be approved. In November of 2023, Zeina finally arrived in Geelong with her son. Zeina mused that Geelong reminded her of her hometown in some ways: a small, quiet, supportive town, along the waterfront. In other ways, though, Geelong felt like 'a new planet' where everything seemed different, and nothing was obvious. Zeina recalled that something as simple as taking the bus was a foreign and confusing experience. Zeina reflected on how overwhelming things could be at the beginning, saying: *'I had to support myself here, I had to learn to be independent. I'm a single mum as well. So, when I arrived here, I didn't have time to digest all the emotions.'* Now, however, Geelong feels like home to Zeina.

Zeina's professional background is in the humanitarian sector. In Syria and later in Iraq, Zeina worked in child protection, humanitarian response, and as an education specialist. Zeina found that ensuring children were protected and had access to education in emergencies cannot be done without supporting women. Zeina shared that since this work, she has been committed to working on projects that support women and children, and this continues to drive her settlement work today.

When Zeina arrived in Geelong, she started volunteering at Cultura; she saw this as the best way to cope, the best way to get to know the community around her, and the best way to learn about the system. Zeina also volunteered to gain local job experience, something she now advises her clients to do to overcome barriers to employment. From her volunteering role, Zeina moved into bilingual work using her mother tongue, Arabic. Since then, Zeina has worked in settlement service provision at Cultura, in the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program and Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP). Zeina has recently completed a Diploma in Community Services and is gaining her qualifications to teach English as a second language.

The road that Zeina has travelled has been long, dangerous and difficult, but Zeina feels deeply grateful. She expressed how fortunate she feels to be building a new life in a place where she can safely raise her son. Now, Zeina is in a position to help others who are arriving with stories of displacement similar to her own. Zeina's lived experiences shape her approach to settlement work. But even now, as the two-year mark approaches, Zeina shared that she continues to face obstacles. Zeina is often left with the feeling that people expect her to return to where she has come from. *'People still ask me, often, "So when are you going back?"'* Zeina feels that it is up to her to prove to locals that she is a good person, and that the assumption at the outset is, in fact, the opposite. Zeina has noticed the surprise that crosses over people when they hear that she loved her life in Syria, and that she had a great job; she didn't want to leave, but war arrived, and she had to.

Just two weeks ago, supporting a newly arrived family, Zeina was shocked to realise that she already knew them. Zeina had supported this family years ago in a refugee camp in Iraq. For Zeina, being able to help this family along their Australian settlement journey was a heartwarming experience. It felt serendipitous to meet again, so far from Iraq, in Geelong of all places. Zeina felt as if this meeting was a symbol: each of them was on the right path.

Nancy arrived in Australia 15 years ago from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. *'I fell in love with a very good-looking man, sorry, bragging about my husband! So, I came [to Australia].'* Nancy arrived with both a university education and many years of work experience.

> ***'I started working two months after I arrived. I got a job, full-time, in a corporate organisation called Healthscope. I worked for them for nine years. Two of those years I lived in Melbourne. The rest of the time I lived in Geelong... After I had my third child, I couldn't see myself going back and forth to Melbourne. It wasn't going to work for my family. So, I started looking for work in Geelong.' - Nancy***

Nancy gained extensive experience in human resources, administration, and finance in the private health sector during her time at Healthscope. Nancy explained that, unlike many of the clients she now supports, she was lucky enough to migrate and settle with the support of her husband, a formal education under her belt, and a strong command of the English language.

But even with these blessings, Nancy revealed that things were hard at times: *'Coming to a new country where you don't know anyone, even though I had it easy in so many ways, I still had to navigate a lot of things on my own. I still had to go to Centrelink by myself with my little people; I still had to go to the hospital by myself.'*

Nancy recalled a job interview she had in Melbourne: *'They started talking, I responded, and they were [fixated] on my English: "Your English is very good!" I was just trying to calm myself. I was thinking… what does that even mean?'* It was at this moment in her settlement journey that Nancy realised her language skills were giving her a foot in the door in Melbourne. Nancy began to appreciate her privilege compared to many other new arrivals. She wondered what it might be like for job seekers without much English, who were just as capable of doing the same jobs. Once she moved to Geelong, however, Nancy was forced to worry about her own circumstances because no one would interview her in Geelong. Nancy explained, *'Based on my surname, regardless of my experience, I couldn't even get a job interview for a position I could do with my eyes closed.'* Nancy didn't find work in Geelong for five years. Nancy's experience searching for work in an Australian town relative to a large Australian metropolis speaks to the bias that many refugees and migrants face in areas where there are fewer jobs and less population diversity. In the end, Nancy's Swahili language skills were the key to finding her first job in Geelong, and she has since worked in a number of CALD community-facing roles.

Nancy has worked as a wellbeing navigator, a COVID-19 vaccination coordinator, and has done a lot of work with Congolese and Burundian women's groups. Nancy is currently completing her Postgraduate Diploma of Counselling. Along her settlement journey, Nancy was faced with an obstacle that many lived experience settlement workers are familiar with. Six months into her wellbeing navigator role, funding for the program ended, and Nancy was out of a job. Nancy ended up accepting a part-time receptionist role while she began searching, once again, for suitable work.

Facing the unexpected? Humility is key

Nancy made a lot of assumptions when she started her settlement work. But things were not as she expected them to be. She shared a language and a physical likeness with many of her clients. Nancy expected this to foster trust. It was the opposite.

> ***'It's been a very humbling experience, because I had this perception where, because we look similar, [my clients and I] might understand each other. It would be easy to connect because we have a language that connects us. But it was very far from this. They have different lived experiences. Their journeys are so different from mine. So, I had to stop thinking of what I think I need to do and start listening, really listening to the clients. "What is it that you need?"'***
> ***- Nancy***

For a long time, Nancy was not trusted with the truth. For her clients, honesty and safety were still in conflict. *'Every time that person had spoken the truth, they had had something taken away from them,'* Nancy said. *'Telling the truth is a privilege. I didn't realise that it was.'* Nancy realised that her clients had learned to be silent in order to keep themselves and their families safe. It took Nancy time and effort to bring down these protective walls. Over time, she was able to show her clients that she would always be there, that she cared. Slowly, they came around.

Nancy came to understand that some of her clients, ones who had been hurt by their own communities, were trying to get as far away from their own communities as possible. They were looking for support from those who were firmly outside of it. *'Along their journey, the people who had helped [my clients] didn't wear a face like mine. My face was like the faces of the people who had crushed their dreams, the people whom they were hiding from. I was really shocked, but that was the reality.'*

There are challenges that come with lived experience. Realising this was a turning point for Nancy. She learned that good practice can be about stepping back, recognising that everyone has a different story, and that even those who seem most similar to you can have fears and needs that you cannot anticipate. Now Nancy knows that her lived experience will not always directly inform her practice; she is confident, however, that it will always indirectly enrich it. Her lived experience may contrast with some of her clients, but it continues to fuel her empathy for others and drive her passion for settlement work.

> ***'Our lived experience is our confidence. It is our pride. But it can also be our blind spot.'***
> ***- Nancy***

Establishing healthy dynamics

Zeina and Nancy spoke about the tendency towards over provision that lived experience workers are constantly navigating. According to Zeina and Nancy, when you have known the same hardships and sense of desperation as your clients, it is difficult to clock off. When your own trauma is in the room, you want to go above and beyond for clients. Both Nancy and Zeina were surprised to find, however, that in their practices, there is such a thing as too much support. Nancy explained, *'We just hear all these terrible things that people have gone through to come here. But then when you come here, you give a lot of support, and sometimes, that's not helpful.'* According to Nancy, if you do everything for a client, a dangerous dynamic can be established. Clients can lose the confidence to take any step on their own, no matter how small. Workloads for staff can become insurmountable as clients' demands border on the extreme. To Nancy and Zeina finding an equilibrium between client agency and client support is key. Nancy stated, *'There are times that you have to put up boundaries and say, "I can't hold your hand anymore. I need you to walk."'* Zeina agreed that the trick was to convince clients not that you don't care, but that you do. What you care about is their independence; you care about their self-determination. In this way, the goal is not to fix clients' problems for them, but to equip them with the tools to fix their own problems.

To avoid staff burnout and to cultivate the self-sufficiency of clients, Zeina and Nancy stressed that there needs to be limits on the levels of support offered to clients. *'I know it can't be one size fits all,'* Nancy said, *'but it's important to have standards made clear: Yes, we are providing this support. But just so that everyone is clear: "This is what we are doing. We do this much."'*

The many faces of support

Zeina and Nancy carry a wealth of experience between them. However, for everything they have seen, endured and learned along the way, settlement work continues to impart new lessons. For all the supports that Nancy has curated for the women she sees at Cultura, she has come to learn that sometimes the support that is needed is breathtakingly simple.

> ***'I took them to a coffee shop, sat them down, and bought them coffee. We started talking, but most of them did not want to hear. They said, "I have switched off my social media because I know there's nothing I can do, and if I keep seeing I won't be able to sleep or function" … [Cultura] opened a room where they could come, to talk, or just be together, to be able to feel like they weren't doing this alone. It was good. It didn't change things back, but it gave them a bit of hope.'***
> ***- Nancy***

When rebels took over the southern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, horrors and devastation began to unfold. These were places that Nancy's clients called home. She found that while the conflict and associated destruction and loss were occurring, her clients more than anything needed to be away from conversations about it.

Of two worlds: children in settlement

Working with Congolese mothers has provided opportunities for Nancy to meet their children and to talk with them. These children and young people were born in refugee camps in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but have no memories of this part of their lives. Nancy has learned that many refugee and migrant children grow up here in Australia, somewhere in between two worlds. They feel different to local children, but they also feel apart from their own cultural background. For many of these children, they feel as if they are hovering between identities, and that they do not necessarily belong anywhere.

Nancy worries about the Congolese children and youth she speaks with. However, she is also glad they are in Geelong now, relative to when she first arrived. Nancy's face was the only one that was different back then. Today, diversity continues to shape Geelong and the wider region. *'I tell you,'* Nancy smiled, *'we've come a long way.'*

Cultural sensitivity, information sharing, and safety

One of the problems that Nancy has noticed in her practice is a crisis of self-worth in her male clients. This can lead to situations of domestic and family violence (DFV). Men with low self-worth are more likely to want to keep their wives at home. Nancy works to address DFV, coordinating mental health workshops for women and providing them with the tools to self-advocate. Nancy employs cultural sensitivity and awareness when working with these clients. Knowing what not to say is as important as knowing what to say, as some topics can be considered taboo and broaching them would lower trust. Nancy has found that indirect communication techniques can work well. During some women's groups, Nancy frames DFV information as if it is for the benefit of her clients' children: *'Now, this could happen to your child. If your child were experiencing this, this is how you would help them.'* For many of Nancy's clients, this is an approachable way to learn about the many different forms of abuse and the range of supports that are available.

Domestic and family violence situations are examples of instances where an excess of cultural sensitivity can be detrimental to safety, since information sharing is of the utmost importance. Nancy advised that settlement workers must always find ways to educate, inform and empower their clients. By taking out content that can be considered taboo or offensive, a service provider risks minimising the information and options that a vulnerable client has access to. To Zeina and Nancy, cultural sensitivity and information sharing are not mutually exclusive, nor should they be.

A saving grace: organisational culture

While Zeina was working at Cultura, 60 people from the neighbourhood she had fled from were killed in their homes. Zeina's parents survived; it was a miracle. Zeina was deeply afraid for her parents and devastated for her neighbourhood. The conflict may have been far away, but for Zeina, it was all around her. At work, colleagues and management checked in regularly with Zeina. She was asked: *"What do you need? What can we do?"* Though she was offered time off work, Zeina felt that Cultura was the safest place for her; she was respected, understood, and knew she had access to different kinds of support. Many lived experience workers have to find ways to cope with the knowledge that traumatic events continue to happen in their home countries. According to Zeina, compassionate, considerate and adaptive working environments are crucial. Cultura's organisational culture helped Zeina to go on, to continue working, in the worst of times.

Whether it is a trauma-informed organisational culture or promoting staff wellbeing, Zeina and Nancy expressed the importance of fostering diverse and supportive work environments. Sometimes, Zeina and Nancy explained, while chuckling, *'You can forget what you look like at Cultura, you can forget what language you are speaking,'* the environment is that diverse and that familiar. At Cultura, different cultural holidays and events are recognised and acknowledged, and this is meaningful for staff. Debriefing is also a central part of working life at Cultura. According to Zeina, it's not always about finding a solution with your staff peers or superiors, *'It can be as simple as thinking out loud with someone.'*

Zeina and Nancy's settlement work is elevated by strong leadership. They understand that their service delivery is monitored not for surveillance, but in the hope of better serving clients and achieving their organisational goals. They explained that at Cultura, mistakes are part of the culture of continuous learning.

Settlement service design

According to Nancy, settlement and related programs should be funded for at least three-year cycles. For clients that are supported by shorter programs, the end of funding means the end of access, the fragmentation of services, and the beginning of frantic searches for other sources of support. Nancy explained that it can take up to six months to gain community trust and confidence when delivering a new program, and before momentum can be generated. Longer grants allow settlement workers to effectively identify and respond to gaps, and ultimately improve settlement outcomes. On the other side of this system, job insecurity continues to be a common and serious problem for settlement workers. Many, like Nancy, have been put out of work at the end of funding cycles. This industry-specific problem has a disproportionate impact on the security and safety of refugees and migrants who make up a majority of the settlement workforce in Australia. Longer funding cycles would therefore also make a big difference to the lives of settlement workers.

Zeina and Nancy also had recommendations for pre-arrival service delivery reform. They discussed an innovative project they knew about where humanitarian organisations were partnering with Duolingo to support pre-arrival English learning. Zeina and Nancy reflected on the value that a project like this could have for those soon to arrive in Australia. They also highlighted the outdatedness of pre-arrival orientation programs; some of the information in pre-arrival programs is not just insufficient but inaccurate. They highlighted the value of community capacity building in Australia, explaining that where pre-arrival services fail, community leaders can offer critical support once refugees and migrants arrive.

I went to Armidale from Newcastle to help on some work there. There were people with a traumatic background living there, they were captured by ISIS. But they never told anyone. When I sat with them, I started with myself and what experiences I had. For example, I've been shot three times in my journey. Our house was looted. These few people found a safe environment, as someone who had similar experiences, and they felt comfortable saying what they had in their hearts. For years, years and years, they couldn't tell someone here in Australia. Then they told me everything. They had relief, they had healing, they were more comfortable. So, having similar experiences, knowing how to approach people, it gives you more opportunities to do your task successfully.

Chapter 06

Creating space by sharing lived experiences and delivering settlement beyond box-ticking

Mohammad Sami Zakhil

Multicultural Youth Worker

Mosaic Multicultural Connections
Newcastle, New South Wales

It can be hard to open up to someone when you are not sure they will understand your experience or trauma, but if you hear that someone has gone through similar experiences, *'it opens the doors'*, Sami noted. Refugees and vulnerable migrants settling in Australia are often more comfortable opening up to providers with lived experience, having overcome that initial worry and barrier. They feel, *'he understands me, he knows where I'm coming from.'*

Sami Zakhil's settlement work

Sami Zakhil works as a multicultural youth worker and settlement caseworker with Mosaic Multicultural Connections in Newcastle, New South Wales, drawing on his extensive experience working with young people in Afghanistan. Sami arrived in Australia in 2019, and moved to Newcastle thanks to links with Australian Defence Force personnel from his work as an interpreter with them in Afghanistan.

With Mosaic, Sami leads a program connecting multicultural youth, Aboriginal youth, and mainstream communities. He also conducts settlement casework with young refugees and migrants. Many of the young refugees Sami works with are from Afghanistan and Syria. Sami sometimes travels to the Mosaic Armidale (NSW) Office, where staff work with many Yazidi families. Sami also works with Tibetans, Ukrainians, Iraqis, Congolese and other young people in Newcastle's evolving, diverse settlement communities.

