



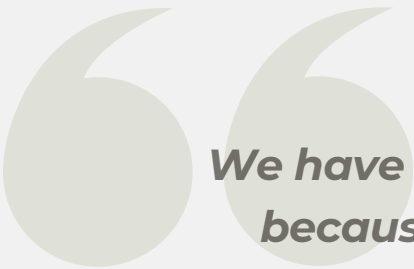
Australian Muslim Women's
Centre for Human Rights

Equality without exception



Stable Ground: Newly arrived Palestinian communities' experiences of settlement and service access

Research Report



*We have hope every morning to have good news,
because they told us they will send [the visa]
approval in the mailbox... We are not standing on
stable ground... we don't know the future.*

- Salwa, 42 y.o.

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Visual Design Rationale

Tatreez (embroidery) art has been used on the front cover to represent a cultural tradition long practiced by Palestinian village women and passed down from mother to daughter. Once a daily craft shared across generations, tatreez continues to be woven today by Palestinian women as an act of cultural preservation and resilience in the face of ongoing colonial erasure.

Throughout the document, we have used tones of olive and green to represent the olive trees of Palestine. Olive trees have become a central symbol within the cultural and historical heritage of the Palestinian people. The olive harvest season is both an agricultural and cultural event, bringing families and communities together.

Both the olive tree and tatreez has deeply influenced the creative works of Palestinian artists, poets, and storytellers, and represents 'sumud' (صمود), a political concept meaning "a steadfast connection to the land" and "resilience."

Artwork: Front cover art by Styled by Haya

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About AMWCHR

This report has been developed by the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR). AMWCHR is an organisation of Muslim women leading change to advance the rights and status of Muslim women in Australia.

We bring 35 years of experience in providing one-to-one support to Muslim women, young women and children, developing and delivering community education and capacity-building programs to raise awareness and shift prevailing attitudes. We also work as advocates - researching, publishing, informing policy decisions and reform initiatives as well as offering training and consultation to increase sector capacity to recognise and respond to the needs of Muslim women, young women, and children.

As one of the leading voices for Muslim women's rights in Australia, we challenge the most immediate and pertinent issues Muslim women face every day. We promote Muslim women's right to self-determination - recognising the inherent agency that already exists, and bringing issues of inequality and disadvantage to light.

AMWCHR works with individuals, the community, partner organisations and government to advocate for equality within the Australian context. This report is designed to highlight learnings and insights from our work in community to contribute to greater awareness and understanding of the unique challenges and barriers facing Palestinian communities in relation to the ongoing crisis in Palestine. And further to make recommendations on ways to address some of these challenges and to strengthen support systems to enable equitable and meaningful access to relevant services.

Acknowledgement of Country

AMWCHR acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands our organisation is located on and where we conduct our work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present. AMWCHR is committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters, and seas and their rich contribution to society.

This report recognises that gender, race, and religion intersect to create multiple forms of discrimination and violence against Muslim women, particularly in a context of growing Islamophobia. It also recognises that preventing prejudice in all forms is bound to the struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Before we can successfully tackle issues within our communities, we must address the ongoing impacts of colonisation, systemic racism, and discrimination in all its forms in this country.



Lastly, this research would not have been possible without the lived experience participants and community members who shared their stories with us, along with practitioners who provided crucial insights. We extend our deepest thanks and gratitude to these participants, who engaged with the project in the hopes that their stories could create change that will benefit their communities at large.

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Foreword, Nasser Mashni

“We are not standing on stable ground.” Salwa’s words capture both the uncertainty and the courage that run through this report.

This report is both a timely and harrowing exposé into the situation being faced by newly arrived Palestinian refugees.

Since late 2023, Palestinian families have arrived in Australia carrying little more than suitcases, they carry grief, fractured futures, and the fierce hope that this country might offer safety, dignity, and the chance to rebuild.

The Australian Muslim Women’s Centre for Human Rights has borne witness to these families’ most challenging moments, navigating visas and landlords, classrooms, health clinics, a life of limbo and long nights of worry. Their work, grounded in community and delivered in-language and in-culture, has created the first footholds of stability for this community, where there was none.

The findings are clear. Visa precarity makes everything harder, housing, employment, study,

healthcare, even the simple act of planning a week ahead. When rights are provisional, exploitation flourishes and wellbeing deteriorates.

The solutions are equally clear;

- Provide immediate permanent humanitarian visas.
- Provide additional financial aid and ensure flexible financial assistance so families can meet immediate needs while they work toward independence.
- Provide further funding for employment and education.
- Provide additional funding to community-led services to deliver fit-for-purpose programs and services that are tailored for the needs of newly arrived Palestinian communities.
- Provide increased housing support to Palestinian communities.
- Provide increased funding for mental health supports, including for children.
- Back employment, education, and rental security.
- Fund community-led services that understand and know the terrain.

This is not charity; it is good policy.

When new arrivals are safe, housed, and able to contribute, our whole society benefits. The Palestinian community offers skills, enterprise, culture, and a profound commitment to family and education. Afforded the appropriate opportunities, they will enrich every field they enter.

This report offers the reader an opportunity to enact the very best spirit of accountability and care, accountability to the values we claim as a nation, and care for people who have already endured too much.

The emotional and physical toll endured by these Palestinians must be eased and serve as a learning opportunity to inform future governments, services and communities deliver a support system that allows for the stable ground that every family deserves.

On behalf of the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network, I would like to offer my thanks to the women, men and young people who entrusted their stories to this project, I am also indebted to AMWCHR's staff and partners who turned those stories into practical, concrete recommendations.

The Australia Palestine Advocacy Network endorses this report and urges the Government and its agencies to urgently adopt its recommendations.

