Support for Older Victorian Migrants and Refugees: A Research Agenda

During projects conducted between 2016 and 2020, our qualitative research has examined the experiences and practices of ageing and aged care support of older adults from diverse migrant and refugee backgrounds who are living in Victoria.

We have used a range of interview, ethnographic and participatory action research methods to work with the following groups:

- Older Karen adults from refugee backgrounds living in Melbourne and regional Victoria
- Older Sinhalese adults living in Melbourne
- Older Somali adults living in Melbourne
- Older English and Irish adults living in Melbourne and regional Victoria

On the basis of our research, we have developed a number of insights into the experiences, opportunities and support available to older Victorian migrants and refugees, including:

1. **Culture matters**
   Older adults we spoke to in the Karen, Sinhalese and Somali communities noted that the norms of ageing and aged care support in broader Australian society are different to the norms and expectations that are valued in their countries of origin. For example:
   - Somali and Karen older adults prefer multigenerational households, in which they can provide grandparent care and receive familial care and support. However, one of the obstacles to multigenerational households is the relative lack of appropriate and affordable housing;
   - Somali, Karen and Sinhalese older adults who need aged care prefer familial care, and particularly care from daughters and granddaughters. However, they note that the requirement and opportunities for women to participate in paid employment mean that this care is not always available; we noted that paid care roles filed an important gap in this respect, with some daughters earning a caregiving payment to provide care for older dependent kin;
   - The preference for familial care translates into frequent stigmatisation of paid aged care services, and a particularly strong stigma associated with residential aged care and mental health care. It was widely perceived that 'ending up in a nursing home' was an indicator of poor familial bonds and/or familial care opportunities, which in turn reflect poorly on the older person's record of sustaining their families over time;
   - Community groups provide a valuable source of support for older adults in the Sinhalese, Karen and Somali communities, both in providing and coordinating aged care services and in providing opportunities to create and sustain a sense of belonging.

2. **Aged care services that offer preferred languages are limited**

   The widespread preference for familial care was cultural, but also the result of limited access to aged care services that are provided in preferred languages and with relevant cultural knowledge. This was particularly acute in regional Victoria, where community

organisations are smaller, providing fewer opportunities to provide culturally specific and language specific aged care services.

3. **Distant care and support is valued**
Most of the older adults we spoke to, regardless of language or cultural background, maintained strong bonds of support and care with people living in other countries. For example
- Older Somali, Karen and Sinhalese adults reported sending money to family members and communities in their countries of origin, including to contribute to healthcare costs of kin overseas
- Older Somali, Karen, Sinhalese, British and Irish adults all reported sending and receiving emotional care and support with family members and friends living in other countries, and relying heavily on smartphones to exchange this care via video and audio calls
- Older adults from all groups reported accessing healthcare information from trusted services, family and friends in the home country

4. **Access to digital technologies is essential**
The wellbeing of older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds is heavily reliant on their access to digital communication technologies. These technologies are used in a range of ways, including, for example:
- To access trusted health information, purchase preferred natural health remedies and access relevant health professionals from the country of origin, in a preferred language and cultural framework
- To access and deliver emotional support and care to family and friends living in other countries, including the country of origin
- To access preferred cultural products, such as religious services and television programs, in order to support a sense of belonging within Australia
- Older adults report feeling more "at home" in Australia once they are able to connect to their transnational networks as freely and richly as they can with their proximate family members and friends.
- Without digital access, older people can feel isolated; alternatively, digital access can enhance feelings of belonging and wellbeing.

5. **Access to digital technologies often relies on support from others**
When English language literacy is limited, older adults from migrant and refugee backgrounds rely heavily on support from others in order to be able to access the digital technologies that are critical to their wellbeing.
- Younger women are often key supports in providing access to digital technologies, creating a gendered and generational caregiving burden
- Independent access to digital technologies, e.g. through community groups, is a preferred means of building skills and facilitating wellbeing, but availability of programs and supports in relevant languages and community contexts is limited
- While English language literacy is a focus for new humanitarian arrivals, a focus on digital literacy would also be beneficial for older adults.
    o Integrating more smartphone learning into older adults' education in Australia is something that could be of significant benefit. Digital literacy is important

in itself, but it is also complementary to developing English literacy. Being digitally literate is an advantage when trying to improve a person's English – just as English literacy is an advantage when seeking to improve digital literacy skills.