Outside of Mosaic, Sami teaches Youth Work students at TAFE and is a leader in his community. Sami wears many hats, a situation not dissimilar to many settlement workers with lived experience across Australia.

An embodiment of interfaith and intercultural dialogue

There are intrinsic benefits to having lived-experience staff and clients from a wide diversity of backgrounds and cultures interacting and working together. Sami recounted how he worked to provide a safe, supportive environment for a refugee family, including a young Yazidi girl. After some time, the girl told Sami that her family had endured deeply traumatic experiences before arriving in Australia as refugees, and that she had held an entrenched hatred for people from Muslim backgrounds based on those experiences. But after meeting Sami, and many other people of Muslim faith during cultural exchange programs, she realised this hatred was misplaced. She and her family invited members of the Muslim community to a large dinner at their family home, and were invited in return to community events, *'so that hate changed to love'*.

Lived experience settlement staff can embody interfaith and intercultural dialogue. They can become a trusted and safe bridge, gradually built over time. *'No matter if we are Muslim, or any community, we need to come together, respect each other, respect each other's decisions and ideas and opinions and culture.'*

Beyond box-ticking

Sami discusses how settlement work cannot be a tick-box exercise. It has to extend beyond *'go meet this person, fill out this form, bring it back.'* Instead, building good relationships and fostering trusting and safe environments is the foundation upon which settlement work must happen.

> ***'It's okay if you link me to Centrelink, if you help me find a job, if you teach me how to drive. But it will not be okay if I have something [wrong] in my heart and I am not comfortable in this community. But if you work to understand people, listen to them, know where they are coming from and the situations they've been through, then they will feel more comfortable and settle better.'***

Understanding cultural barriers

Settlement workers with lived experience can support cultural understanding when working with refugees and migrants.

Having lived experience informs how you approach people; that approach will often determine whether or not someone feels understood, and ultimately, whether or not they trust you to support them. *'I know how to approach a Muslim family, especially with two or three young daughters; that there are some concerns about how you need to approach them. I know how to approach a Hazara family here in Newcastle, having in mind that there are some conflicts between Hazara and Pashtun [Sami being Pashtun]. I know how to approach a Tajik family, and from which area in Afghanistan they are from, keeping in mind that there are some conflicts between Pashtun and Tajik in provinces in Afghanistan.'*

> ***'It's not just our responsibility to provide a youth camp and cultural exchange trip. Many refugee families might find it hard to let their daughters go with a bunch of boys for an overnight trip. It's our responsibility to go to their parents and family and explain things. It's a different environment here [in Australia] from Afghanistan. The first step is to explain the environment. The second step is to build a healthy relationship between yourself, the family, the sister, the brother. What is the reason that a brother doesn't want to let his sister go on the trip? "My best friend's sister went out for a trip in Afghanistan and got attacked by men." [So now we understand the reluctance.] But here, we don't have that. You have to explain the differences, explain the trip and what is planned, and provide reassurance. If someone just called and said: "Your daughter is coming on this trip." Believe me, the family will get offended. But there is an approach; that you ask, that you explain. Finally, we've reached a stage where families are actually recommending their daughters to go.'***

Understanding and clarifying boundaries

Many settlement staff are recruited specifically because they are respected in their community, have strong community networks, or are community leaders. When asked how he manages balancing his professional work with being part of a community, Sami responded: *'I try to make clear I am wearing very different hats.'* Sami noted the need to be explicit from the outset about which hat he is wearing. This clear delineation helps Sami separate different aspects of what he does and helps him deal with potential conflicts of interest. *'One example is Afghan Independence Day. When I go on stage, I want to be speaking on behalf of the Afghan community in Australia, as a community leader. People shouldn't be thinking "Sami works for Mosaic, Mosaic think this, and that." Before I stand on the stage, I make it clear that I'm wearing my community leader hat.'*

> ***'I'm very tough. I have faced things and never given up. But sometimes it makes you sad. We have good managers here. There are supports available for us as well.'***

Sami notes this mindfulness extends to social media, television, radio, and other platforms that lived experience workers might use in their capacity as community representatives or community leaders. Understanding and clarifying these boundaries can support lived experience settlement workers as they navigate their professional work and community roles.

Being mindful of staff trauma

Sami discussed how a settlement worker's job is to listen to people's experiences. This includes their stories of their countries of origin, their journeys of displacement, and hardships during settlement: *'That they've been arrested by the Taliban, that their house has been looted. But if someone tells me their story, it takes me back to my story. This is a challenge for me... Listening to their stories that are similar to my story and what I've been through in Afghanistan.'*

After listening to challenging stories, Sami speaks with his managers. Sami stressed the importance of proper debriefing between staff, both those with lived experience but also all staff and others at their work.

The organisation and team culture are centrally important in supporting lived experience workers. *'Here, if you need help or support, you can easily ask your colleague. There is good access to managers, and good access to our CEO. Our CEO is standing right there and is always open to talk. And when we do any casework or settlement activities, we have calls and debriefs right away. Leadership listens to us. Then, if someone really needs additional support, they offer additional support. As a manager, it's someone who always follows up with you, asks you what happened, and what support do you need. For someone who has experienced trauma, debriefs after each activity are really important.'*

Culturally-appropriate and responsive organisations

Beyond structured debriefs and staff wellbeing support, Sami notes there are other important considerations for organisations to support lived experience workers. *'Many organisations are working with Muslim communities. If an organisation is running an all-day orientation program for a group of new arrivals who are Muslim, then they need to have a prayer room. They need to have an ablution space. If you're inviting someone for a full day, they need to pray five times a day. In Australian culture, throwing water on the floor of the bathroom is not a good idea. But while taking ablution, that will happen.'* Sami highlighted the case of a local Newcastle hospital that created a prayer room, which then led to a strong connection with local communities and hospital patients. *'Local Australian staff and caseworkers are doing [respectful and culturally intelligent work]. But it's also good to have cultural advisors or workers who can explain what can be done, people's responsibilities, and how to be sensitive to people's religious and cultural practices.'* Sami highlighted that beyond the settlement sector, people are enhancing culturally-responsive practices for Australia's diverse populations in many areas, which includes settlement staff advocating for and supporting changes in mainstream services. Yet Sami notes that building safe and inclusive environments, *'in our own house, as a sector, first'* is important. This extends to making the sector safe for a wide range of diverse cultures and religions, but also for people with disabilities, older people, young people, women, men and diverse identities. The settlement sector can lead the way forward.

Chapter 07

‘No matter how many years it’s been, there’s always a part of you that’s living back home’

Zoraida Salazar

Senior Multicultural Youth Worker

Saanya Chawla

Multicultural Youth Worker

Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY)
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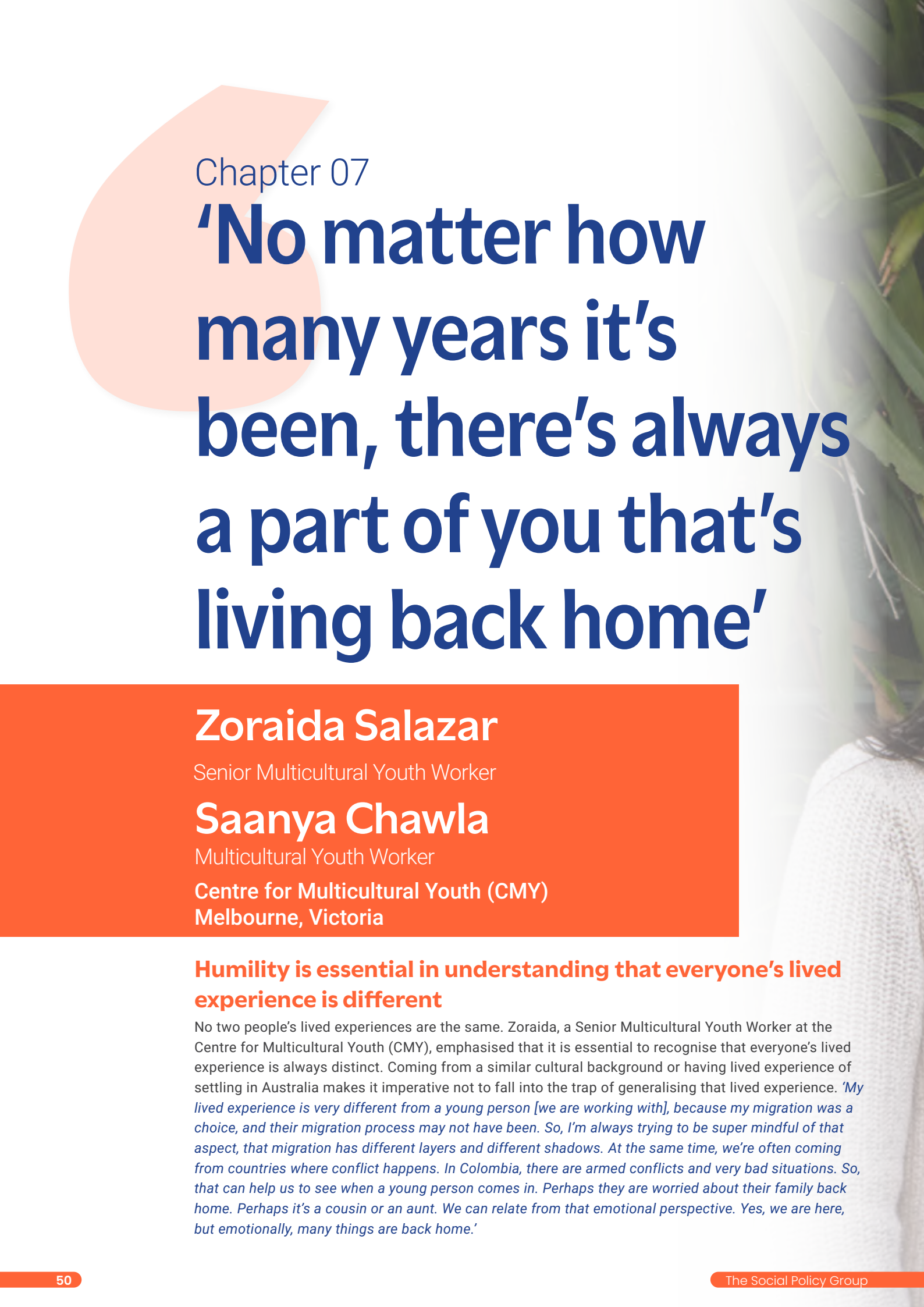

Humility is essential in understanding that everyone’s lived experience is different

No two people’s lived experiences are the same. Zoraida, a Senior Multicultural Youth Worker at the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), emphasised that it is essential to recognise that everyone’s lived experience is always distinct. Coming from a similar cultural background or having lived experience of settling in Australia makes it imperative not to fall into the trap of generalising that lived experience. *‘My lived experience is very different from a young person [we are working with], because my migration was a choice, and their migration process may not have been. So, I’m always trying to be super mindful of that aspect, that migration has different layers and different shadows. At the same time, we’re often coming from countries where conflict happens. In Colombia, there are armed conflicts and very bad situations. So, that can help us to see when a young person comes in. Perhaps they are worried about their family back home. Perhaps it’s a cousin or an aunt. We can relate from that emotional perspective. Yes, we are here, but emotionally, many things are back home.’*

Lived experience creates a safe space to be inclusive and get conversations going, to dive deeper… and in some places, the conversations don't even need to happen at all.

- Saanya

Coordinating and working with young refugees and migrants

Zoraida coordinates the Settling Smarter program at CMY. She originally migrated from Colombia in 2018 to study in Australia and has since decided to stay, contributing her skill set to the youth settlement and multicultural space. Day-to-day, Zoraida coordinates CMY youth activities, the employment mentoring program, youth group sessions, casework, external referrals, eligibility assessments, and service delivery with the CMY settlement team.

Zoraida is joined by Saanya, who also arrived in Australia in 2018. Saanya came to Australia to study as an international student and has since completed both a Bachelor and a Master of Social Work. As a multicultural youth worker at CMY, working in the Settling Smarter program, Saanya now runs youth group sessions at English schools in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs, alongside low- and medium-intensity casework.

Relatability and rapport

Lived experience of migrating to Australia and knowing what it was like to newly arrive in the country helps Zoraida and Saanya relate to how young refugees and migrants might feel. It also helps young people relate to them.

From that shared space, lived experience workers can give professional advice informed by what they went through.

> ***'We reflect that there are two broad types of young people settling in Australia. There are, of course, many different types, but at a very general level, we often see high-goal achievers who want to have everything done in their first year after arrival: learn English, go to university, get a professional job. And then there are young people who feel they just don't know what to do. While we don't have the exact same experiences, the feelings and the opportunities can be similar. That can help us manage frustrations.'***
> ***- Zoraida***

Zoraida continued: *'For the high goal achiever, calming down, taking things step-by-step. It's a process. We're not going to solve everything all at once. Things will take time. And for the young person who doesn't know what to do, it's okay not to know! Again, it's a process.'*

Having been through those similiar processes helps build rapport. *'I can share some of the tools that have worked for me,'* Zoraida highlighted. *'Young people find it very useful, understanding that while they might want to find a job straightaway, perhaps we need to improve our English first. What are the steps? And planning that out with them.'* This can often be connected back to Zoraida's own lived experience, using examples, and then saying: *'How are we going to do this together?'*

Laying out a series of steps can help young people who might be thinking that settlement is too much and an overwhelming number of things to do. *'So, how to ground it in the material, simple steps,'* stated Zoraida.

This helps young refugees and migrants relate to lived experience workers with a feeling of safety. Zoraida recounted that, *'Young people will often say: "Oh, you've had similar things go on!"'*

Role models to navigate family dynamics and settlement anxieties

'If anyone asks me, what's the one skill that you practice every day? It is lived experience: understanding, sharing, and utilising culturally nuanced knowledge,' Saanya reflected.

'Luckily, being based in Melbourne's south-east, I'm working closely with cultures that have similarities to Indian culture: Afghans, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans. And the young people, they'll ask "India?", and will immediately start talking about things right after. They see the colour of my skin, know you come from a specific culture, and it can create trust and rapport. Lived experience creates a safe space to be inclusive and get conversations going, to dive deeper… and in some places, the conversations don't even need to happen at all. It's understanding family dynamics. For example, the academic pressures. It's understanding things that are unsaid. Seeing yourself with a very hard lens, thinking: "I'm not worth this country. I have to be white, amazing at English." So when someone can be a role model and say: "I didn't know a word of English, I was stuttering when I came here, and look where I am now." You see that glimmer, and young people come up and ask: "Can you please help me do the same?"'

What things are unsaid?

'We often come from families where it's predominantly the male who is the head of the family; they make decisions, while female voices are viewed as more submissive. Then there are certain career goals, expectations not to go out [to pubs and clubs].

That's where the whole duality of culture crashes. And the kid just feels so sandwiched. It's like: "I am in Australia now, I want to wear these clothes, I want to go out. But why is my family still in Pakistan mentally? How do I figure this out?"

'I reply: "Look, I don't have a handbook. But we can do this together." There must be this understanding that we don't have a magical wand. There must often be compromises. There are ways of dealing with your parents, talking to them. A young person I was working with was finding it hard to go to mosque every single Friday with his dad. But then we found out that for his dad, it's really important. It's how he was building a relationship for his son. So, it was coming to terms and being sensitive to things, without making too much friction and volatility in the house.'

Academic and career pressures

Saanya and Zoraida reflected on the academic pressures and family dynamics that refugees and migrants (as well as young lived experience staff) often face. They discussed how, in the CMY settlement group sessions, they actually build lived experience into the settlement program itself. Saanya outlined: *'Every week in our sessions, we each build on our own stories. We do storytelling sessions based on specific themes. For example, last term, we did education and employment.'*

Within education and employment stories, Saanya was able to address career expectations. Some young people felt channelled towards manual labour. Others were burdened with pressures to pursue careers in prestigious fields like medicine.