Yours truly,

Australia Palestine Advocacy Network

Nasser Mashni

President





Executive Summary

**Children from our Newly Arrived Palestinian Group taking part in beach and water-safety training.*

Since late 2023, the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) has been providing support to Palestinian families who have arrived in Australia following the outbreak of violence in Gaza, through direct case management services and community-based support programs. In this time, we have directly supported over 250 women, men, and children. Throughout our service provision, we have seen the impacts of a precarious visa situation, financial insecurity and poverty, and severe mental health issues as a result of the trauma families have endured. We have also seen the challenges and barriers families have faced when attempting to access supports in Australia to facilitate settlement, and how these barriers have exacerbated feelings of isolation and hopelessness, and negatively impacted wellbeing.

Consequently, AMWCHR undertook this research project to document these issues. The aim of this project was to explore Victorian Palestinian communities' experiences of settlement and access to services, particularly with relation to essential material, physical, and emotional needs. Through interviews with AMWCHR Case Managers, Programs Coordinators, and Palestinian community members, as well as analysis of session reports from our community programs, we identified that newly arrived Palestinian families continue to face challenges with relation to visa insecurity, housing, employment, economic security, healthcare, and transport.

A range of services were available for Palestinian families to support them in meeting their needs upon arrival in Australia. These services were formal and informal, specialist and generalist, community-led and 'mainstream'. Each had an important role to play in facilitating settlement support and filling gaps caused by structural barriers such as visa restrictions. Some services or organisations were providing support unfunded by governments and operating on a volunteer and community fundraising basis. Others had received funding from different state and federal government sources, including 'social cohesion' and 'Australian Palestinian, Muslim and Arab Communities (APMAC) Support Project' funding streams.

While significant needs were present, research and program participants had mixed experiences of the services they had engaged with to address them. Some of the barriers that prevented participants' engagement with services included ineligibility, services not being available in their area, language barriers, and limited awareness of what services were available and how to access these supports. Other issues arose post-engagement and included challenges such as limited communication between the service and participants, options and structures not matching participant needs, and a lack of culturally relevant and sensitive programs.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, and to improve the provision of timely and relevant supports to allow Palestinian communities to safely and securely settle in Victoria, AMWCHR makes the following recommendations to governments and services:

Recommendation 1: For the Australian Government to immediately provide permanent humanitarian visas for all Palestinians who have arrived in Australia from Gaza

Recommendation 2: That the government provide additional resources to community services to allow for the dissemination of financial aid

Recommendation 3: That governments and universities provide further pathways for employment and education opportunities for newly arrived Palestinian communities

Recommendation 4: That state and federal governments provide additional funds to ensure community-led services are adequately resourced to deliver fit-for-purpose programs and services that are tailored for the needs of newly arrived Palestinian communities

Recommendation 5: That increased housing supports are provided to Palestinian communities

Recommendation 6: That governments support increased accessibility of mental health programs and supports for Palestinian communities, including children and young people

Recommendation 7: That services delivering programs and supports to Palestinian communities acknowledge the impacts of anti-Palestinian racism, Islamophobia, and discrimination and facilitate a safe environment for Palestinians to engage and access supports



Introduction

**Children from our Newly Arrived Palestinian Group create tote bag art.*

The dispossession of the Palestinian people and the occupation of Palestinian land has been ongoing for over a century, with the impacts of the occupation on Palestinian people's safety, wellbeing and self-determination impossible to understate. Today, Israel controls the autonomy of almost 7 million Palestinians across Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, with the levels of restriction and control varying depending on a person's place of residence. The occupation of Palestinian land and settler violence in the West Bank, the blockade of Gaza, and the government restrictions on Palestinians within Israel have resulted in an apartheid system whereby Palestinians are faced with daily violence and denied equal rights and freedom from oppression (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

In October 2023, Hamas, which governs the Gaza strip, broke through the borders of Gaza and killed approximately 1300 Israelis in southern Israel. Hamas also detained 240 Israeli hostages (Elmali, 2023). In response to this attack, Israel launched a military operation in Gaza, which has been ongoing since October 2023. In this time, Israel has indiscriminately bombed heavily populated areas, destroyed hospitals, schools, and residential buildings, forcibly displaced 90 per cent of the population, and prevented vital aid including food and medical supplies from entering Gaza.

As of the time of writing, more than 67,000 Palestinians[1] have been killed, majority of whom are women and children (UNOCHA, 2025). Israel has also killed hundreds of journalists and aid workers based in Gaza (CPJ, 2025; UN, 2025a). These numbers do not include the many more Palestinians who have already and will continue to die from reproductive, communicable, and non-communicable diseases related to the destruction of healthcare infrastructure, famine, and lack of shelter (Khatib et al., 2024).

Israel has used tactics that constitute war crimes, including starvation of the population through its total blockade of any imports into Gaza, sexual violence and rape, wilful and indiscriminate killing, and collective punishment (Amnesty International, 2025; UN, 2025b). Hundreds of Palestinians have also been killed by Israeli soldiers while collecting aid from distribution sites (Al Jazeera, 2025). Women and girls have died from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth as a result of the conditions imposed by Israel, including restricting access to reproductive healthcare. These are acts that 'amount to the crime against humanity of extermination' (UN, 2025b), and in September of 2025, a United Nations commission of inquiry determined that Israel has and is

[1] The total number of casualties is based on estimates reported by the Gaza Ministry of Health (MoH) as of October 2025. However, accurate reporting of mortality data has been severely hampered by Israel's military operations and the destruction of infrastructure. A February 2025 study utilising capture-recapture analysis involving data from MoH hospital lists, an MoH survey, and obituaries suggested an under-reporting of mortality rate of 41% (Jamaluddine et al., 2025).

[2] Fleeing the violence and destruction in Gaza is not simple. Israel, alongside Egypt, controls entry and exit into the territory. For those few who are permitted to exit, exorbitant fees – up to \$5000 US dollars in cash per person – can prevent families leaving.

continuing to commit genocide against the Palestinian people (UNHRC, 2025).