- o Being provided with a smartphone, being helped to set up an email or social media account or being taught how to explore the internet could greatly benefit older adults' wellbeing; it could help them remain connected with people, culture and events in their homeland and/or other parts of the world. All of this is to say nothing of the many domestic advantages digital literacy could have for older people in terms of accessing public health information, paying bills, receiving payments and accessing education.
- o Education and support provided in preferred languages and social contexts is essential to help older adults navigate significant misinformation campaigns on social media platforms and avoid online scams

Further Information

Further information about the findings summarised above are available in the following resources, copies of which can be provided upon request:

Resources informed by Research

Evidence-based tips for enhancing health and wellbeing of Karen people (2020)
https://opal.latrobe.edu.au/articles/composition/Evidence-based_tips_for_enhancing_health_and_wellbeing_of_Karen_people_in_Bendigo/14220128

Healthy futures for Karen people in Bendigo (2020)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5ZBhQR7h3Q

Healthy futures for Karen people in Bendigo: Healthcare responses (2020)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLmZXTk50ms

Research publications

- *additional research publications from this research are currently under peer review; copies are available upon request*

Baldassar, L and Wilding, R 2020 Migration, aging and digital kinning: The role of distant care support networks in experiences of aging well. *The Gerontologist* 60(2): 313-321. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnz156

Baldassar, L, Wilding, R and Worrell, S 2020 Elderly migrants, digital kinning and digital home making across time and distance. In B Pasveer, O Synnes and I Moser (eds) *Ways of Making Home in Care for Later Life*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Nunn, C, Wilding, R, McKinnon, K, Ku, HG, Myint, GPRL, Taveesuupmai, P, O'Keefe, M and Graves, K 2021 Promoting healthy futures in a rural refugee settlement location: A community-based participatory research intervention. *Journal of Sociology* https://doi.org/10.1177/14407833211003204

Wilding, R and Baldassar, L 2018 Ageing, migration and new media: The significance of transnational care. *Journal of Sociology* 54(2): 226-235. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783318766168

Wilding, R and Malta, S 2018 Not so ubiquitous: Digital inclusion and older adults in Australia. In M Ragnedda & B Mutsvairo (eds) *Digital Inclusion*. Lexington Books.

Wilding, R, Baldassar, L, Gamage, S, Worrell, S and Mohamud, S (2020) Digital media and the affective economies of transnational families. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23(5): 639-55. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1367877920920278

Worrell, S 2021 From language brokering to digital brokering: Refugee settlement in a smartphone age. Social Media and Society 7(2): https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20563051211012365

Authors of this submission

This submission has been prepared by the teams of researchers undertaking analysis for the Victorian component of the ARC Discovery Project, *Ageing and New Media: A New Analysis of Older Australians' Support Networks*, the La Trobe University – Manchester Metropolitan University funded project, *Healthy Futures: Understanding Enablers and Barriers to Refugee-Background Community Engagement with Health and Wellbeing Across the Life Course*, and the La Trobe University PhD thesis, *Karen Humanitarian Migrants and Video Calling: Digital Brokering in a Smartphone Age*, as follows:

- Associate Professor Raelene Wilding (La Trobe University)
- Dr Shane Worrell (La Trobe University)
- Dr Shashini Gamage (La Trobe University)
- Samiro Mohamud (La Trobe University)

The research informing this submission includes the following lead researchers:

- Professor Loretta Baldassar (University of Western Australia)
- Dr Caitlin Nunn (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Related research outputs, from our work with older adults with migrant and refugee backgrounds who live in other parts of Australia, include the following:

Brandhorst, Baldassar and Wilding, (2021) The need for a 'migration turn' in aged care policy. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1629893

Juul. Wilding and Baldassar (2019) The best day of the week. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16061000

Millard, Baldassar and Wilding (2018) The significance of digital citizenship in the well-being of older migrants. *Public Health*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2018.03.005