'The young people have been in Australia for just a few months, so their mindset is often what they have seen online or heard from their Afghan extended family, who have been living here for many years. So, you might hear, "Factory work or selling vegetables," or "Doctor, engineer." Across every brown culture, doctors, dentists, it is elite, you're talking money!'

The immigrant tropes of expected career pathways and professions, such as those in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), are often what migrant parents project onto their children, though from a well-meaning place, often placing pressures on young refugees and migrants. These aspirations value financial stability and security, especially after they have left everything behind to build brighter futures for their children or have fled conflict. These expected career pathways juxtaposed with those such as art, theatre, social work, and others, which are considered *'taboo,'* with cultural perceptions and expectations that people cannot build stable careers in these areas.

In the sessions, the CMY facilitators would then share their own lived experience stories. Saanya explained: *'Then they have two people of colour with lived experience telling real-life stories, with facts. We're not motivating TEDx talkers. We're literally telling you, "We did this." I wanted to become a doctor. I'm doing social work. I'm earning, I have a car. It's possible. We have young people who say, "I took music at school…", and it's okay. So, that's when you start having conversations. They come up to you after class and ask, "Can I be a pilot? I've really been thinking about it…" Yes! It's where we can break stereotypes, you can start conversations and expand understanding of so much potential this country has to offer them [and they have to offer this country].'*

Diversity in settlement teams is a key strength

The diversity in the settlement workforce is a major strength. Staff who are also representative of the communities that the sector works with are important in recruitment, retention, and leadership progression. *'An Afghan can say, "This is the situation." This helps the team know how to better respond,'* Saanya noted. Zoraida gave another example: *'We had a young person experiencing family violence. They didn't want to talk about it in English. But luckily, we had a Lebanese staff member, and the young person had the space and safety to open up.'*

Diversity beyond settlement teams is a key need

While the majority of the settlement sector has lived experience, Saanya said this diversity must extend to other important areas so that young people can see positive role models. This includes teachers, police, and political leaders, who can then engage with young people from positions of leadership, giving help and guidance to refugees and migrants.

Understanding hidden language: seeing conflict and tension between community members

Lived experience workers will often understand, *'Hidden language, non-verbal language that you cannot identify in a normal conversation… and even non-visible things that are hard to identify,'* as Zoraida explained.

Saanya agreed. *'There are so many cultures in Australia. As beautiful as it is, it is sometimes really hard to understand all of the nitty gritty - you can't. I personally cannot know everything that's happening in every country. We're so lucky to have a youth facilitator who speaks Dari and Pashto. What sounded like just kids poking fun at each-other, banter and having fun… The youth facilitator understood it was worse than that, discrimination, kids from [one ethnic background] being silenced by the other. You realise you are not the right person to take charge of this. You step back. To get someone from the same culture, in their own language, to come in and say: "Look, not cool.'"* Conversely, sometimes having people from outside of the culture (and lived experience) can be helpful: approaching it with curiosity, without judgement, and noting that despite people coming from different communities and histories, *'we are here today, and all of us need to come together, work together on what we are doing here.'* Both Saanya and Zoraida noted that while challenging, it is very important to have these conversations.

Outside of direct work with clients, the diversity of this knowledge also shapes organisational policies and the way programs are designed and delivered.

Youth is a component of lived (or living) experience

It is not just migration and settlement that constitute lived experience. Having young people as facilitators or delivering programs is also important. *'The participants of the program feel even more related to them because it's similar ages, similar backgrounds,'* reflected Zoraida.

'Lived experience… It's a blessing, it can sometimes be a curse'

Settlement staff are constantly navigating sensitive issues around client data and safeguarding. Saanya noted: *'Because we work with young people who have just come to Australia, they might not understand the Australian workforce, environment, and expected ethics. We're always highlighting confidentiality. And also why I need to know where a young person is living, if they are feeling safe. Even if it's just for a sports referral! I really struggle with these questions. Because their face tells me: "Why are you asking? If there's problems in the home? Should there be a problem?'"*

Lived experience staff also often feel a blurring of borders.

> ***'Sometimes, what happens, coming from the same culture, there might be a blurriness of what you are. They might just consider you as a friend. I have had WhatsApp messages on weekends. I have had people asking, "Why aren't you answering me? Please answer!" People have said, "Come home, have tea with my family." You appreciate the gratitude and amount of trust that is there, but you do have to clarify. It's very important, because I'm sure many [young refugees and migrants] have never heard of it before in their countries, with safety protocols, child safety. It really helps by clarifying it first.'***

Conflict abroad: *'No matter how many years it's been, there's always a part that's living back home.'*

Many settlement staff maintain close links with countries of origin, with family, friends, and emotional connections outside of Australia. Zoraida intimated, *'That can also impact our work. We need to acknowledge that, because we are also humans.'*

Saanya echoed this with her own personal experience: *'Your home, you walk with it. There have been some really horrific terrorist attacks, and back and forth conflict between India and Pakistan recently. I had to take some time off work because it hit home soil. Personally, you are in a position where you have to give unconditional, positive regard to someone. But mentally, that guilt of not being home… Knowing that your family are in these situations.'*

There is a strange dissonance that settlement staff have to navigate in these situations between alarming conditions elsewhere and what can feel like more mundane issues at work. *'I straight up thought, "I wish I were a youth worker in India right now." That's where my heart went. There is so much suffering. And here, it felt like I was just going the next day to deliver a session on high school subjects. That's not meant to sound sad or rude. It just felt wrong to me. But you realise how important it is in that moment, when a young person says something about what a difference you have made for them. You understand: "Now you are here for the good of people. No matter where you are, you're doing the right thing, and you're doing it for people."'*

Giving grace when people can be antagonistic

Conflict abroad can also sharpen antagonisms in Australia. This often impacts settlement staff directly. Saanya discussed the conflict between Pakistan and India, how personally affecting it was, and reflected: *'Then I'm going into class with a majority of Afghan and Pakistani students, and I'm overhearing some conversations that I don't necessarily accept or don't align with my values. That's where the whole ethical dimension comes in… They're not adults, they're still adolescents. Half of what they're saying might be coming from home. They're still building their [worldview]. If anything is disturbing them regarding what is happening, it's just a child that I'm talking to. And any and every child in this world needs support. It's unsettling because war, in any country, is not good; it's never the answer. I'm not bringing my political opinions on anything when it comes to situations like this. It's just humanity. For us, as social workers. I answer: "So many young people are losing their lives." Then it turns into a conversation that helps both of us. At the end, we both agree that it's not good. I'm glad someone in my physical environment right now knows this.'*

Flexible and supportive supervisors and leadership

When there is conflict abroad affecting staff, organisational support comes to the fore. With Saanya's family in the middle of conflict, it was hard to be switched on at all times while also hearing about the conflict in classrooms and group sessions. *'But having amazing supervisors like Zoraida, I get that break.'*

Managers, supervisors, and organisational leadership play a principal role in creating supportive environments. Leaders create safe spaces where people can be vulnerable and be supported through challenging times, to be able to be their best selves, both as workers but also as people.

Saanya found that this open dialogue between leadership, management, and staff builds amazing environments and safe spaces where staff can be vulnerable and not feel guilty. Zoraida noted that flexible, supportive leadership is important; otherwise, staff might feel like they have to keep showing up and not take breaks. Both Zoraida and Saanya light-heartedly, but poignantly, discussed how this support and these conditions first came as a bit of a shock when juxtaposed with what might be experienced elsewhere. *'When I was first told, I thought, "Oh? You don't want to fire me?" Because, of course, in Colombia, not everywhere is like that. So, it was shocking, in a good way, to see how good the conditions were,'* reflected Zoraida. Saanya added, *'I hadn't ever heard of mental health leave. I remember thinking, "What is that?"'* It is an implicit part of the settlement sector to create safe spaces for refugees and migrants, and it is both a testament and reminder that this extends to staff who comprise the sector.

> ***'When we knew about the situation in India, we had a team meeting. I mentioned to Saanya, "Look, we know what's happening." I didn't want to say too many things, because I wanted to be careful around what might be painful or how much trigger someone. But offering, "If you need to take time off, if there is too much case work, if there is something else, we can look for strategies." I feel like, as a team, we need to be super flexible. That comes from leadership. Someone told the Team Leader, "Look, this is happening in my family, this is happening in my country, I'm not feeling well today." He said, "Just take care of yourself, you don't have to worry about work right now." I think, when organisations have this leadership, this type of support, it helps all of us to be more supportive of our coworkers. [CMY's] CEO will make an address, send an email, give an update about what is happening in the world, the organisation's position and why, but also her own position as a migrant, as a woman. She always reminds supervisors to be supportive of staff and that there is no other way except to be supportive. It comes from top leadership and goes down to make the organisation very supportive.'***
> ***- Zoraida***

I've faced those same challenges. I've lost my way so many times, holding my phone out, trying to follow directions. I saw women with no English, no literacy, no digital skills, and I absolutely understood how hard and scary it was for them.

Chapter 08

‘That made me really tough and confident in my life’

Fahima Ahmadi

Former Community Liaison Officer

Australian Migrant Resource Centre (AMRC)
Adelaide, South Australia

Fahima Ahmadi fled Afghanistan in 2021, relocating to Adelaide, South Australia. Fluent in Urdu, Hindi, and Persian, she worked with the Australian Migrant Resource Centre (AMRC) for three years, finishing there in June 2025. At AMRC, Fahima supported South Asian and Afghan communities restarting their lives across the Greater Adelaide Metropolitan Area. Fahima brought to her role direct lived refugee experience with a strong gendered lens, which was shaped by her earlier work as an interpreter for coalition forces in Afghanistan, and her disorienting experiences of settling in Australia. Alongside her prior work at AMRC, Fahima was studying Women’s Leadership at TAFE.

Shaky beginnings

'Maybe a caseworker might have thought, "Oh, it's just a Medicare card, or a Centrelink form, basic stuff." But for the person who's just arrived? They had no idea.'

Even with strong English skills, Fahima struggled with basic Australian system navigation when she arrived. Using public transport, accessing services, and completing forms were difficult. Harder still was trying to work things out alone. *'We were evacuees... For a month, no one approached me… I started to think, "I'm starting life here... and I'm completely confused.'"*

This confusing and isolated start shaped Fahima's approach to settlement work. She took an open-minded, empathetic and practical approach to supporting newly arrived women and families and was careful not to take anything for granted: she paid careful attention to the seemingly simple, small details, building her clients' systems-navigation skills.

Strength and confidence: the inheritance of lived experience

Fahima shared, *'Newcomers [refugees] in the office, they saw me, like, "Oh, she's very strong."'* She attributed her strength and confidence to her experience working as an interpreter for coalition forces in Afghanistan. Fahima was often the only woman in male-dominated spaces that operated in conflict zones.

'Working with them as the only woman… wearing armour, a helmet, sitting in their big, big tanks. Going to the police, to ministries… that made me really tough and confident in my life.'

Fahima said she no longer gets easily embarrassed or feels shy in front of new people. Fahima explained that she was pushed to grow when she had to navigate extreme environments on her own. Her attitude and her beliefs evolved. In her previous role in settlement, Fahima took a clear and direct tone with clients. Her confidence was a beacon for her other coworkers, as well as for clients who often felt confused, afraid, or uncertain.

A gendered lens

Fahima's forced displacement and settlement journey gave her an awareness of what newly arrived women were navigating in their day-to-day life, particularly those who were constrained by cultural expectations. *'Some Afghan women are still living in the same bubble; same dress, same beliefs, same way of life. They don't know what's available here, or they're too scared to ask.'*

Fahima explained that new arrivals needed someone who understood not just what they were saying (their language), but what they were not saying (their silence). Fahima's gender, cultural background, and warm nature enabled her to build unique and trusting relationships with her clients.

'It's not in our culture to talk about what's happening inside the house. [Women from our culture] don't trust easily. It really needs to be someone who speaks our language and is a woman. When they heard me talking in their own language, and saw that I'm a woman, they relaxed. That's when they opened up.'

Through women-only sewing groups and informal learning circles, Fahima created spaces for confidence to blossom and conversations to naturally grow. *'They came for sewing, and then they talked - "Oh okay, I have a problem with… how to handle my finances in Australia, how to get my licence, how to buy a second-hand car." A lot of information, they got it from the community.'* Sessions were facilitated so that they could evolve into discussions about family roles and domestic violence. It was here that safe and secure environments were created so that culturally sensitive conversations could take place.

Building bridges

Fahima was kept busy not just by her settlement work, but also by her community work. She engaged and organised events for seniors and elderly people from the Afghan community. *'Many of them don't do anything at home, and their family members are often too busy; the kids are at school, the others are working, so they don't have much time for them. We tried to engage them.'*

Fahima also volunteered her time organising cultural events and led her wider community. To her, important cultural celebrations offered continuity, which, for many, helped them process the grief and start to move on.

> ***'Here, in Australia, we try to keep our own culture alive. For example, during Eid or Nowruz festivals, or any other celebrations we used to have in our countries, we try to organise small gatherings during that time, whenever we can find a weekend.'***
>
> ***'It's difficult for some people to accept change. But this way, they can keep something of themselves while also learning to live here.'***

Fahima worked hard to link community members to community groups. In this way, Fahima encouraged her community to embrace tradition and change.

A positive aspect of previously working in a professional role and doing community work was that they overlapped. By the time community members arrived at her desk looking for professional support, she often knew and understood them through community groups, events, and celebrations.

Service provider, fellow community member, leader?

Overlapping roles brought challenges too. To her community, Fahima was a friend, a leader and a settlement service worker. This fostered trust and made Fahima both an informed and nuanced settlement practioner, as well as a connected community leader. However, there were challenging aspects that came with the intersections of professional, political and personal worlds.

> ***'When you met them in the community, of course, you weren't a worker then. You're just Fahima. So, they came up to you and they were very friendly, offering food, inviting you to their houses… But then, when they came to the office, they expected a bit more of an "overwhelming" approach from me. And for me, that was a bit difficult, because I really wanted to treat all my clients the same.'***

Fahima explained that if boundaries were mismanaged and expectations were not mutually understood, it could have strained community bonds. *'Especially when you got busy. Then they lost that connection a bit. I found it challenging sometimes to help them realise and understand that the work area was different from the community work.'*

Empathy and its emotional demands

Fahima pointed to the importance of mental health support for service providers themselves. She noted that the nature of her prior settlement work often involved listening to complex, emotionally charged stories. Clients frequently confided in her because of shared experience and cultural familiarity, and while this trust was essential, it also placed emotional demands on workers. *'To listen to every type of story, every day… and then not get emotional and help [your clients] with the right services. That was the important part... I'm not a mental health provider. I haven't studied psychology, but I have experience with things and how I handled them, I passed that on.'*

Fahima highlighted that the cumulative effect of displacement and settlement conversations over time can be significant. This calls for workplace cultures to continue to recognise the importance of debriefing, emotional support, and reflection, and to provide opportunities and guidance around each.

Flexible and client-led service models

Fahima emphasised the need for structured systems that support caseworkers to deliver responsive, client-led services. Rather than taking a standardised, tick-box approach, she supported models that begin with listening and allowing clients to define their own priorities. Not all families are at the same point in their settlement journey, and their needs vary based on family structure, cultural background, trauma, and individual confidence.

By supporting settlement services and case workers with systems that are flexible and client-led, Fahima was confident that the sector would be able to better meet clients where they are, allowing workers to focus less on administrative compliance and more on building meaningful, tailored support.