In response to the genocide and to escape the violence, Palestinians who have been able to leave Gaza[2] have begun resettling in other countries. Since October 2023, Australia has granted visas to 1,300 Palestinians, most of whom arrived in the country on tourist visas. While the tourist visas allowed families to arrive safely in the country, from the beginning of settlement, the visa situation also presented considerable challenges due to associated restrictions. While on these visas, families had the same rights as tourists travelling to Australia for a holiday; this meant they were unable to legally work, did not have access to any government supports including Medicare and Centrelink, and were ineligible for many other social service supports. The length of time spent on these visas varied, with Palestinians holding tourist visas for either one month, three months, or one year. The amount of time spent on tourist visas has played a significant role in the precarity of people's situations.

In late 2024, the Australian Government introduced a new visa pathway for Palestinians. This 'temporary humanitarian stay' pathway involved a two-step process: obtaining a Humanitarian Stay (Temporary) (subclass 449) visa, followed by a Temporary Humanitarian Concern (subclass 786) visa. The subclass 786 visa is not a permanent visa and is only valid for three years. If granted, this pathway allows Palestinians to access:

- study and employment rights
- special benefit payments
- Medicare services (for 786 visa holders only; 449 visa holders are not eligible for Medicare)
- Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP)
- Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program
- Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). (Department of Home Affairs, 2025b),

While the majority of Palestinians who have migrated to Australia since October 2023

have now moved on to the 786 visa, some remain on the 449 visa or bridging visas. This is a group that is not eligible for the full range of government supports (Amnesty International Australia, 2024). This process has also resulted in families moving back and forth between eligibility for certain supports as they go from one visa to another. Further, the length of time spent on bridging visas and 449 visas can vary considerably, with unexplained delays occurring for some applicants and not others, leading to differing rights and levels of visa precarity even among family members under the same roof. It has also meant that Palestinian communities' service and support access, and subsequent settlement journeys, have not been linear.

In response to the high need for supports for newly arrived Palestinian families, the Australian government announced several rounds of funding to increase service provision. This included over \$40 million to support programs for Palestinian, Arab and Muslim communities. These programs focussed on resettlement activities, community capacity building, financial aid, and preventing racism and Islamophobia (Department of Home Affairs 2025a). There are now a range of services, including the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights, that are providing supports to newly arrived Palestinian families through this funding package, as well as through national Settlement service streams.

Despite the provision of funding to increase support options for newly arrived Palestinian communities, there are likely to be considerable and continued support needs and barriers to service access experienced by the community. This may be due to the ongoing impacts of the precarious and restrictive visa situation, but also due to general barriers to supports shared with other migrant and Muslim communities, such as language barriers, lack of culturally appropriate programs, and lack of familiarity with Australian systems and services.

However, Palestinian communities are also likely to be faced with unique support needs, especially those related to managing the mental health impacts and trauma of their pre-settlement experiences (WHO, 2024).

This research seeks to document and understand these support needs, as well as Palestinian communities' experiences of services thus far. In doing so, service gaps can be highlighted to encourage greater resourcing of these areas and the provision of more effective supports to facilitate settlement and broader wellbeing of Palestinian families in Australia.





About this research

This project sought to explore Victorian Palestinian communities' experiences of settlement and awareness of and access to services, particularly with relation to essential material, physical, and emotional needs surrounding the ongoing crisis in Palestine. To highlight these experiences, needs, and support gaps, this research addressed the following research questions:

1. *What are the support needs of newly arrived Palestinian communities in Victoria?*
2. *What are the barriers and facilitators to the provision of accessible and high-quality services to meet community needs?*
3. *What complementary informal supports are community members engaging with to meet their needs?*
4. *Are there any service support gaps and if so, how can these gaps be addressed?*

To address the research questions, this exploratory project involved primary and secondary data collection and analysis in the form of:

- interviews with AMWCHR Programs Coordinators and Case Managers who have experience in providing programs and case management services to newly arrived Palestinian communities;
- interviews with Palestinian community members who arrived in Australia following the outbreak of violence in October 2023; and
- analysis of session reports from programs with newly arrived Palestinian community members in Victoria.

Interviews with Palestinian community members and AMWCHR staff lasted between 1-1.5 hours, and took place in person, online, and over the phone. In total, this research draws from interviews with three Programs Coordinators, two Case Managers, and interviews with seven lived experience participants. The session reports draw from weekly group programs with 90 newly arrived Palestinians (21 men, 37 women, and 32 young people).

Below is an overview of the demographics of the Palestinian community members who participated in an interview for this research. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this report and certain details changed to de-identify participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Month of arrival	Language/s spoken	Interpreter used (Y/N)
Layla	F	23	March 2024	Arabic, English, French	N
Wafaa	F	29	March 2024	Arabic	Y
Fatima	F	28	February 2024	Arabic	Y
Salwa	F	42	December 2023	Arabic, English	N
Mariam	F	33	May 2024	Arabic	Y
Ibrahim	M	37	May 2024	Arabic	Y
Amal	F	49	March 2024	Arabic	Y

It is important to acknowledge that this research is exploratory, drawing from a small sample of interviews and utilising secondary data analysis of session reports. While there was consistency in terms of the themes appearing in interviews and within community programs, this research does not claim to be representative of all Palestinian community members' experiences of settlement. Further research is needed to explore the breadth of experience and need across Palestinian communities who have recently arrived in Australia. However, due to the current lack of research on this topic, this report does provide an important indication of where additional focus and resources should be directed.



Research findings

Journeys to Australia

"I feel very lost. I feel safe and very thankful that I am safe but every day, I feel lost because I don't know where to start. It's a new life from scratch, what do I do?"

Before discussing Palestinian communities' experiences of settlement, and challenges families are facing in the settlement context, it is important to first highlight the circumstances that precipitated their arrival to Australia, and what it was like for community members to arrive in a new and unfamiliar country with little to no supports.