Pathways to development and leadership

Often, due to her experience and her previous role, Fahima was seen as a pillar of strength. This could also mean that clients compared their settlement journeys to hers, minimising their own achievements. For Fahima, it was important that the people she worked with understood that she had her own shortfalls and that they had their own strengths. *'I tried to show them the strengths they had, that I didn't. I wanted them to feel empowered too.'*

> ***'One day, the teacher said, "Analyse yourself. What kind of feminist are you?" I still don't know what type of feminist I am… All I know is that I try to sit in the places where there are people who have more experience than me, with the same background. Especially at AMRC, there were people there who had been working for 20, 30 years.'***

Fahima was still learning herself, shaping her future in Australia. She was studying women's leadership at TAFE and was continually striving to learn from her colleagues at AMRC, some with decades of experience.

Fahima reflected that her passion to pursue education and leadership stemmed from her family. Her family valued and encouraged her learning, something not all women in her community have experienced.

'I belong to a family who were open-minded enough to send their daughters to schools and universities, and to work. But there are a lot of people who are still living in Australia, and they believe that women are not supposed to go to work or study, they believe women do not need it.'

The settlement sector has a role to play in nurturing the aspirations of its workers. For the sector to harness the true value and potential of lived experience workers, the sector can offer sustained support and opportunities such as mentorship, training, education, and pathways to leadership.

The gift of time

Fahima's reflections revealed the power and pressure of being a worker with lived experience. When asked about the future of settlement in Australia, Fahima offered a final thought:

> ***'I can't actually talk on behalf of all refugees… Experiences vary, and settlement is different at different times. Looking to the future, I would say: we all need a bit more time. For clients to speak and settlement providers to listen... Of course, they are afraid. They don't know what's going to happen to them here.'***

Chapter 09

Connecting two worlds: community and professional services

Kenny Duke

Community Connection and Wellbeing Lead

SSI
Logan, Queensland

Kenny Duke has over 20 years of experience in community services and the settlement sector in Queensland. Kenny is working as the Community Connections and Wellbeing Lead for SSI (previously Access Community Services). Kenny also sits on the MYAN Australia executive through Multicultural Youth Queensland (MyQ). Originally from El Salvador, Kenny arrived in Australia as a refugee with her parents and brothers.

When I present or do talks on refugee journeys, I start with, "This is what makes me, me, and this is what has influenced my values and perspectives." Some of my professional human services, some of my lived experience, some of the migration journey of my family, the impact of my father having a disability, this helped shape my advocacy so that people understand this is not something that you can just cookie cut.

Recognising unique and varied lived experiences

According to Kenny, lived experience drives good settlement practices. Workers who have experienced displacement and settlement themselves are an asset to a busy sector that strives to support vulnerable and diverse refugees and migrants with complex needs. Beyond this, lived experience is also crucial when informing policy and program design. Kenny discussed chairing and co-chairing leadership tables, and the power of bringing lived experience and specialist insights into decision-making realms.

No community is the same, no conflict is the same, and no displacement and settlement journey is the same. Some communities have more pronounced and longer experiences in refugee camps, while others have histories of political persecution, which can shape settlement differently. Hence, the sector and policymakers need to be careful to understand this and not treat one perspective as sufficient or all-encompassing. There are dangers to jumping to conclusions, Kenny warned. Kenny was adamant that many different people's lived experiences are needed to inform settlement decisions. *'You can't generalise.'*

> ***'I often see that danger when people talk about communities and policy and say, "We should do things just like that!" Would that work for a mother who was never allowed to learn to read or write, and lived in a camp for 20 years? That's a very different perspective to someone whose family has come with long professional experience, fleeing a different conflict... So, I'm always very clear: "This is my perspective, this is my lived experience, and it is very different to other people's lived experience."'***

Intersectional lived experiences and safety

There are also different intersections of lived experience. There are lived experiences of displacement, settlement, and cultural and linguistic diversity; there are lived experiences of different genders, disabilities and queer identities. Even within the same community, lived experiences will be markedly different based on this intersectionality. For example, an older heterosexual man and a young queer woman may navigate very different settlement journeys in Australia. *'Intersectionality is very, very important in all the work that we do.'*

Taking an intersectional lens is important for safety. For women who experience DFV along their settlement journeys, they require settlement supports that take not just a lens of cultural safety, but also one of gendered safety, as they may not feel emotionally or physically safe within their communities. It is crucial that clients are supported to make the choices that feel right for them.

Kenny spoke about the fact that each intersectional experience is likely to be a little different, and stressed that settlement workers should do their best to respond to each unique case.

Understanding diverse and unique lived experiences amongst settlement staff themselves is also crucial for settlement organisations and the wider sector. *'There is a danger in trying to replicate people. Everyone comes from different shapes and experiences. So, it is important to give that frame first. I was taught to do that through years of community development work, where I was able to draw from all of these learnings to shape my practice.'*

The weight of responsibility to community

> ***'Whenever there's a housing issue, a real crisis, you get brought in as someone that is trusted and has a relationship. We hear the word 'connector' a lot. And it is navigating both those worlds: understanding community, but then also being able to navigate systems.'***

Connecting the two worlds of community life and professional services means that lived experience workers will often be fielding late-night phone calls and requests for support outside of formal working hours. Kenny reflected on her position as a community member and service provider in the community and said with a laugh, *'Yep, the El Salvadoreans... they call you!'*

Kenny noted that because she speaks Spanish, beyond the El Salvadorean community, she is also contacted by Cubans, Colombians, Venezuelans, and other Central and South American communities. Kenny cautioned that *'there is that expectation to give back, which we do... but it's not really something you can push back on.'* These expectations come from several places: Kenny explained that some of her clients do not understand why you are not giving advice that is not part of your service area, or why you are setting boundaries with clients who try to contact you after work hours. *'Community don't always understand [why you can't provide advice such as on visas], when they are in a crisis situation, and they just want someone to help them out.'*

Furthermore, sometimes boundaries are difficult to maintain because settlement staff feel responsible for supporting people as community leaders and peers. *'Many community leaders [working in settlement] may not understand everything about how different service systems work. Such people do run a real risk of giving "too much" advice, giving too much information, putting a view or stance on certain things. It can be very difficult.'*

Kenny explained that being a trusted leader in the community and a known professional in the settlement space can be a busy and heavy load. Kenny spoke about what it can be like to be a 'go-to' for community and settlement workers.

> ***'A potential difference with my lived experience to others, is [that] we are not so formalised in Spanish-speaking and Latin American communities. We don't have structured leadership within our communities. It is more whoever can help you. It might be that someone is a lawyer, or someone works in the community space. So, every community is different. Some are very formally structured. They have elders and leaders. Others are more governed by faith leadership. For me, our family was one of the first that settled here. There was an expectation that you will mentor anyone else that comes. So, there is a lot of pressure on those first families. Similarly, if you've got smaller communities, there are similar expectations and pressures, especially if there's limited interpreters; you can feel guilty, if you say no. Is this going to mean they're going to be homeless? Does this mean they're never going to be reunited with their family? Does this mean they're never going to get a roof over their head? I've had to really learn to accept that, from a professional aspect, but that it can be really difficult to separate.'***

More than the sum of their parts

Kenny reflected on her social, political and professional roles. She said that inherently, these can't always remain distinct, and nor should they. *'You can't take the Kenny who is employed with SSI, to the community leader Kenny, to the Kenny who is a mum. I am still me.'*

Kenny believes that we need to be more accepting of grey areas, so that people can bring their full selves to both settlement work and community work. *'How do we be more accepting that it's okay to work for a settlement organisation, have lived experience, and you do have community? There can be too much boxing in, and that's sometimes a very western lens of "professional ethics," of not being able to cross boundaries.'* Kenny knows that there are risks and that safety for community and staff is paramount, but believes a balance must be struck. Kenny values *'speaking from holistic perspectives, rather than changing hats all the time.'* When roles and identities cannot be neatly separated: *'We need more safe spaces to have hard conversations. What we are talking about is that lived experience is valued, but also understanding where it can be a burden.'*

Culturally safe spaces for settlement workers

Kenny noted that the settlement space is a safe space for people to bring and demonstrate their lived experience of migration and displacement. While organisations outside of settlement offer learnings for the sector, such as a focus on continual training to upskill their staff in different professional development areas, conversely, lived experience workers in other fields might find that they are *'boxed-in'*, given a disproportionate share of clients from diverse backgrounds, or the most challenging. On the other end of the spectrum, some workers feel their lived experience and multiculturalism are invisible, or should be hidden.

> ***'For instance, lawyers, or others working outside the settlement sector, their lived experience can sometimes not even be considered. They may feel they have to behave in certain ways and not show so much of their culture. So, I feel privileged that I can bring those perspectives into my work.'***

What Kenny believes the settlement sector gets right is building up the confidence of its staff by valuing where they have come from and what experiences they have had. Kenny spoke about the positive differences she has witnessed in some of her colleagues, those she works with or manages, as they begin to understand that their lived experiences are strengths that can benefit their work, clients and communities.

'That was an interesting experience, helping build the confidence of some of the staff that I work with. And to go, "Well, actually, that lived experience is gold." The fact that you can speak five languages, that's amazing. And the fact that you're working not only with your community, but a lot of different marginalised communities from Myanmar, that's amazing.'

Getting comfortable with discomfort

How can the settlement sector and organisations better equip and support workers with lived experience? Safe spaces should not be tokenistic, but genuine spaces of safety where people can be authentic. *'Genuine safe spaces mean that sometimes people will speak and share challenging perspectives. How are we going to work through that? As soon as you feel judgement, that is not a safe space... We've had training, and a couple of my staff asked questions, genuine questions from experiences they have seen in their communities on specific topics, and you could immediately feel a sort of judgement. That was not a safe space for my staff... It might not sound like a big deal, but it was because staff will feel like they cannot speak up or ask questions. It's a big thing for experienced managers who are facilitating these conversations.'*

Creating and nurturing spaces where lived experience workers and all settlement staff can grow takes concerted effort. Kenny believes that debriefing and external supervision are important because of vicarious trauma. Kenny also believes that representation and diversity within organisations make a big difference; representation and diversity bring people with different perspectives and experiences together, providing accessible and safe spaces for diverse staff.

Kenny highlighted the significance of support provided by mentors and leaders in the sector. She commended the mentors who consciously create safe spaces for people, encouraging them to be their authentic selves, and supporting workers' development and aspirations.

Addressing gaps in organisational and sector knowledge through diverse perspectives

Kenny noted that while everyone is capable of empathy, lived experience can cultivate a distinct kind of empathy that is an important lens in the sector. We are more likely to understand or share the feelings of those who have lived through something similar to us, and when we understand, we are more likely to see the world and systems differently; to see things from new angles, to see other possibilities. *'I have often sat in meetings where people will say, "Oh, that's not an issue." But it is a blatant issue. So, it can be hard to see it unless you've gone through it yourself.'* Rather than a knock against people who do not have particular lived experiences, this is an embrace of the idea that diversity can address blind spots, bringing different perspectives and knowledge to situations and organisations.

Bridging theory and practice

Kenny is a firm believer that lived experience should be undergirded by theoretical frameworks and systems-level knowledge. This is where formal training and qualifications come in. The lived experience settlement workforce needs support to elevate their experiences and skills.

> ***'For example, there is one settlement worker with lived experience of having children with disabilities and navigating that system. She's learned a lot through her navigation. But she also recognised she had to learn more about broader systems, to help other families navigate them. She recognised that she still needed further training to understand the wider health service system. So, there is your experience, but there's also bigger pieces to the puzzle.'***

Kenny highlighted the importance of community development frameworks, settlement foundations, and settlement approaches. Kenny cited examples of Peter Westoby and asset-based approaches. This knowledge should not be a prerequisite, but rather part of ongoing training and on-the-job learning. To Kenny, this is paramount to good settlement practices and building sector capacity.

Benefiting settlement and the wider community

'I definitely see in the settlement space, what a difference it makes when you have people from different worlds working for your team. That's why the teams are diverse. And that's why we are very good at what we do. We know having staff that are bilingual, that have a sense of those two worlds, that we've been able to train. It not only benefits the outcomes of the [settlement] program… It's benefiting the community in general.'

I think it's both beneficial and challenging. I think as a worker with lived experience, and someone who's out there in the community as well, you have to build a reputation of trust, honesty, and absolute confidentiality.

Chapter 10

Leading teams, listening to clients

Halia Rohany-Azizi

Team Leader, Settlement Caseworker

Australian Refugee Association (ARA)
Salisbury, Adelaide, South Austraila

Halia Rohany-Azizi began her career in settlement as a frontline bicultural caseworker at the Australian Refugee Association (ARA), drawing from her own lived experience to support refugee and migrant communities. Today, she plays a leadership role within the organisation, supervising a team of caseworkers and case managers from Bhutanese, Congolese, Colombian, and Afghan backgrounds, including Pashto-, Hazaragi-, and Dari-speaking communities. The team reflects the multicultural communities that it supports every day.

> ***'We've got leading communities that have established themselves. Also, emerging communities, such as the Spanish-speaking cohort. Their challenges are different… So, we have a dedicated worker who speaks the same language. And that makes it so much easier to connect with the community members.'***

The double-edged sword of lived experience

The shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds that Halia and her team share with their clients are their superpower. They foster connection, comfort, and provide a culturally safe space for clients to seek support. Lived experience also enables the team to anticipate their clients' needs. However, lived experience can also be a source of emotional strain. When staff have first-hand experience of displacement and settlement struggles, this is heavy work. When staff are unable to provide the support to clients that they themselves once urgently needed, this can be particularly distressing.

'Financial assistance towards [clients'] utility bills, topping up their rent payment, medical procedures that are not covered by Medicare… When you know it's a genuine request and there are not enough resources, it can be quite disheartening. Especially if you've also got a lived experience of those situations, or your family has lived through it as well.'

Boundaries in tight-knit communities

When bicultural workers are embedded in the communities that they support, challenges arise. As Halia puts it, *'information is sacred'* in settlement work. For some community workers, de-identifying a client is enough to protect their confidentiality when discussing work. In close communities, such as those that Halia and her team support, extra measures must be taken. Even if you de-identify a client, *'[The community] can pinpoint the person from the situation... Let's say you talk about DFV. The community may already be aware of who's going through DFV and who wants to separate. Communities can put two and two together: "Oh, yeah, this situation belongs to that family," without you intending to harm or disclose any of the client's personal details.'*

At this complex meeting place of community membership and community work, for Halia, professionalism and confidentiality are non-negotiable, both in and out of the office.

> ***'People already have a tough time finding their voice. For them to come to you, that means that they trust you. That means that they want to seek your support, and they are confident that you won't share or disclose the information unnecessarily. Especially, if we are working with vulnerable families in the community, especially ladies with young children. Their situation is already so vulnerable and sensitive, and to jeopardise something like that. It's absolutely, absolutely, a no-no.'***

Remittance and resilience

'For us to live a good life here, we need to make sure that [loved ones back home] are comfortable there as well. Otherwise, the trauma for us just multiplies.'

One of the most sensitive and recurring issues Halia encounters in her settlement work is the burden of remittances that falls onto her clients. Halia has worked with many clients who also carry the responsibility to send money back to their families abroad. However, many refugees and migrants who are responsible for the families they have left behind are suffering from their own financial strains here in Australia, in their new home.

'For a lot of our community members, obviously, they pay their rent and utilities, but [to afford remittances] they'll cut down on their medication. They will cut down on the social activities. In a lot of cases, I've seen some cut down their kids' soccer or sports in order to help support families back home. So, there are challenges, obviously, if you are coming here and leaving loved ones behind, there are multiple challenges. The cost of living currently doesn't help with rent increases, grocery increases, petrol increases, and so many other things as well. There's not enough to actually send back home. That's a trauma in itself for a lot of our family members.'

These are complicated issues that require culturally sensitive and trauma-informed approaches to support from settlement support workers. Lived experience has informed the way Halia and her team navigate remittance conversations with their clients.

> ***'[Until we know] that our loved ones back home can have food and clean water or a roof over their head in a comfortable bed and with a blanket, we won't be satisfied here.'***

Halia and her team know that caseworkers cannot ask their clients to stop sending remittances. Instead, the team work hard to strike the right balance between understanding the position that their clients are facing, whilst also working to ensure that those clients are able to look after themselves and support their own settlement. *'We have to do it in a very respectful way. My first reaction would be if you can't survive, don't send. But I can't say that because I know that trauma. Not sending, let's say, $50 or $100, knowing that your mum or your dad or your sibling can't afford food. We instead might ask: "What can you do so that you can send some money but also keep yourself happy and healthy here?" Usually, they are so resilient. They know exactly what to do. And how much to send to survive here.'*

Culture and belonging

Matching caseworkers and clients by language, faith, culture or even food customs can make all the difference to a settlement journey, particularly for newly arrived families. Finding the right match helps Halia and her team build connections, trust and rapport, allowing a client's unique background, situation and needs to be illuminated, so the right kinds of support can be pursued.

> ***'As the first point of contact, a familiar face, a familiar culture, and possibly a familiar religion, it's a comfort zone, there's a sense of belonging. When you have that connection, and down the track, of course, you have to meet mainstream communities. But I think initially, when they're starting off, there is a benefit of connecting people with their own community members, it's such a beneficial step along the settlement journey.'***

Peer support, training and supervision

Like all settlement teams, Halia and her team rely on peer support, training, and supervision to sustain complex and emotional workloads and to ensure best practice. *'All our team members have lived experience. They're absolutely knowledgeable about their community's needs. They know how to treat each subject sensitively and appropriately. And when they need support, they always come to me or senior workers to debrief.'*

Halia invests in her team's development through regular group and one-on-one training, Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program Community of Pratice (CoP) webinars, and case-based refreshers. Access to resources and support from leadership, she believes, is key to sustaining this workforce. *'Professional development absolutely improved people's skills… Sometimes, just to refresh their knowledge around what's available in the mainstream communities as well. And what's affecting our CALD communities.'*

Recognition and equity for settlement workers

There are many valuable skills that effective settlement workers need. Unfortunately, the skills and qualifications that refugees and migrants tend to bring are undervalued in Australia. For Halia, being multilingual or bi-cultural, having lived experience of displacement and settlement, or having related foreign work experience or foreign qualifications, are examples of typical skills and qualifications that refugees and migrants possess. However, industry requirements such as domestic work experience or domestic higher-education qualifications prevent many refugees and migrants from accessing higher-paying jobs. Despite their high level of skill and knowledge, for many refugees and migrants, formal recognition remains a challenge, barriers to foreign qualification transfer remain high, and pay levels remain low.

> ***'Qualified social workers will absolutely bring in theory, but bicultural workers with lived experience and community experience should be treated the same as well. There is definitely a pay gap. Just because you've got a degree compared to someone who has a diploma in community services, even though that community diploma holder may actually have all the experience and all the knowledge compared to someone who actually has the degree.'***

Non-linear settlement journeys

When asked about the future of settlement services, Halia reinforced the importance of the removal of the previous five-year limit on accessing Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program services.

'Within the first five years, especially with mothers with young children, their focus is on the family's journey and the family settlement, not on herself. The priority for the mother is for the children to be successful in their studies or enrolled in courses and sports activities, and for the husband to find work and learn English, while the mother doesn't prioritise herself. She is just juggling the family. After five years, what we see is a lot of young mothers come in and say, "Oh, I haven't learned English. I've been here nearly four and a half years." So that's four and a half years for them. It hasn't been lost. But the journey for the mother hasn't started to settle well, in Australia.' Halia's example reminds us of the reality that settlement journeys are complex, and even within one family, are highly varied. Ongoing SETS eligibility is critical to effectively support diverse refugee and migrant clients.

Being a refugee, there's a connection. Because you've gone through it. I wouldn't necessarily call it a skill. But it's a wider perspective. For people who are newly-arrived, once, I was in their shoes, so you can see what they're going through and assist them further.

Chapter 11

Supportive teams are the bedrock of effective settlement

Ninawa Nano

SETS Caseworker

Assyrian Resource Centre - Assyrian Australian Association
Fairfield, New South Wales

Ancient Assyrian cities, human rights, and the power of YouTube

Ninawa is an Assyrian refugee who arrived in Australia in 2016. Named after the ancient city of Nineveh and being born on the associated feast day, Ninawa shared that people in the community who see her name instantly know she is Assyrian.

Nine years after arriving in Australia, alongside her daily work as a settlement worker, Ninawa is studying Law and Human Rights. The settlement sector is abundant with stories like Ninawa's: diverse lived experiences, wide varieties of skills, and strong commitments to justice. Ninawa smiled as she reflected on some of her earliest memories in Australia, *'When I arrived in 2016, I didn't speak any English. YouTube was my friend while learning!'*

Those who aren't reached risk going without

Ninawa often thinks back to the time in her life when she first arrived in Australia; it motivates her settlement work. *'At the time, there were so many services available. But I didn't know about any of them.'* Ninawa's experience highlights a serious and ongoing problem in the settlement sector: that those who do not know about the essential and lifesaving supports available are likely to go without.

'I only know this now because of my position in settlement. A lot of the time, people need assistance but don't know how to access it. With our shared lived experience, I can give back to the community, because it's what I would have wanted when I first arrived.'

Connecting through lived experience

Along with inspiring Ninawa's passion for her day-to-day work, Ninawa's lived experience also helps her in other ways. *'Being a refugee myself, yes, at work, you have to be formal. But there's a connection. Because you've gone through similar experiences. It creates empathy and sympathy because you know people's needs.'*

Emotional tolls, a mentality of reflection, and seeking support

'A personal challenge can be the emotional toll.' Ninawa expressed the belief that it is human nature to feel the emotion of the person you are supporting, the person in front of you who is struggling, and who has gone through something extreme. To truly know, however, is something else. There is a flip side to genuinely understanding the hardships that some refugees and migrants have gone through. For lived experience settlement workers, it is both their greatest asset and their biggest challenge. *'People have gone through traumas. From my perspective, I won't generalise, that's the main challenge. That I can relate.'*

Ninawa emphasised that mindset and reflection are crucial in this regard. *'It helps address [the emotional toll]. Reflecting on the inside. As a worker. And the mentality: knowing that I'm going to face these things.'* Ninawa also talked about the importance of seeking support.

> ***'It's important to find out about support options for staff, about the help you can seek... You have to look after yourself to help others.'***

Tight-knit communities

Tight-knit communities are a lifeline. They are also a challenge. *'In the Assyrian community, people come up to you on the street and at the shops. Can you help me read this email? And in the community, it's rude to say no. Especially for older people. This isn't just professional work. We're part of the community as well. So you try to say to people, in a polite way, "Can you come to the office between 9 am and 5 pm during the week, and I can help you with that properly?"'*

Supportive team cultures

> ***'At Assyrian Resource Centre, well, you can see by the name. Most of us are refugees or migrants. We all support each other. We know the types of clients we work with. We have an open-door policy. When we see a colleague who needs help, we step in. In any way possible.'***

Ninawa highlighted a central pillar of life in the settlement sector: a connected and supportive team culture is the bedrock of all settlement work. It is just as important as the work itself.

The importance of collaboration

'Sometimes I've gone into sector meetings expecting to get knowledge to take back and share with clients. But then I found out information that was actually useful for staff. So the meetings, the information sessions, they're really important.' The importance of engaging and collaboration extends to policymakers. *'If there is a conference, we've been talking about how there is diverse staff across the community sector. Policymakers can sit down and work with settlement workers. Take questions and suggestions. What issues and needs are there for settlement workers themselves?'*

The key takeaway that Ninawa continually returned to was the importance of connection and collaboration across the entire sector, between settlement workers in all areas, at all levels. Ninawa emphasised the importance of opening up communication channels, so that clients and workers can *'find out about services, and how to access them.'* Ninawa exhorted the sector to continue collaboration and knowledge sharing for staff.

Ninawa credited her lived experience for where she is today. *'It's a passion. The only reason why I'm here, including my law and human rights backgrounds, what appealed to me was my own lived experience. Seeing there are opportunities. My lived experience has driven my passion.'*


…After going through so much as a refugee in the old country… I really wanted to be in a field to help others start a new life.

Chapter 12

Consulting settlement staff on policy and program design

Zeljka Prodanovic

SETS Team Leader

Multicultural Services Centre of Western Australia (MSCWA)
Perth, Western Australia

In August 1991, when the war broke out in her hometown, Zeljka Prodanovic fled and moved to another part of former Yugoslavia, where she lived as a refugee for over three years. In April 1995, she arrived in Australia under the Humanitarian Program for displaced people from former Yugoslavia. She started learning English and, after some thought, decided on a career path where she could help people start new lives.

> ***'I was a lawyer in my country, so I thought law was where I would finish a degree. But I realised in the very beginning that I would never be a good lawyer [in Australia], because you need perfect English skills. And not just to speak. You have to feel the language...'***

Zeljka finished her Diploma of Community Services, and was well-placed to support those newly arrived and restarting their lives.

Overcoming personal biases, connecting through shared trauma

Zeljka admitted that early on, it was challenging being a settlement support worker. After experiencing extreme loss and persecution, Zeljka recognised that it was hard not to generalise and blame certain groups of people. Zeljka had lost extended family to conflict, but considered herself lucky that her close family were alive, which might have helped her to be more open-minded.

> ***'You have your personal sad experience, and it's hard to stay rational and think, "Okay, that happened to me, but I can't blame every single person from that group and look at them as potentially harming me or my community members."'***

Zeljka pointed out that in her effort not to discriminate against clients from the major ethnic groups arriving in Australia: *'I always wanted to help those people [from other groups] more, because maybe deep down, I felt that I might somehow discriminate… I think I was pretty successful in that, because I definitely had clients from all the major [former Yugoslavia] ethnic groups… All the feedback that I received was really, really good. I really wanted to hear if I succeeded because it can be challenging. We are all humans, and it's not that easy, you know, when you were there, they were your "enemy." Then you come here, and within six months, you have to forget it all.'*

The common goal of starting again

Later on, as Zeljka started to work with refugees coming to Australia from other conflict zones, she would see her trauma mirrored, the grief that they carried, but importantly, the resilience to forge ahead and rebuild. *'…Refugees are generally very resilient and forgiving. They move on. Life goes on. They start a new life, and they can, and they are willing to socialise or to work with other people and to support each other.*

I still remember one guy… he was Muslim from Sudan, and he was volunteering and helping and bringing me so many clients from other groups, including Christians as well. And he said, "I feel it, I'm on a mission, to help people, and I'm so happy to be in the position to support them and to take them where they can get help."'

When asked if she experienced or observed any hostility between settlement cohorts as a legacy of their displacement, Zeljka said: *'Maybe those extreme people, maybe they stayed within their own community groups or started some activities specifically for their own [community], not mixing up. Otherwise, from my personal experience and through my work, people that I came across, it was always a very, very positive experience, and people willing to work with others.'*

Zeljka reflected that beyond the shared trauma of displacement, most of the clients did not see themselves as important players in the conflicts they fled from, often dictated by agendas of the elite and powerful, which may be another reason the clients she worked with were more open to supporting each other.

> ***'They did not blame the ex-neighbours living in the country. Most of them, when they were going into that [talking about conflict and politics], "It was all a big game, at some high-level, and it's not really neighbours or us starting [the wars]… it was something about whatever it is, power, oil, just selling weapons or whatever…" They felt that most ordinary people just got into that war without really wanting it and felt sorry for the other parties. "I don't blame them, we were all dragged into that… people suffered a lot…"'***

When biases are a risk to service integrity

For Zeljka, lived experience workers, like everyone, can bring conscious and unconscious biases to their roles, and settlement organisations must have structures in place to ensure service delivery remains client-centred, regardless of personal views or beliefs.

Zeljka recalled an instance where a staff member struggled to reconcile their religious views with a client's needs. *'When a female client came to him who wanted to terminate the pregnancy, and asked about practical help, where are the clinics, and how can she access them? And he was consulting me, horrified, like it's against his religion and his personal views and values… "In that case, just tell me, and we will find another worker, but there is no way that you can advise the client or try to change her mind.'"*

This incident has stuck with Zeljka all these years. She emphasised that personal bias, if not properly managed, can compromise the integrity of support. *'It wouldn't happen with the right supervision and debriefing. But some people might feel that something is so right that they don't even need to consult somebody.'*

While lived experience workers can bring insight and can build strong connections with clients, Zeljka believes that the role also involves helping clients navigate and adjust to life in Australia. This, she notes, requires settlement teams that are not only empathetic but have an understanding of the host culture.

> ***'My culture was a collective culture, whereas in Australia, it's very individualistic… When you are coming from different cultures, you have to learn in Australia. It does take some time… It is different.'***

To maintain high-quality service, Zeljka sees the need for regular supervision, critical reflection and team balance that draws on lived experience, professional qualifications and familiarity with the Australian context, including systems navigation and understanding the diversity of local communities.

Interpreting in settlement service design

Zeljka emphasised the value of bicultural workers in addressing language needs within settlement teams, particularly where access to funded interpreter services is limited. Having staff who speak the same languages as clients can ease logistical pressures and reduce operational costs. *'So, I think before the last five years, [accessing interpreting services] was free for us, and after that, they just went, "I'll include that in your grant application." But it's not possible because we don't know what the intake will be... We don't know which workers we will employ. You can't just let people go, because the government decided to bring people [who speak particular languages]…'*

Zeljka provides an example from her own team: *'We're lucky to have workers who can speak Spanish as well as Farsi. That's not a very common combination, but you can't really predict how many clients will need [which languages]. You can't budget that far ahead.'*

Zeljka explained that current funding models can pose challenges for Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program providers. *'To me, that's something that just does not feel right about that, to charge us, a SETS service provider, interpreting costs at phone rates. At least if there was some discount, 50% or something similar... It can be so expensive.. If you don't get the right interpreter, something comes up for your client, the line cuts out, or something [else happens]. You get charged $30, $50 for the phone call. So now, onsite, we don't even think about it. We never, ever book because it's just not practical. And for citizenship applications, for example, it can drag on for over an hour and a half, so if you have an interpreter sitting with you...'*

Frontline staff experience to inform policy and program changes

Zeljka emphasised the importance of meaningful consultation with frontline workers when it comes to settlement policy or program design. Drawing on her years of experience, both professional and lived, Zeljka reflected on recent changes to the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program eligibility criteria, which removed the five-year limit on eligibility to access support services. This change was widely welcomed by the sector. Concurrently, Australian citizens are excluded under this change, which has created challenges for service providers and, more importantly, the clients they support.

'I can't say we were not consulted, but I don't think we were really, truly, consulted. For example, Australian citizens being excluded. The decision felt like it came from nowhere. We asked so many people, and nobody was consulted. Even when we are consulted, I question how things have changed…'

Zeljka pointed out that citizenship does not necessarily equate to independence from support. Many clients, including refugees granted citizenship on compassionate grounds, may continue to face significant settlement needs, particularly those with low English proficiency, disabilities or complex trauma histories. They then must try to access mainstream services, which often lack cultural appropriateness and can be inaccessible for many people of refugee and migrant backgrounds.

'There are big groups of people, [exempted] from passing the [citizenship] test, so they can apply, and they will get citizenship without sitting the test. They get that paper, but their English can be zero because of [factors like] intellectual disability or age…'

Citizenship is deeply meaningful for many people, particularly those who have been forcibly displaced or who might be stateless. For them, citizenship is an opportunity and a sense of belonging.

> ***'Most refugees would love to be citizens. I remember having been in Australia for two years and two months… In 1997, I got my citizenship because I wanted it desperately, because when the war started, I was not a citizen of any country… Most refugees, they really, really want to get [their citizenship], it gives them that sense of belonging…'***

Zeljka, like many settlement practitioners, has observed that settlement needs do not end at the point of citizenship. Emotional, psychological, and practical challenges can emerge years after arrival, especially for those with trauma backgrounds.