The interview participants we spoke with shared their own experiences or in the case of practitioner participants, the experiences of Palestinian community members they had supported. What was clear was that after experiencing indescribable violence and destruction of their homes and communities in Gaza, the journey to Australia was likewise traumatic and tumultuous, with the precarity of their situations resulting in high levels of stress and anxiety. Community members were grieving the lives they had left behind, and the futures they had been denied.

”

[Leaving Palestine] was more emotionally difficult because it's our country that we love. Even though we're used to war, we weren't used to a war at such a large scale like this. Leaving behind people that we love, knowing that we were leaving people behind...

– Wafaa, 29 y.o.

Of course it's a shock – culturally, for the weather, for everything. As for the trauma that we have; you have to now deal with people and smile in their face, even though you are struggling from inside and you have a big trauma, and you don't know the future.

– Layla, 23 y.o.

Following traumatic and precarious migration journeys, where the likelihood of ever arriving safely in Australia was unknown, participants shared what it was like to enter Australia. They described arriving with nothing, sometimes in the middle of the night. While some participants had family members in Australia who had arranged accommodation for them, others scrambled to locate housing immediately upon arrival.

During programs sessions with Palestinian communities, program participants described this early settlement period as particularly unstable, as families described their shock at the cost of food, housing, and other basic needs.

Families were unfamiliar with Australian norms, laws, and culture, and due to language barriers, were unsure who to look to in order to learn about Australian systems and meet their basic needs. In all, the trauma of war and displacement was compounded upon arrival in Australia, as there was often a gap between arrival and access to both formal and informal supports.



I feel very lost. I feel safe and very thankful that I am safe but every day, I feel lost because I don't know where to start. It's a new life from scratch, what do I do?

– Mariam, 33 y.o.

Palestinian families' needs post-settlement

Palestinian communities who had arrived in Australia following the crisis had several key and pressing needs. Some of these needs were more evident immediately following arrival, while others were ongoing and even escalating throughout the early settlement period. These needs included issues related to housing, food security, transport, education, employment, healthcare, economic independence, and mental health. . The vast majority – if not all – of these issues could be linked back to the severe visa restrictions imposed upon Palestinian community members, which limited their eligibility for many government supports and services, and denied them working rights. This section explores the visa situation and how Palestinian community members' needs are presenting upon arrival to Australia.

Visa issues

Of primary concern among the participants in this research and community members who attended our weekly sessions was the impact of Australia's visa system. This system restricted Palestinian community members' capacity to address their immediate needs and prevented them from having a sense of security and stability in Australia.

Practitioner participants suggested that many newly arrived Palestinians had been misled or misinformed about their visa situations and prospects in Australia. Palestinians who were overseas were told that the quickest way to get them to safety was through a tourist visa. However, there were then little concessions or supports to provide security and independence upon arrival. Instead, Palestinians were again encouraged to forego their applications for permanent protection in favour of a temporary visa.



[The tourist visa] was sold to them that this was the quickest visa to get them here. They come on student visas too... And now they're not eligible to roll onto the humanitarian visa until the student visa is finished. So, these people came here assuming they were going to get here and get support. Because this was what the government was suggesting. But when you come to Australia as visitor you're actually saying you're financially stable and you're not going to ask the government for money. So, they're making this promise. And the government, once they get here, they use that against them.

– AMWCHR Case Manager 1

While the temporary humanitarian stay visas allow Palestinians to have working rights and access to government services including Centrelink and Medicare, participants and community members spoke about the insecurity of the visa situation due to its temporary nature. Some also questioned why Palestinians would be ineligible for permanent protection visas, when they fit the criteria for one.



Other humanitarian visas are a guaranteed situation. They are PRs immediately. I think the Palestinians, even though they've come here for one year, their status has always been cast or instigated as if it's a burden. Firstly, they had to come on tourist [visas] and there was a lot of advocacy that had to happen before they could even be put on a bridging.



And then even the advocacy to push them into a humanitarian, they were rejected, and they were only given a temporary humanitarian visa. And temporary humanitarian visa means that it's very short term. There's no certainty as to what's going to happen after this. So, they don't know what the future in the next three to five years holds, which is very difficult for you to settle down... I think that uncertainty is very unhelpful for their mental wellbeing, for their notion as to whether they should settle down.

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 1

These visa restrictions have impacted community members' capacity to settle down in both a material as well as an emotional sense. Many spoke about their inability to plan for the future, or to pursue education and careers, because of their visas. Attending university or seeking further qualifications was near impossible due to being ineligible for government assistance such as HECS. Being unable to work, study, or even volunteer left community members with little hope and purpose in their days.



We remained on the visitor visa all this time. So, I started to find something voluntary, just to make something in my day. Because I wake up every day with nothing to do at all. I'm like a young lady; I need something to do... I tried to go to the library and ask them, "If you need any voluntary work, if you need anything." They said, "No, even voluntary they need the rights, working rights and security check, working with children check, police check. So, they need all this, and if I don't have working rights or other than this [tourist] visa rights, I can't work even on volunteer work. So, I keep going to the library as a pretend job. So, it's like a routine for me. I wake up, I dress formally as a job, and I go to the library. I go on my laptop and pretend that I have a job, or I have a routine, or I have a life.

– Layla, 23 y.o.



Every morning, my husband he runs to the mailbox to check if there is any news and he only finds the newspapers and magazines... We have hope every morning to have good news, because they told us they will send [visa] approval in the mailbox... my husband here, he has a plan to buy a food truck for example or to take a loan or something. I say to him don't do anything, we still don't have the proper visa, the good visa, so don't go for anything. We are not standing on stable ground, or so you have to wait... And we don't, we don't know the future.

– Salwa, 42 y.o.