These observations are grounded by insights from practice and lived experience and reflect where there might be a disconnection when policy shifts are made without close dialogue with the service sector.

> ***'Do people really think, once you get that piece of paper, that you are able to manage your affairs and that you are independent, that you don't need support? For people with PTSD, maybe after five years, it gets to them, they get all this [trauma] back, and once that settlement period is all done, some of them get in crisis, [such as experiencing] mental health issues. So, if you are a citizen, you are not entitled to that [settlement] service that is specifically tailored for people with those needs. Mainstream services would not really cater well for refugees and migrants.'***

Zeljka reinforced that consultation is key in effective policies, especially to understand the impacts on service delivery on the ground. Zeljka also believed that better feedback loops could help bridge this gap between consultation and policy outcomes. For her, a meaningful follow-up where frontline input is acknowledged and the rationale behind decisions is communicated would enhance transparency and mutual understanding.

Operations, reporting and data

From an operational standpoint, Zeljka reflected on the limitations of current reporting systems in capturing the true impact of settlement work. She described the task of reporting through the Data Exchange (DEX) as burdensome and misaligned with the realities of Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program service delivery. *'I think DEX was designed for other, different programs, not really for SETS… OSCAR, the previous system, was specifically for settlement services. [DEX is used by] many different community services, and they apply the same criteria to all service providers.'*

Zeljka explained that measuring client outcomes through DEX SCORE (Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting), such as goals, circumstances, and satisfaction, is often inappropriate for refugee and humanitarian cohorts. She noted that cultural dynamics can limit the accuracy of feedback collected. *'Regardless of which groups or countries, refugees and humanitarian entrants, they would never tell you to your face if they are not happy with the services. You can find one person in a few 100 that would, but generally they won't, and the government put so much pressure on us for SCORE… In SCORE, you have goals, circumstances and satisfaction… If you fail, then you're criticised for not fulfilling… And you have to sit with the person, and you have to enter [the SCORE], so I have to ask; so who would tell me? Right straight to my face?'*

For Zeljka, these experiences raise broader questions about how feedback is interpreted and whether current reporting mechanisms reflect what is happening on the ground. *'So that's why when we talk about consultations, and then I feel like, do they really listen, can they really see? That [current reporting methods], it's not the best way.'*

She also pointed to a perceived gap in relationships between service providers and funding managers. While providers are expected to produce detailed reports, feedback can be minimal. *'So many times we try to suggest having grant managers back locally, get to know each other, attend our services, get to know us, our clients, go to community events... My grant manager, in two years, I think, I talked to twice. And they don't contact us. In my report, I did like 14 and something pages. I sent photos, flyers. I tried to make it really, really nice, and I got feedback in one sentence: "You fulfilled your contractual requirements. Your payment was approved.""*

This limited engagement has, over time, left Zeljka feeling disheartened about participating in consultations or providing written feedback. *'I realised, actually, there is no point for me to consult or to write. So, I don't anymore because I have tried a few times, to ask for some opinions, for some directions, guidelines. I never got anything back.'*

Zeljka's reflections highlight that transparency between frontline service delivery and program administration is critical for improving both outcomes and engagement. Strengthening relationships between providers and grant managers, and aligning reporting mechanisms more closely with the nature of settlement work, could help improve both practitioner participation and program responsiveness.

Diversity in settlement teams: between lived experience and professional experience

'If I were to choose, I would pick up people from different backgrounds and try to match current intake.'

Zeljka shared that as Multicultural Services Centre Western Australia (MSCWA) is not an ethno-specific service provider, it can be challenging if the settlement team does not reflect cultural cohorts arriving in Australia. She stressed the importance of having team members who match the cultural needs of intake.

'Whether we had a generalised grant or ethno-specific [grant], we always employed people [with relevant cultural backgrounds]. Of course, that is my experience at MSC [WA], that it is easier to reach community leaders, clients from that ethnic group. They find it easier to access the service if there is a person they can speak to in the same language. Later on, once they feel comfortable… they can access other services. But that initial contact, and to open up, it's definitely much, much easier [with the same language].'

An example she highlighted of a team member with Karen background also proved that when services can meet clients' needs and build rapport quickly, clients are willing to overcome barriers such as distance to travel to access someone they can trust.

> ***'Clients followed her to Midland (approximately 20km) from Cannington. They would come to the Midland office, or wherever she worked… it wasn't easy for them to drive; [public] transport wasn't that good, but the funding body had requested us to provide services [in that area]. So, we opened an office in Midland, and thought: "How to get clients there?" When you are new somewhere and not so known, and then from everywhere, they started coming to Midland! … So, it definitely is very useful to keep bilingual and bicultural workers in the settlement field.'***

Though Zeljka emphasised the importance of bicultural workers and lived experience, she does not dismiss her colleagues who do not have lived experience of displacement and settlement. For workers who may not be able to connect to clients through language, shared culture or ethnicity, Zeljka stressed the need to be, *'Open-minded, and acceptable and non-judgmental and easy for clients to come to them and open up.'*

Ultimately, a well-balanced team of lived experience and professional experience is ideal. Zeljka stated that she does not feel as confident in her English when it comes to report writing and leans on colleagues who have English as their first language to help her improve. Importantly, her team members who are Australian-born offer insights and bridge newly arrived communities with the host culture, supporting a feeling of community welcome and belonging.

> ***'We have to be realistic about our own shortfalls as well.. When you are new, it takes time for you to learn certain things... Because when you are new in the country, you obviously know about settlement services and basic things about Centrelink payments, housing, etcetera. But still, I think there might be some things that you are just not aware of, like [wider Australian] culture. You might have some workers who potentially can become too isolated working only with those [ethno-specific] groups. [Some staff] always say like, "My people, my people." I was like, "Please, when you work here, everybody is all your people." It does not sound right. And you have some people who are so active in their own communities, and they don't really look outside that… So that's why I really think that balance is good.'***

> *Because people are different, needs are different, so sometimes the way that we support should be different.*
>
> *- Hayam*

> *In our countries, there is no trust. Politicians and parties are always manipulating people, so there is a feeling that no one can be trusted. So that's a big question: how can we build trust, to pull everyone together?*
>
> *- Idris*

Chapter 13

Understanding political and cultural histories

Hayam Alkhudher

Community Wellbeing and Language Support Assistant

Idris Muhyadin

Community Connector

QPASTT
Toowoomba, Queensland

Invisible labours

> ***'Being from the community, having personal and professional connections with that community, has two sides. There is a good side, a very good side. And then there is a challenging side,'***
> ***- Hayam***

Personal and professional relationships are a juggling act. Hayam Alkhudher, a Community Wellbeing and Language Support Assistant at QPASTT in Toowoomba, Queensland, explained that often clients will think that lived experience workers should be able to do everything. '*One challenge is community might ask you to do something you might not be able to do,*' noted Hayam. They think, *"You know the language, you've got networks, you've got this, you've got that. You can do it!" But there can be a lack of understanding of the limits of your role. It's not that I don't want to do it for them... They don't know sometimes that I really can't do it.*' It's often a tricky balance for settlement workers to maintain the trust and confidence of the community while also making clear what can and cannot be done.

Calls after hours are also a big problem. Hayam's colleague, Idris Muhyadin, a Community Connector at QPASTT, explained that a community member might have a question or concern, and if they cannot reach a lived experience staff member's work phone, they might try a family member or a friend of that staff member. Hayam agreed: *'Calls after hours… We have good self-care here. But sometimes there are urgent matters, which we address because we have a good understanding of what people are going through and their challenges.'*

It can be challenging for lived experience workers to explain that they should only speak to clients during work hours, especially when clients are experiencing hardship. For Idris, some late-night calls with clients leave him with the feeling that if he doesn't support them, they might hurt themselves.

'Sometimes, the recommendation from an organisation is to turn off your work phone. You always have two phones, which is very good. After 5 pm, you turn off your work phone. Because it's a big responsibility, [OH&S], and all of the risks. But because of our relationship with communities, because we are part of the community I'm very close with people, and have friendships with multiple families, they know our personal details. And Toowoomba is a small place. There's no way to skip that. They will call your work phone, and if not that, your personal phone. And if they don't have my personal number, they have my wife's or daughter's, because of all of the relationships. They will call Hayam's father or brother. So, you will end up answering that call. That's where it's really challenging, because when someone calls you and says: "I feel very sad. I don't like this life." Especially if the call comes at 12 am, 1 am, you know that it will not be something normal.'

Idris explained that this kind of contact from clients places a heavy responsibility on lived experience workers, who can begin to suffer under such extraordinary pressures. For Hayam and Idris, clients are also their friends, their community, even their families. Idris noted: *'There's no way to just say: "That's a work relationship and I'll turn off my phone. If they hurt themselves, commit suicide, it's not my problem..." As a human being, you cannot do that. If I answer the phone, someone might ask: "Why did you answer the phone?" If I didn't, and [the caller] did something bad to themselves, I would feel guilty for the rest of my life, because I could have maybe stopped that, but I didn't. That's where the challenge is.'*

Spanning settlement and community in Toowoomba

Hayam's work at QPASTT involves community work and running group activities such as school holiday programs and family fun days. *'And millions of calls! Lots of calls: sessions over calls, reminders, cancellations, scheduling, checking in with clients.'* Hayam is Yazidi. The Yazidi community has been growing quickly in Toowoomba, with significant numbers beginning to arrive around 2016 to 2017. These days, there are lots of marriages and newborns in the community, which Hayam finds heartening.

Idris has been working with QPASTT in the community outreach space for over two years. This includes working with men's groups, youth groups, and group sessions at TAFE. Idris has an extensive history working in settlement, previously working with another organisation in the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) and Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program. Idris was born in Iraq, and though he is not Yazidi, he shares this country of birth with many of the Yazidi families in Toowoomba that he works with. *'We both have communities. We know what they are suffering from. We understand how someone would experience a similar situation. And how community can work with service providers, how things could be made easier and smoother.'*

The art of translation

Both Hayam and Idris provide interpreter services as part of their roles. This includes both interpreting for one-on-one counselling sessions and interpreting for group work facilitation. Both Hayam and Idris understand that translation is not a word-for-word exchange. Translation is about culture, and it is about context. Idris illustrated this light-heartedly when she said: *'It's very common to say to a kid, "I will eat you," that means "I love you." We say this to our kids all day. But imagine [hearing that out of context]!'* Idris explained that translating counselling sessions, mental health concepts, and people's stories, feelings, and emotions is incredibly complex.

> ***'You cannot interpret saying, "This word means that word exactly." It won't make any sense. You have to feel what is being felt by that client... You have to interpret their emotions and their meaning to the counsellor. The counsellor will build his or her case depending on what you are saying. So, if you are just exchanging the words, the meaning will be wrong. It's not as simple as saying, "This window is broken, cracked, not working," where you then simply need someone will come and fix that window. It's more sensitive than that, more difficult than that... Sometimes the client will just put a small word in between a sentence. But as a culture… It's a big thing; that small word has a lot of meaning!'***
> ***- Idris***

Hayam added: *'Interpreting involves values, practices, even faith, religion, body language. I said there are good and bad sides of coming from the same community, and that's the good side of it: knowing the values, body language, norms, the way that people talk, what they are saying... lots of things, lots of what people say, there's no way to say them exactly in English. But we understand that and deliver it in English.'*

Cultural and political histories

People's cultures, political histories, and global affairs are the overarching context for successful settlement work and client interactions, but are not taught in a social work degree. Understanding cultural and political histories and affairs is a capability often inherently held by lived experience workers with their own diverse cultural and linguistic background, and their own experience of displacement and settlement.

'I think it's very important for staff to understand culture, to have some understanding of people coming from Ukraine, Iraq, Afghanistan... Understanding situations is important for staff,' discussed Idris. *'Because when people first arrive, they always have a lot they want to tell people, why they are here. And they talk about very shocking incidents that happened to them. [If settlement staff do not understand what is going on globally], it can be traumatic for staff. Staff have said, "I never expected that kind of conversation," so having some understanding of the situation beforehand is important. And that could come through cultural support workers. Before working with any community, it's good to sit with cultural support workers, to have an idea of what's going on, what's the story behind these things.'*

This deep understanding of cultures and political history is also paramount in overcoming community distrust. Idris reflected on how organisations and practitioners had long tried to build community associations and organisations for the Yazidi, Kurdish, and Arabic-speaking communities in regional areas like Toowoomba but had often encountered challenges. *'Through all the conversations, we heard: in our countries, there is no trust. Politicians and parties are always manipulating people, so there is a feeling that no one can be trusted. So that's a big question: how can we build trust, to pull everyone together?'*

Idris and Hayam outlined how Yazidis structured society in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran, as well as how historical relationships between lineage clans and families shaped community-building efforts in Australia. Approaching it from a culturally responsive perspective, Idris and his counterparts knew that building smaller associations within trusted groups first would be beneficial, before then building inter-group trust and political capital over time for those associations to eventually form a larger collective. *'This understanding helped us to navigate how we can bring everyone together... If we do not have that understanding of the situation, the history, the culture, and what was going on before people came here, it would be impossible to reach that point.'*

Continual training and upskilling

Hayam sees continual training and workforce development as a key premise for successful settlement service design. *'More skills for workers. And experience. There are different needs, different stories, different cases.'* Support for training and upskilling settlement staff is important for lived experience workers as well as the wider settlement workforce. *'I'm studying a Bachelor of Social Work and I'm learning a lot of things... I always say, listen, respond, review, react, and then follow up. Because maybe for that family, if there was more listening, understanding of what really the underlying issues are… then providers might actually choose quite different ways of dealing with those issues.'*

> ***'If I don't have the language, I'm new to the country, I don't know the system, I don't have connections, and don't have support from a community... things will be difficult.'***
> ***- Hayam***

Vicarious trauma

A major challenge for settlement staff is vicarious trauma and hearing harrowing stories from people they care for and about. Lived experience workers might experience vicarious trauma differently: it might remind them of their own past experiences, or resonate differently knowing the culture, context and places where trauma occurred.

> ***'Listening to clients and what they've been through and what they are going through right now is a challenge itself. It's so emotional. For me, it can't go any higher. It's that emotion that is difficult for me to hear, and because I am from that community, what they have experienced and what they have been through. I've been through it. But theirs is even, it's much, much, much more difficult than what I've seen, what I've experienced. So sometimes just listening to that... I'm good at controlling emotions. And that's the responsibility. Because we do complex, sensitive work. But I've been crying in sessions just listening to a client, and I just think: "I can't even imagine what she's saying." And that's another thing, when you go home and you remember... "Oh my God. How has that person seen this, or experienced this? What if that was me? I would never survive." That's another challenge.'***
> ***– Hayam***

Lived experience: struggles and strategies

While not fully resolving the tension between switching off phones after hours and the concern that community members may need urgent support, Hayam emphasised the importance of setting boundaries around phone use for lived experience workers: *'Sometimes I'll get messages or calls at 7 pm, 8 pm, and then, usually, after answering those question and calls, I turn off my work phone. I also have my personal number, which some people have from before I started at QPASTT. So sometimes they ask me questions, they call me, or message me. I will answer and just tell them: "Please, tomorrow I'm going to be at work, call me between this time and this time," and that's how I continue.'* This is where organisational practices support personal ones.

Idris cited a distinct effort to separate personal life and work. *'You have responsibilities. I have kids, I have a wife, I have family. At home, they also need me. I'm not only doing counselling for clients. That's the balance everyone needs.'* This is again supported by organisational practice. Idris continued, *'We know QPASTT is not an emergency service. But we also have that clear understanding, if there's a client in need, how to try to support them. Showing them where they can call. Who can they go to for help, like the emergency department, or Lifeline, and others.'* Getting this balance right is also about self-care, which a fulfilling personal life is crucial for. Idris went on, *'I go out with my family, play with my kids. This makes me feel cool and calm and sometimes helps me forget about what's going on in the workplace.'*

Institutional supports are fundamental for workers, particularly those with lived experience. Hayam explained: *'We've got a lot of different supports here at QPASTT. We can have a brief chat after a session. We have internal supervision. We can choose whether to meet fortnightly or monthly, or if you want more [frequent meetings], you can meet more. And we have external supervision. This is all for staff members, to make sure we're doing okay and that we can cope with everything happening in the workplace.'*

In conjunction with this, it is imperative for staff to also recognise and seek the care practices they need. Idris stated: *'We have to take really good care of ourselves, otherwise we will not be able to continue our work.'* Hayam explained that whenever things get stuck in her mind, she knows it is time to talk to someone. She explained that since she is already carrying such a heavy personal, educational and professional load of her own, she has come to realise she cannot hold all the stories of her clients alone and needs support.

> ***'I already have a lot to think of: from the past, what has happened. My current life. Work is already a big pressure. I'm studying. Family responsibilities. And then, the client and their stories, it's so important to me, and I would give everything I have just to make them smile and to be able to support them and their case. And sometimes it happens: they heal, they feel better. But what they passed to us… It is a lot for us to carry. So, it's really important for us as workers to talk to someone, to seek professional support, to be able to continue. And if the case is [really distressing], staff might need medical support. Which is so normal! If we are burnt out, then how are we going to provide further support to the clients?'***
> ***- Hayam***

The long game: building trust

Hayam explained that for many refugees and communities, building trust is particularly challenging. However, as a central factor in good settlement outcomes, settlement service providers must find ways to cultivate the trust of their clients. *'We really understand, because of everything that they left behind, everything they have been through, from their home country, especially after the genocide, when their friends, neighbours actually betrayed them. Their trust was broken.'*

Trust doesn't happen automatically, nor overnight. It takes both ethics and effort, along with patience. *'Trust is not something you build in one moment. It's not something that just comes by itself. It depends on how you deal with people, day by day, little bit by little bit. So Hayam now has the full trust of the community,'* said Idris.

Hayam commended Idris in return: *'I've heard so many people in my community say: "There's no one better than Idris." That's a really nice thing to hear about your colleague and community worker who's supporting the community a lot.'*

Hayam continued explaining that lived experience can help to build trust, as well as other essential ingredients in settlement. *'A benefit of lived experience is the trust that we have between us [as workers and clients]. The confidence. And the relationships. Those three things are very important. Without those, people can't really work together. Even if they do work together, it is difficult to achieve their goals.'*

Reputation is crucial for trust, for both the settlement service provider and for workers. *'When the worker has a good reputation in the community. To have that trust, and then for that trust to continue, is really important. It's a goal that we achieve for us… to be working with community, my [Yazidi] community, and communities in Toowoomba in general, into the future,'* explained Hayam.

Building and maintaining reputation relies on making every contact and interaction count. Never breaking confidentiality. And ensuring that no one has a negative experience. Because if trust is broken, it is not with just one individual: word spreads, and it can undermine relations with whole communities. Settlement staff are constantly rising to the occasion and not dropping the ball.

> ***'We really appreciate that trust. It's important for both workers and clients to trust each other.'***
> ***- Hayam***

Chapter 14

Regional settlement issues through lived experience and community leadership

Tika Poudyel

Rural & Regional Community Development Worker

The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)
Albury-Wodonga, New South Wales and Victoria

Tika's roles in community leadership and settlement

Tika Poudyel works for the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) in Albury-Wodonga, on the New South Wales and Victoria border. Tika is a Nepali-speaking, Bhutanese community leader. *'I arrived in Australia in 2011. I settled in Albury-Wodonga. It's a beautiful place. After completing 500 hours of English class, I did my bridging course in university and completed a Master of Social Work.'* Before joining STARTTS, Tika worked with children in residential care, as an interpreter, and as a school liaison officer, alongside his continued work as a community leader.

Working with refugee populations, I've been through that process. A strength is understanding people's lifestyles; where they come from, cultural sensitivities, and developing rapport. For example, a principal at one of the schools in Albury asked: "How can we engage parents from your community? They're not coming to the school, they're not coming to parent-teacher interviews." But you have to remember, these parents don't speak any English, or read or write any English. And we come from a place where we see police, we hide under the bushes. There are a lot of issues and barriers. So, I said, okay, how do we build up the parents' confidence? All of the parents are from a farming background. I said, "Look, this school has a lot of unused ground space. How about giving a plot of land for growing vegetables?" The parents would come to school, grow vegetables, and also cook their produce for teachers and the school during Refugee Week. And the plots were not only for them, but for the agriculture class. It's beautifully maintained. Teachers would come to the garden and meet the families. Slowly, the parents built up the confidence to come up to the office, and the [school] principal was really happy.

Supporting workers: switching off and self-care

Being a settlement worker and community leader means that it is almost impossible to switch off. *'I get calls in the middle of the night. "Hey Tika..." On many occasions. One night, one of the men [in the community] rang me. He had been throwing jury summons letters in the bin because he thought they were junk mail. He didn't understand what they were because of language barriers. He had low English; he had no children at home to look at the letters. He then received a fine of over $700. When he saw the fine, he called me. He was really, really distressed, it was $700! What was he going to do? I had to call the revenue department, organise an interpreter for him. That was outside of my work. Some other people borrow the money and pay the fine because they are scared of the government. Eventually, the situation was explained, and the fine was withdrawn. I've had to do similar things multiple times. I've had to work with a lot of people who have been scammed. I work hard. So, self-care can be difficult.*

> ***If someone calls me two or three times, I cannot just ignore it. It might be someone who needs help calling an ambulance. In real life, it's hard. Self-care is really hard. We try, but it's hard.'***

Tika shared the importance of communication between a worker and their organisation when navigating these kinds of challenges and responsibilities. It helped Tika when STARTTS provided him with a work phone; this allowed Tika to separate his work tasks from any additional tasks he takes on when he can. *'With my group work, I explain. I don't want to be rude. This is how it works. If it is an emergency, that's when people might call my personal number.'*

Tika commended the role of direct referrals in effective settlement work. *'Being at STARTTS, there are a lot of people sharing what is happening in their lives, their emotions, and I refer people to the counsellors.'* Direct referrals allow clients to receive specialised, professional support, and take some of the load off workers like Tika.

Organisations can also support their settlement workers by providing them with opportunities to learn about their own needs and how to meet them. '*STARTTS is really flexible. There are a lot of training opportunities, for example, on self-care. And while it cannot always help take away all the challenges, it is important support.'*

Lived experience in NDIS, health and wider services

There's also an important role for workers with lived experience in sectors outside of settlement. *'It's a benefit for organisations. Not all workers have to be bilingual, of course, but if you have some bilingual staff, it's very helpful to understand culture, what works for a particular community. The NDIS, health services, really need bilingual support workers. It's hard [for refugees and migrants] to understand Home Care Packages [for older Australians], the NDIS [for people with disabilities], and the many different systems to know. There's a lack of trained professional interpreters in Albury-Wodonga. So, then people have family members [including their children] trying to explain complex health issues… Other sectors should support bilingual workers. That would, in turn, help the settlement sector a lot.'*

Challenges communities face: physical spaces

Tika outlined some of the major challenges that the Lhotshampa community, and other multicultural communities, face in Albury-Wodonga.

> ***'There can be a lack of physical spaces for people to get together [in regional locations].'***

For example: *'For cultural events, for spiritual events, and also to organise language classes... places to do cultural dance. Come and share knowledge like how people got a job, to do yoga, talk about health, wellbeing, women's health, a place for the police to come talk, and legal professionals. There are spaces, but they're very expensive. It doesn't only have to be for one community, but space for multicultural communities to come together.'*

Challenges communities face: language barriers and employment services

Tika is concerned that many employment services do not know how to support refugees and migrants with low English proficiency. *'One member of the community was at an employment service provider meeting, crying out for a job. But he had a low level of English, so the employment service provider did not know how to help him. Eventually, he asked friends, family, and just kept going. Now he's been working full-time for a long time, and he's bought a house. Though the community might have low English, a lack of qualifications, people want to work, but employment service providers often don't help.'* Tika noted that it is only when the right kinds of supports are provided that refugees and migrants will be linked up with appropriate work, and that this work can then go on to benefit communities and governments.

Long-term service design with a focus on building community capacity

When discussing the future of settlement service design, Tika talked about the importance of funding longer-term programs and building community capacity. *'For example, elderly people need help with their digital skills and their settlement. So, if there are problems in the home, they know who to ring, what to do, and how to remain safe. This cannot just be one information session, especially for people who do not speak English. There needs to be longer projects, like weekly sessions for a few months. If it's just one session, then the knowledge goes. Think about swimming lessons. If it's just a one-off lesson, that doesn't help. It's just putting water on the sand. It's not a good use of money. There needs to be investment in longer-term programs.'*

Chapter 15

‘What I have been through, I don't want my other brothers and sisters to go through’

Altaf Hussain

Youth Support Officer

Brotherhood of St. Laurence
Broadmeadows, Melbourne, Victoria

For Altaf Hussain, being a settlement worker is a personal commitment born from his own lived experience. Originally from Afghanistan, Altaf arrived in Australia nine years ago as a refugee. Today, he supports newly arrived refugees and migrants through his work at the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) in Melbourne’s northern suburbs. He brings to this role not only linguistic skills and cultural knowledge, but also an intimate understanding of displacement, trauma, and the daunting complexity of rebuilding life in a foreign country.

Altaf described his approach as instinctual. When someone walks through the door seeking help, he sees his own experiences in them. This is what drives him and fuels his practice.

> ***‘What I have been through, I don’t want my other brothers and sisters to go through. When organisations like BSL asked me to be one of their colleagues, to work here and help my own community, work for them, and the broader community. That was an opportunity where I could step in and say, “Yes, I’m in.”’***

You already have [a similar] experience to the person who came in to ask for help… You can make them feel comfortable because you can share [that experience], "I know what you are going through because I have been through it."

Cultural insight as a bridge to trust

For Altaf, effective settlement work is inseparable from cultural understanding. Beyond speaking the same language, Altaf understands someone's silence, frustration or hesitation. This awareness allows him to tailor support in ways that are both practical and respectful. When reflecting on the nuances of Afghan culture, Altaf explained, *'They will not ask for help for things that they need - why? It is not a part of our culture. Asking is seen as something bad. When I am working with a young person… I say, "Okay, what is your need?" not, "What do you want?"'*

These nuances shape how Altaf frames his approach to service delivery. For vulnerable new arrivals, this subtle difference can be significant. Altaf explained, sometimes this may involve surfacing the services clients already have access to for him and his team to identify what services clients may be missing. *'I ask, "Who is already helping you?" Then I can figure out with my team, "Okay, this person is getting that service, but they are missing out on this service." Then we can tell them [the client], "We have this, are you willing to come to this service?"'*

This culturally-informed approach has helped Altaf to deliver comprehensive support for his young clients, which includes enrolment in university or TAFE, to navigating the public transport system.

Intergenerational responsibilities

An important part of Altaf's work is effectively linking his young clients up with free translation and interpreter services. *'Telling them, "You don't have to be a translator for your family; there are free services. If your parents want to go to the doctor, you can still attend your classes."'* Altaf understands that young refugees and migrants are often relied upon to translate and interpret for older generations due to cultural expectations, a sense of responsibility and a lack of awareness of interpreter services. These expectations and responsibilities often come at the cost of young refugees and migrants' autonomy, well-being and time to focus on their own settlement needs.

Altaf also understands the cultural expectations placed on boys within the Afghan community, the pressures of which can lead to poor mental health outcomes and additional stressors on top of their personal settlement journeys.

> ***'There was no one from my community to tell me what to do, how to do it, and I didn't know the services around. The employer took advantage of that. I was underpaid for three months. And at my second job, also, I was underpaid.'***

Altaf stressed the importance of culturally sensitive approaches when supporting vulnerable men and boys in crisis.

Contextualising Australia's systems and processes

Having once found Australian systems unfamiliar and indecipherable, Altaf is now adept at breaking these systems down and clearly explaining them to others. By demystifying government systems and institutions, Altaf's clients are more trusting of them. Altaf recalled the way he once explained income taxes:

> ***'You are supporting the government to support you. A damaged road is fixed because we are paying taxes. We have free medical services because we are paying taxes. Our kids have a free education because we are paying taxes. So, this is income tax, this is the benefit.'***

Altaf explained that because his community can see him as one of their own, they trust in how he contextualises complex systems in ways that address his clients' beliefs and distrust in a new country. Altaf can understand his clients' values, priorities and experiences, where a person without this understanding might struggle to bridge that initial trust.

This helps the clients build confidence in the host country and empowers them with knowledge, moving towards independence from services.

Filling the gaps

Working with youth, Altaf often fills the gaps that may have been missed at school or at home.

'Any young person who is of the age to start work, we sit with them to work on a resume, because in their home country, you'll get a job by word of mouth. Clients might ask, "What is a resume? What is a tax file number? How does a tax file number work? How is an ABN going to work?" I know my community don't know that.'

Altaf prioritises foundational systems navigation because of his own experiences.

Having been exploited early in his own settlement journey, Altaf is careful to explain the dangers of working cash-in-hand jobs to his young clients.

> ***"What about [a safe] work environment... what about personal leave, annual leave, and all those things that we don't have in our country… We think, "Why not work in cash?", but God forbid, if something happened at work. Tata, Bye-Bye, you are not insured, and you are not covered if your employer doesn't pay you, so it means you can't do anything [about it].'***

Documentation and recognition

'In my time, I was forced to go to English classes regardless of my English level, without asking me what my English level was. Without anything, you have to go to the English class.'

Just as there are now English proficiency tests for incoming cohorts, which help to allocate refugees and migrants to appropriate language classes, according to Altaf, the same line of thinking should be used to tailor supports in other areas, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Altaf is confident that this would significantly improve settlement outcomes.

One of the suggestions that Altaf made was for the Australian Government to support collaboration between incoming communities, settlement organisations, and onshore community leaders. Altaf explained that onshore community leaders, who may share language and culture with incoming cohorts, are in a strong position to connect with incoming communities. From this position, community leaders are well placed to identify the education needs of incoming cohorts. Once education needs have been identified, onshore community leaders could work with settlement organisations to prepare tailored programs for soon-to-arrive refugees and migrants.

Education recognition continues to be a prevalent issue in the settlement sector. It is an issue that is often raised, particularly by those working with younger cohorts.

For Altaf, helping young Afghans with their education journeys is an ongoing challenge. Many of Altaf's young clients are well-educated but had to flee Afghanistan in the middle of their education and cannot get their qualifications recognised in Australia in order to find appropriate work in their field.

Altaf is grateful that increasingly, settlement staff with lived experience are being given the opportunity to provide their input into settlement design; he is confident that this will lead to better settlement outcomes.

> ***'I'm trying to fix things for my community, because in the Afghan community, education documentation is not valid here. So, we are trying to help our new generation that arrived after the fall of Afghanistan. We are trying to help them to validate their documents, so they can work in some sector, or they can [go to] university, otherwise, the bachelor's they did in four years or three years equals zero. Why should they have to start again from zero? They should at least get some credit for [their studies] … they should be given a test, an exam. If they pass… then they get an Australian document. If not… then they should study. We want that type of system. Not like, "We don't care what document you have, you have to start from zero." Yeah, that is a bad system.'***

Community connectors

Now that he is on the other side of the settlement system, Altaf stresses the importance of having staff who are community connectors to act as a bridge between the two sides of the system. Bicultural and lived experience staff can effectively build trust between the two sides and bring an understanding of cultural nuances to service delivery and program design. Altaf made the suggestion that the government should inform settlement organisations of prevalent incoming cohorts within particular service areas, so that organisations can hire staff who bring cultural insights and foster trust.