We have that big language barrier, Arabic and English... When we first arrived, we were trying to enrol in an English course but because of the visa we were on, we were actually not allowed to be studying.

– Amal, 49 y.o.

These visa restrictions, and the consequential ineligibility for many government and non-government programs and services, left the responsibility of supporting newly arrived Palestinian families to the community, primarily established Palestinian communities. Many families relied on this community and familial support, especially in the initial period after settlement. While the support that was received was considerable, it also placed pressure on the individuals providing support who may themselves have been struggling in both a material sense, but also due to the collective trauma that Palestinian diaspora communities have experienced throughout the violence in Gaza. Adding to the already heavy pressures that many Palestinian communities were facing made some participants feel as if they were burdens; wanting to contribute but unable to due to the visa restrictions and barriers to financial independence. Many of the participants in the research spoke of the toll that it has taken to be so reliant on other community members, and to feel as if they have no independence. This was in stark contrast to their lives prior to displacement, where despite living under

Israel's blockade, individuals had careers, autonomy, and financial security. It was felt that the reliance on others to make ends meet could impact their sense of identity and self-worth.



There were so many of us in the house... every now and again, we tried to, like, help pay with the food and stuff... we felt very burdensome... The family we were living with wasn't charging us. They had food, and they were feeding us. But we didn't want to stay there for long because they [the host family] had their own lives to live.

– Fatima, 29 y.o.

They come on the visitor visa from their family members. So that family member can be an uncle who already has their four kids. How can you expect, you know, here on that income if I'm asking my nephew or his wife or family to come to support another family or something like that.

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 2

In all, findings show that many families' challenges upon settlement stemmed from their visa situations, which caused ineligibility for certain supports, but also left them in a precarious and unresolved visa situation. The restricted and temporary nature of the visas significantly impacted families' wellbeing, stability, future planning, access to resources, and hope for the future.

Housing security

What was clear from interviews and session reports, was that the visa situation, language barriers, unfamiliarity with Australian systems, and lack of access to financial resources caused families significant struggles in terms of meeting their basic needs. In particular, participants and community members spoke about the housing situation, which was incredibly precarious and a constant stress for families. Many families were moving from one short-term accommodation to another, especially in the initial stages of settlement. For those who were able to secure their own homes for their families, this housing was

characterised by overcrowding, a lack of basic amenities, and high rents.

Community members often felt compelled to accept housing that was subpar, and in some cases violated state tenancy regulations. As families did not have rental histories in Australia, real estate agencies and landlords would not accept their rental applications. This left families forced to accept private, high cost, cash-in-hand rentals with no rental contracts. The system was circular; a lack of rental histories meant families' applications were automatically rejected, but no rental histories could be established without first being approved. There were also experiences of landlords refusing to fix broken appliances or windows to ensure the house was functional and liveable. Participants in interviews as well as community programs described their houses as being cold during the winter and hot during the summer, with limited or no heating and cooling. Community members were concerned that raising complaints or advocating for themselves may place their visa situation at risk.



A big challenge is overcrowding. Many clients want to leave the house and move out by themselves, but it's expensive to live by themselves. Funding is limited and finding housing is hard because most of them are unemployed.

– AMWCHR Case Manager 1

When we first came, the main thing was housing because the people we were living with weren't very close and weren't related [to us], and I was pregnant, and I felt like we were a burden... because we were new to the country and don't know anything about this country, we didn't know how to find housing for ourselves, so we'd have to wait for my husband's relative to help us.. We felt like we were waiting around and were burdensome on people... the number one most important thing was the housing.

– Fatima, 29 y.o.



Inshallah, I want to feel like I am home. The house we are in right now, it is not home. It's too small, I know we won't last there much longer. I just want, I am just sick of moving and carrying bags.

– Mariam, 33 y.o.

To respond to housing shortages and access barriers, Palestinian and broader communities came together to provide necessary resources. Initially, friends, family members, or other community members provided properties for families to live in while more permanent housing was sought. However, accessing such housing, as mentioned, was incredibly challenging, and the families who had provided properties could not do so indefinitely. This left many Palestinian newly arrived families facing the prospect of homelessness, unable to come up with the funds to pay for a property on the private rental market, or barred from the private rental market altogether. All participants interviewed for this research described living with housing insecurity, with some already in rental arrears and questioning how they would be able to pay rent each month.



The rent. That's the most important thing right now. The rent. Because every month we're scared of how will we pay it next month.

– Wafaa, 29 y.o.

[Husband] he's still unemployed, and we are one month behind on the rent.

– Fatima, 28 y.o.

Employment, economic independence, and financial insecurity

“Sometimes they've got just \$6 in their bank account.

“How do you live for the next weeks?

It's just \$6?...”

A crucial issue that was central to a challenging and disrupted settlement was community members being prevented from achieving economic independence and financial security. These issues were often tied back to, again, the visa restrictions, which left many families unable to gain working rights as well as access to financial supports like Centrelink. However, in other cases, the barriers preventing employment and financial security were also attributed to a lack of recognition of overseas qualifications in Australia, or levels of English language proficiency. The structural barriers associated with the visa restrictions and lack of recognition of overseas qualifications, even for those who were permitted to work, left families facing considerable hardship, poverty, and financial insecurity. Oftentimes, the services that participants engaged with were unable to provide financial aid due to funding constraints, instead trying to work with families towards financial independence. However, where families were experiencing poverty and an inability to meet basic needs, focussing on the long-term goal of financial independence was challenging amidst this immediate risk and need.



He [husband] works but sometimes it feels like almost impossible to cover the expenses because there are so many of them. So, there is the bills, the rent, the insurance, running the car, food... So, it just feels like there is so many expenses in this country compared to the hours he is getting at work.

– Salwa, 42 y.o.



Sometimes they've got just \$6 in their bank account. How do you live for the next weeks? It's just \$6?... So, when we refer these cases to services it's very disheartening, I think, for the clients to be told 'we can't help you unless you're willing to work towards financial independence', because it's an assumption that they don't want to work towards financial independence. Most of them would love to be financially independent, but there's lots of systemic barriers towards achieving that... And sometimes they need the money to pay the next bill.

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 1

Not only have these structural barriers left families facing poverty, it has also left newly arrived Palestinian community members open to exploitation. Several participants spoke of the reliance on cash-in-hand work to make ends meet, which could place individuals in risky or exploitative situations.



I don't have any choice. Because no one helps us. No support from the government... We started to work cash on hand. I work in a sweet shop. How much do they give me in an hour? \$7 per hour... and I have to, there is no choice because we don't have any support.

– Layla, 23 y.o.

We had a man who was working cash in hand, and he got injured and he will have this injury for life. And because of the situation he didn't have work cover or anything. So, he's now disabled and can't work but is still facing pressure and needs to support himself.

– AMWCHR Case Manager 1

For parents who were ready and able to find work, again, visa restrictions made this untenable, as families were ineligible for child care subsidies and therefore unable to afford full-price fees. This meant that many families were living on a single income, if any. For single mothers, these restrictions further impeded financial stability, but also general

independence and capacity to undertake daily tasks required to facilitate their settlement and wellbeing, such as attending appointments or classes. Many women in interviews and in the community programs described their goals of learning English or gaining further skills or qualifications through short courses in order to broaden their employment prospects. However, caring responsibilities amidst limited access to child care as well as removal from familial supports had often delayed or prevented these ambitions from coming to fruition. This demonstrates the specific ways in which visa restrictions intersect with gendered caring responsibilities, placing women and especially single mothers at significant disadvantage.



A lot of the mums are under pressure.... I don't think they're eligible for free kinder. Childcare is expensive so I don't know if it's something that they want to spend money on especially if they have one or no income.

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 3

One of my biggest issues is that I'm trying to find childcare, but I can't... When they were babies, it was a bit easier because they'd stay still, but now they want to move around, and I have to take them to all my appointments with me... It's \$15 per hour per child. So, if I have a two-hour appointment, that's going to be \$60. And we don't work or have an income. So, \$60 is a lot of money.

– Fatima, 29 y.o.

I would like to do a course like a NDIS course like a support worker or something to work. But yes, I can't get a full-time job because my son is young, and I have to do the school pickup and drop off and he still needs a lot of my attention.

– Salwa, 42 y.o.

Healthcare

Newly arrived Palestinian communities' arrival to Australia is precipitated by experiences of war, violence, displacement, and ethnic cleansing. These are severe experiences that have an immeasurable impact on individual and community mental health and wellbeing.

"I feel like this is too much for a girl my my age. This is why I feel myself, 70 years old sometimes, and nothing makes me happy... There is something missing in my life."

These impacts were evident throughout this research. Participants shared experiences of losing loved ones, their homes, their communities, and their culture. They also spoke of survivor's guilt and expressed deep emotional distress regarding the family they had left behind in Palestine.

I feel like this is too much for a girl my age. This is why I feel myself, 70 years old sometimes, and nothing makes me happy... I'm not happy because I don't feel myself settled. I don't know, there is something missing in my life.

— Layla, 23.y.o.

I still don't feel stilled even when yes, I am in a safe place where lots of people they try to help. We appreciate that, but still, as long as the war is going there and we still have lots of friends and families and relatives still [in Palestine], it's like your son is bleeding far away from you and you can't do anything. How can you live normally? You can't live normal like other people here it is very hard for us. Few people they understand, and they want us to live normally like nothing is happening.

— Salwa, 42 y.o.

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I'm anxious and I'm depressed, and I have lots of sadness... I have been seeing a counsellor at Foundation House too fortnightly, because things that should be making me happy, I don't feel happiness that I know I'm supposed to feel... most of the time, I am overcome of sadness.

— Mariam, 33 y.o.

Community members reported both physical and psychological symptoms of their mental health challenges, such as insomnia, lack of sleep, and loss of appetite. Women in interviews and in community programs reported that children were also experiencing night terrors and disrupted sleep.

"My kids saw things that they should never have to see [in Gaza]..."

This left parents facing their own mental health crises, while also managing the mental health and wellbeing of their children and families. There were severe needs presenting in children and young people, that participants felt were unaddressed and potentially escalating. Children were facing challenges settling into a new environment, adapting to significant cultural shifts, and building their social connections. Parents could feel at a loss as to how best to support their children in light of the trauma, social disconnection, and consequent mental health issues they were experiencing.

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My kids saw things that they should never have to see [in Gaza]... when we first arrived, all three were very bad at day and night. So, if they hear a loud truck or a loud aeroplane, or any loud noises, they were very jumpy. Now they are a bit better during the day, but at nighttime, all of the kids still get nightmares. My son sleepwalks and my daughter has very bad night terrors.

— Mariam, 33 y.o.

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Actually, till now they don't want they don't like to go out a lot or to make friends even. Until now, every, everything I don't want to say everything but maybe always they ask when are we going to visit our country again? When are we going back to visit, I want to see my friend, like this. They still miss their home, their grandparents, they still miss their country so much it's very hard to them. Everything is completely different, the regime, the system of schools, it is not like ours, it is not like ours sorry, so it is difficult... It's not their culture but they are trying their best to adapt and to adjust.

– Salwa, 42 y.o.

While AMWCHR practitioners reported that many casework clients and program participants are in need of mental health supports, there was also a belief that accessing such supports, even when it was accessible, wasn't always a priority. This was attributed to families being in 'settlement mode', meaning they are so focussed on meeting their most basic and immediate needs – such as keeping food on the table – that issues such as mental health aren't able to be prioritised. Some participants also spoke about readiness to engage with mental health supports; that this may be a slow process for some within the community, due to never having accessed clinical psychological supports before, and also cultural beliefs or hesitations surrounding the purpose and necessity of such supports.