'When there is no bridge, staff don't know what is really happening on the other side. We need that bridge… Each organisation should have at least one person from the community they serve… Here [at the Brotherhood of St Laurence], we have a youth advisor with an Afghan background. [Because of this], we can talk to our community effectively. We know what the needs of our community are, and that's why our community trusts our organisation. My community also trust me… I understand what help they need, and I tell my manager, and I tell my other colleagues, and we figure it out. If we can't, we refer them to another organisation, and our partner organisation will help.'

Community volunteers and leaders

Like many settlement practitioners with lived experience, Altaf approaches settlement work with a deep sense of personal commitment and with a passion to see his community succeed in rebuilding their lives. Outside of his role at BSL, Altaf is the chair of the Victorian Afghan Youth Association. He is also a public speaker, a mental health advocate and is considered a role model among Afghan Australian youth in his community. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Altaf supported his community with health information in Dari and also with relief packages. In 2021, Altaf and his community welcomed new refugees from Afghanistan. Altaf personally supplied more than 100 people with clothes, toiletries, hygiene products, food and gift cards. Besides helping his community celebrate cultural events such as Nowruz, Eid and Ramadan, Altaf also operates a Dari language school on the weekends.

As someone so visible in his community, Altaf explains that it can be hard at times, particularly when he is often the first point of contact in crises. Altaf recalls that during the time when the Taliban took over Afghanistan, knowing that no flights would take off until dark, he took the time to get some rest.

'It was three in the night, I received a call from a lady… As soon as I said hello: "How dare you, you are sleeping while my husband is stuck in Afghanistan?"… I remember around 15 minutes after that, the lady arrived at my home and actually checked that I was emailing [and calling] around… I put credit on my phone to call Afghanistan and the airport. I was so emotional at that time because someone was counting on me.'

When Altaf recounted this story to others, he was told that it should make him upset, to be spoken to in this way, and to have his personal space invaded. Altaf explained that it means a lot to him that his community believe there is someone who will drop everything to look after them.

Altaf would carry this weight even while he was on holidays abroad, but he is grateful for the network of young Afghan volunteers whom he can trust to support his community when called upon.

> ***'Now I have many volunteers in my community whom I can call regardless of the time, day or night. [The community] trusts us, so they call. If we were not there, would they call a service provider [who is not from the community] in the middle of the night? No… They don't call triple zero. They call us. I'm pretty sure the service provider told them on the first day of arrival, "Call triple zero in case of emergency," but still, they didn't have trust yet. So, they called their own brothers.'***

There was a constant level of anxiety in those days... I hated the weekends. I felt incredibly insecure and vulnerable. I would sit with this overwhelming fear: "What if something happens to my children? Who will be there?" But it was Saturday or Sunday, and I felt completely alone. No support. No safety net. Just silence.

Now, as a case worker, I give my clients strategies to cope and manage those same feelings. I tell them, "You can reach out, even on weekends, if you really need to." It doesn't happen often, and they understand we're not an emergency service. But we are human. And we care. Sometimes, just knowing someone is truly there can make all the difference.

I offer that because I once needed that too.

Chapter 16

Finding the joy in settlement work

Afsoun Mohammadkhani

Case Worker

MercyCare
Mirrabooka, Perth, Western Australia

Afsoun's approach to her role as a settlement case worker at MercyCare in Western Australia is deeply informed by how she felt early in her settlement journey.

'In 2002, when I came to Australia, there weren't many service providers to help me settle in the country. I had to find my way around. I had to make mistakes… It took me a long time to settle in... If we provide more support to the new arrivals, it's going to help them to settle faster, so they can contribute and provide for the community, instead of receiving from the community… I feel there is still more that needs to be done.'

Since 2007, Afsoun has supported newly arrived refugees and migrants through challenges like finding housing, finding work, and navigating Centrelink. For Afsoun, clients are people with stories and aspirations, beyond just cases, needs, and numbers. Afsoun shared that clients are often disappointed with services through their experiences with ineffective service provision.

'The majority of clients I have worked with arrive feeling broken, disheartened, and without hope. They come to MercyCare burdened with worries, often believing that it will be just another agency, one that listens but ultimately does little to bring about change.

My first priority is to understand their needs, how they're feeling, and their personal stories. I aim to make a meaningful difference in their lives, no matter how small it may seem. Sometimes, even the smallest act of support can have a lasting impact.'

To Afsoun, listening must be accompanied by follow-through. Clients don't come looking for sympathy; they come seeking change. Ever-focused on outcomes for her clients, Afsoun's commitment to attentively listening models a trauma-informed approach. Her commitment to promoting client agency models a rights-based approach to service delivery. Afsoun works hard to restore her community's belief that change is possible, and in the right ways. Like many settlement service workers with lived experience, Afsoun has lived experience that informs her practice to centre clients with pragmatic follow-through.

Meeting clients where they are

Afsoun recalled the challenges she faced early in her own settlement journey when adjusting to a new language and new systems made even the most mundane, everyday tasks feel overwhelming: *'For someone who's newly arrived, when you go to the shop, you simply want to find the item you need, you look around, and although the shop is full of people, it feels as if no one is truly there. You try to ask for help, but you can't find the words. You don't know how to say it. You feel voiceless, like you're mute. It's frustrating and isolating. This is the everyday reality for many new arrivals who are still learning the language. It's not just about speaking, but being seen, heard, and understood.'*

Afsoun reflected on being misunderstood due to her accent or pronunciation, and on feeling discouraged by the smallest of interactions. These experiences showed Afsoun the importance of patience and flexibility to new arrivals, principles that are central in her practice today.

> ***'Many clients come to us feeling overwhelmed and disheartened, often because they are unable to clearly express their needs. All of this can lead to intense frustration and a sense of helplessness. I reassure them, "You don't have to speak perfectly. We can still understand each other." I aim to empower clients by encouraging them to express themselves in whatever way they are able. Even the smallest effort toward communication can be a meaningful step in restoring their confidence, dignity, and sense of agency.'***

Afsoun stressed that communication breakdowns can lead to disengagement, frustration, and fear. She shared, *'I simplify my language to match clients' level of understanding, helping build trust and ensure meaningful communication.'* This helps her clients feel comfortable, rather than intimidated. Afsoun reduces the perception of the provider-client power imbalance that many clients find intimidating or uncomfortable by doing away with formal language and service scripts. This approach cultivates client confidence through small, relational acts, delivering outcomes for her clients on a foundation of accessibility, connection and trust.

Rigid systems

Afsoun has observed that clients often come in with practical requests, usually centred around finding a job, accessing income support, or getting assistance with documents. But Afsoun also knows that these surface-level needs rarely exist in isolation. *'Clients may say they have a financial concern and think that by securing employment or improving their income, they will resolve their challenges. However, through deeper conversation, it often becomes clear that there are underlying issues that need holistic support from service providers.'*

From her own settlement journey, Afsoun understands that financial stress is often the most visible layer of a complex array of issues. Clients may be experiencing housing insecurity, domestic violence, trauma, or mental distress, but those concerns may not be raised at first. Afsoun's cultural understanding and her own lived experiences allow her to build trust, inform how she probes, and ultimately help clients identify and address the root causes of their practical problems.

'I assist them… [so that they can recognise and acknowledge that] there are more issues.'

Afsoun gives her clients the time and space to think and to speak, and builds up their confidence so that they can eventually ask for what they really need. To Afsoun, her role is to help clients assemble all their pieces, even the ones that are less visible or more stigmatised. Lived experience is a powerful lens that helps workers empathise, identify and understand the needs of someone who is yet to understand the host country where they're rebuilding their lives.

Putting people first

Afsoun expressed concern that Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) can compromise good practice, *'We are human beings, not just statistics… I feel it is very ethically concerning when clients are shifted between services solely to meet KPIs. Support should be based on real needs, not numerical targets.'*

Afsoun shared the example that this can fragment a client's support across multiple appointments to meet a target. Rather than asking clients to return repeatedly, Afsoun makes a concerted effort to address everything in a single visit, wherever possible, even if it takes two or three hours.

> ***'New arrivals often lack their own means of transport, and they don't have enough money… They need to travel. It can be very time-consuming for them. They have to take time off from their English classes. I encourage them to consolidate their errands, "One trip, let's do it." I ensure that all business is handled in one visit to minimise inconvenience.'***

With some extra preparatory work on her end, Afsoun can make a big difference in the lives of her clients by demonstrating care and respect for her clients' time, energy, and autonomy. Efficiency is about removing barriers and ensuring that the system doesn't place more strain on people who are already under pressure.

Afsoun understands what it means to juggle appointments, expenses, and responsibilities. Her approach to settlement work rests upon her belief that behind every case is a person, and behind every person is a story. Afsoun explained that not all clients arrive with the same level of capacity or stability, especially those dealing with trauma, financial pressure, or family obligations. She was once in a similar position: *'Those days, it was difficult to find someone to look after my child, so I could attend an appointment. When I finally get there, the case worker would say, "You don't have enough documents. Can you come back tomorrow?" They didn't understand how hard it was for me to make it to the appointment. They expected me to return another day, but with a baby, a pram, bags, and sometimes bad weather, it was very challenging. I guess they didn't realise this at the time. For new arrivals, even simple daily routines can be overwhelming. These small things are huge for us and can make a world of difference if we are understood and supported.'*

Systems often operate with an assumption of refugees' and migrants' accessibility and that clients are homogeneous. This can cause harm by overlooking complexities and risks, leaving clients behind.

Personal commitment to settlement work

Afsoun's approach to client care extends beyond business hours. She recalls feeling isolated and vulnerable in her early days of arrival in Australia, especially on weekends when services were unavailable. That memory shapes how she structures her own availability today. She leaves her work phone on over the weekend, offering clients the option to call if they need support, knowing firsthand how hard things can become.

> ***'Now, as a support worker, … I offer my clients to give me a call on the weekends, "If you need it," … I was in that situation.'***

Afsoun's decision to take on additional, unpaid labour and emotional loads is not uncommon for lived experience workers. Staff with lived experience often bring exceptional levels of personal commitment to their roles. The boundaries between professional and personal responsibility are often less defined. This is not a matter of inadequate training or overreach. Rather, it reflects a considered approach to settlement practice shaped by the knowledge that there are not enough supports for all vulnerable refugees and migrants, and by personal settlement experiences of life without sufficient support.

Afsoun acknowledges that in some roles, constant availability may not be necessary. But in her view, maintaining weekend contact is a precaution that addresses the urgent and unpredictable needs of her clients.

Confidentiality and safety

As a known member of the Iranian community, Afsoun's visibility draws Iranian clients toward MercyCare. Iranian clients request her specifically, drawn to Afsoun's linguistic and cultural understanding. Afsoun also promises clients the utmost confidentiality.

> ***'They frequently ask me to advocate on their behalf and communicate their needs to other services. Clients feel comfortable sharing openly with me, confident that their information will remain strictly confidential. Once they leave, I treat their visit with the utmost discretion, as if I had never met them. For instance, when I attend Iranian community gatherings, I conduct myself as though I am meeting them for the first time.'***

Being a part of the community, at times, professional boundaries can become blurred. Afsoun shared an example from a community event where a client approached her to discuss their case in front of others.

'I said, "Would you mind making an appointment so we can have that conversation privately in the office?" The client was confused, "Why are you not responding?" I gave her a wink, and explained, "You're standing next to somebody else, I want to make sure your privacy is protected. It's your decision, but I prefer not to discuss personal matters in a public setting."'

It can be challenging for lived experience settlement workers to sustainably balance their relations with the community inside and outside the office. Some of Afsoun's clients would be at risk if client confidentiality were not maintained, particularly those who may be experiencing domestic and family violence (DFV). Afsoun takes a vigilant approach to protecting her clients' stories. Afsoun recalled someone calling MercyCare's reception and asking Afsoun about his wife's whereabouts and whether his wife had visited MercyCare; *'When these things happen, you have to be professional.'*

Afsoun's experiences reveal the subtle interpersonal negotiations that lived experience workers engage in, which often go unnoticed but are vital for client safety and dignity. Afsoun's experiences remind us that settlement staff who navigate the duality of community membership and service provision need support, training opportunities and supervision to set respectful boundaries and centre their personal and clients' safety.

Sector collaboration and frontline workers' inclusion

To Afsoun, lived experience workers are adept at recognising patterns, anticipating barriers, and approaching their casework with practical strategies. She is confident that workers with lived experience could make meaningful contributions to the sector, beyond their casework. Afsoun sees great value in spaces where frontline workers can share insights, challenges, and solutions with each other and decision-makers.

> ***'A regular opportunity where all SETS workers come together to exchange information. What makes it even more meaningful is when a government body is present, not just to speak, but to truly listen and hear about the challenges, the successes, and everything in-between. That kind of open exchange makes a real difference.'***

In Afsoun's view, cross-sector collaboration opportunities allow frontline workers to inform service design and delivery from the ground up, revealing what is working and what isn't. Workers who support clients every day bring practical and current insights. When frontline voices are meaningfully included, systems are more likely to correctly identify and effectively address the needs of the clients they aim to serve.

To Afsoun, the settlement sector must be sufficiently supported to continue providing regular opportunities for accessible collaboration across the workforce. Similarly, awareness of these opportunities must be disseminated to all settlement staff.

Finding joy in settlement work

> ***'There's been so much joy in this work. Many of our clients come to MercyCare through word of mouth, not through formal referrals from other agencies. Often, their friends tell them, "If you go to MercyCare, you will achieve a positive outcome." Every day, I walk out of work feeling genuinely happy. I know I've offered my clients respect, understanding, and the freedom to make their own decisions. That means everything to me.'***

Afsoun approaches her settlement work with an outcomes focus, defined by principles of dignity, access, safety and agency. The aim is simple: to make a difference in people's lives. When she can do this, she finds joy in her work.

Conclusion

Settlement Voices highlights the skills, insights, and contributions of settlement workers with lived experience of migration, displacement, and settlement. Their perspectives strengthen service delivery, build trust, and improve settlement outcomes. Their cultural identities and lived experiences elevate relationships with clients, supporting effective and responsive settlement. When involved in leadership, policy development, and program design, they offer grounded knowledge that reflects the realities of settlement in practice.

These strengths come with particular pressures. Lived experience workers often face burnout, blurred boundaries, uneven workloads, vicarious trauma, and disproportionate impacts from geopolitical events and domestic tensions. Without the right supports, the very qualities that make lived experience staff so invaluable can also leave them at risk.

Settlement organisations, leaders, managers and staff (both with and without lived experience of settlement in Australia), should continue to recognise and value lived experience as professional expertise, while building the scaffolding of tailored support around it. Settlement leaders should create clear pathways for professional development and leadership, ensuring that lived experience workers can advance and shape the sector's future. Involvement of lived experience staff in decision-making at all levels should be standard practice, with their perspectives embedded in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services. These efforts must be supported by regular supervision, manageable workloads, and targeted wellbeing resources, so that lived experience workers can sustain their contributions and continue to strengthen the sector.

For government, lived experience voices identified the benefits of longer-term funding arrangements that enable organisations to provide these supports: multi-year contracts, resourced professional development, and program guidelines that reflect workforce sustainability needs. Policy development should draw on a range of lived experience voices, recognising the diversity, expertise and critical insights of these perspectives.

For all settlement sector stakeholders, the priority should be to move from recognition to structured support. The accounts in this report offer pathways forward: with strengthened conditions, lived experience workers can deliver even stronger services, build even deeper community trust, and further improve settlement outcomes for refugees and migrants.

Settlement services are made up of committed and values-driven professionals, including frontline workers, program managers and executives. The insights of lived experience workers complement and bolster this broader expertise. Supporting lived experience workers is about ensuring policy and practice are informed by those who understand settlement both personally and professionally. The *Settlement Voices* report outlines evidence for why lived experience matters and how it might be better recognised across the sector for the benefit of settlement services, settlement staff, settlement clients and communities, and wider Australia.

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