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At the moment they're in settlement mode but once they settle down these things with come up and they will realise how much they need this. It's cultural too. They won't sit down and say they need help.

– AMWCHR Case Manager 2

[My son goes] to see a psychologist. But my other children, they don't believe in these things. Actually, in our culture we don't believe so we don't admit it [needing help]. We need someone to help us, like, encouragement.

– Salwa, 42 y.o.

However, the health issues that many community members are experiencing are not only related to mental health but physical health too. As the settlement journey continues, participants shared that more and more health issues were arising.

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I think the other thing we're also dealing with people who were living for some time during the beginning stages of the ethnic cleansing, they were displaced. They had to move out and face quite a difficult journey coming here. It had placed a lot of toll on their physical wellbeing. And so, when they came here, when things start settling down, they've managed to find a house, even though it's not perfect. I think that's where the bodily functions start giving way because they've been surviving on adrenaline, you know, mental adrenaline. So, the body functions start giving way. You hear of men having back pains, you know, certain diseases coming into play

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 1

Unfortunately, while there were severe needs present, there were considerable barriers to accessing support to address health concerns. Many within the community relied upon social services to pay for healthcare upfront due to visa restrictions that left Palestinians ineligible for Medicare. Private health insurance wasn't a viable option for many families due to high costs and long waiting periods for certain treatments. The challenges accessing health services were also attributed to the structure and complexity of the system. Even those who were eligible for Medicare, and could access supports, doing so wasn't always easy or achievable – at least not without intensive supports. Newly arrived Palestinians in need of disability supports, for example, could be faced with prohibitive costs for assessments, specialist appointments, and treatment options. The process was arduous, and left families for long stretches without adequate treatments due to the complexity of the system.

Mothers, in turn, took on roles of carers for children, husbands, and other family members with physical or mental health issues, as navigating systems became a full-time job. Participants also shared the challenges of accessing women's health services, including pre- and post-natal care. Some families, again, were paying for prenatal care up front due to ineligibility for Medicare. Even when services were covered by Medicare, Australia's systems were felt to be confusing, complex, and expensive.

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And things like NDIS. The slowness. It's so slow. This is why we're having all these issues. Some of the clients have children with behavioural issues because of the trauma and even to get them diagnosed to be able to start medication it took them forever to be able to do that. They are sent around and around to different services, and there are waiting lists, then multiple specialists, different tests. And some of these assessments are over \$1000. With no one to guide the women, it's impossible.

– AMWCHR Case Manager 1

Where I didn't know how to get the help, is that my son needs two surgeries... just being able to get the information about surgeries for my son has felt really overwhelming. I don't know the exact process or vaguely how things get done.

– Fatima, 29 y.o.

Transport

“I've got lost many times and I cry in the street I didn't know what to do.”

One critical issue that many newly arrived Palestinian community members are facing is challenges surrounding transport. Participants in our research as well as community members who attended AMWCHR programs spoke about transport issues impacting their level of access to services, engagement with the wider community, and employment opportunities.

Many were dependent on public transport systems, which could be unreliable, expensive, time consuming, and complex to learn how to use, especially for those with language barriers.

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We moved here and it's big and wide and everything is really far apart. So, at the start I was really anxious about catching the bus and the train, because I would get scared about if I'll be able to get back home... I'll do the short trips now on public transport but if I have to go somewhere further away, I can't.

– Mariam, 33 y.o.

It was very, very, very difficult especially here in Australia it is a very big country. I've got lost many times and I cry in the street like I didn't know what to do. I go from the ride or the lift. It's very big, you know, I had to know how to use Google Maps, and the buses – I was always taking the wrong bus. And this was making me frustrated, depressed, just wasting my time outside just in the public transportation.

– Salwa, 42 y.o.

The lack of transport options for families contributed to their isolation. Many in the community programs spoke of being located far from services that were supporting their settlement, with no support options available in their local areas. One interview participant spoke about the weekly challenge of navigating public transport while carrying material aid and food boxes. Many women had also not yet learnt to drive and expressed a desire to obtain their licences. Oftentimes, the cost of doing this independently was prohibitive, there were limited organisations providing supports for driving lessons, and the programs that did exist were oversubscribed or had long wait lists. A further challenge was that families did not have access to cars, or if they did, were concerned about the cost of registration, insurance, petrol, and maintenance.



Most of the women can't drive and stuff like that. And why will they drive for 30 minutes to pay for the transport and, you know, pay their petrol and stuff. So, I think it's of quite a big hurdle in our work. Transport is quite a big hurdle for our work.

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 2

Overall, transport was seen as a key facilitator for settlement, as it allowed families to access services, attend programs, maintain social connections, and manage day-to-day activities. While some community members were on their way towards obtaining their licences through the support of local services, the high costs associated with lessons, completing the test, and owning a car was the most significant barrier to doing so.

Strengthening systems of support for newly arrived Palestinian families

The above needs that newly arrived Palestinian communities are presenting with during settlement necessitate engagement with various local, government, and community services. However, accessing these services could be challenging due to the isolation many families experienced upon arrival, language barriers, and lack of knowledge or awareness of the services available. Many community members, did, however, become linked with organisations. These organisations were made known through word of mouth via family or other community members, or through community groups on social media or messaging platforms such as WhatsApp.

The types of services accessed varied considerably. Some were formal specialist services and set up to provide supports to Palestinian, Muslim, Arabic-speaking, or broader multicultural communities. Other services were more 'mainstream', catering to community members across different cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. Some community-led organisations were providing support unfunded by governments and

operating on a volunteer and community fundraising basis. Other services had received funding from different sources such as state and federal government, including 'social cohesion' and 'Australian Palestinian, Muslim and Arab Communities (APMAC) Support Project' funding streams. Each had an important role to play in facilitating settlement support and filling gaps caused by structural barriers such as visa restrictions.

The primary services that community members were engaged with were those providing supports around legal and migration issues, housing, and settlement. Settlement services could provide supports around a range of issues through case management and community programs, facilitating community members' engagement with education, healthcare services, legal services, employment opportunities, English language classes, or other supports to establish independence.

Unfortunately, the experiences of such services were mixed. Interview and program participants reported disappointment in services, and there appeared to be a disconnect between what agencies were providing, and what families were most in need of. This could result in unmet expectations, as well as the practical reality that families were unable to address basic needs. What families were often most in need of was financial support, which would allow them to pay rent, buy groceries and medicine, and pay for transport. However, most services were unable to provide untied financial aid or rent assistance.



They have high expectations of services. You know that sometimes services should be able to provide what they need and realistically lots of agencies don't provide financial support or financial like rent assistance kind of thing... So, there is a gap between what they actually need versus what is provided.

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 1



The first house that [an organisation] provided for us, that was for a couple of months, and then we had to move out because they said, well, you need to continue paying the rent. We couldn't afford to because we didn't have jobs yet, and my husband actually got into an accident, so he wasn't able to work.

– Wafaa, 29 y.o.

Participants also described some services, particularly more mainstream services, as being unprepared to provide supports to Palestinian families due to limited understanding of culture and language, and inappropriate planning or program delivery. For example, services not having Arabic-speaking staff available, being insensitive to gendered norms, or delivering the program or service in a geographical area that is inaccessible for the vast majority of community members due to transport constraints. There also appeared to be a lack of communication between some services and families, perhaps due to capacity issues within the services. However, for the families on the receiving end of this silence, it could be extremely stressful.



They said if you need any help, you can email us. If you need service or anything, you can email us. They said, "We will reply immediately." I waited for one month, no one replied. I sent them another email in a polite way, no one sent me.

– Layla, 23 y.o.

We'd feel like we'd be harassing, and we wouldn't be getting responses. We would have had to make contact multiple times... it would be something urgent; we wouldn't get a response for one to two weeks.

– Wafaa, 29 y.o.

A further challenge within the service system was related to the nature and intensity of the supports needed. For newly arrived Palestinians, navigating Australian systems was complex, confusing, and at times impossible.

Sometimes, these systems could be a closed loop with little logic or reason. This meant that families required intensive one-to-one supports to overcome barriers and achieve necessary administrative tasks. While some within the community had been able to access the level of support required, the needs were often greater than services had the capacity to offer.



I think they do have issues with mainstream providers and it being hard for them to wrap their heads around the service systems and legal requirements in Australia. For example, one of the girls wanted to get her licence but she needed a certain number of points of ID, and she only had her passport. So VicRoads suggested she open a bank account. . I went to help her open a bank account but then the same thing happened and to open a bank account she also needed multiple types of ID... basically there's a lot of issues they come across that's like that. And the person they're talking to can't do anything about it because it's a systems thing and so then they're stuck.

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 3

However, participants also shared many positive experiences of services that went beyond their remit to attempt to understand participants' needs and provide extra supports. This alleviated some stress for families, who had often initially faced significant challenges in accessing appropriate services and supports. These services were those that provided more tailored support, in locations relevant to the community, had experience working with Palestinian, Muslim, or Arabic-speaking communities, and were communicative and responsive to participants' needs. Often, these services were community-led. The community-led services who provided intensive supports were a 'bridge' to other mainstream services that families required, such as healthcare services, and also provided linkages to informal supports and social connections. The supports provided assisted newly arrived Palestinians in navigating Australia's complex systems. Participants described feeling understood by these services and staff members, who knew

the context of their migration, their settlement challenges, and the impact of the trauma they had experienced.



All of the children are seeing counsellors at Foundation House, and they are improving, it is just night times are the worst now... They are very happy when they know they are going to see the Foundation House counsellors

– Mariam, 33 y.o.

I had a medical emergency [related to pregnancy] ... and I got scared that there'd be a big medical bill, but because they [the hospital] knew that we had come here from Gaza and what was happening, I wasn't sent a bill. We didn't have to pay... We had the direct number to a midwife who was in there with us, and we could call them whenever I wanted to, so I'm happy with how they treated me... as the due date got closer, because I was catching transport for all my appointments and the hospital knew this, they gave me taxi vouchers... they gave me a breast pump – a brand new one – as a gift from the hospital as well.

– Fatima, 29 y.o.

I have got lots of [driving] classes from Women's Centre [AMWCHR]. I appreciate that and they are still helping the rest of my family... yeah, they helped me a lot, and the [driving] instructors they are amazing, all of them. They are really helpful. They are patient, and they know our case and our condition. They know that we came traumatised, so we take time [to learn]. It has been a year I'm learning, I don't focus well, I have lots of problems with concentration.

– Salwa, 42 y.o.

Alongside formal service providers, there was also a significant degree of support and aid provided by informal community groups. These supports sat in between those provided by organisations and services, and those provided by individuals or families. These supports came in the form of community

events where families were able to access food, make social connections, and learn about opportunities for accessing other resources. There were also community groups that came together to fundraise or collect donations to provide material aid, food, and housing to newly arrived families. Below, Layla describes going to a community Iftar the day after arriving in Australia, after having gone almost 24 hours without food due to not having any support upon arrival. Wafaa also described relying on an informal group, led by a local woman, that brought together food, kitchenware, and other basic house necessities to distribute to Palestinian families. The community-led supports often complemented supports from formal service providers, providing critical aid and information to families to facilitate their settlement.



So, on the first day, Alhamdulillah, there is a community Iftar. We go to the community. We saw all the people. We saw people speaking Arabic and stuff, and we eat, Alhamdulillah, and they gave us takeaway containers. We take it home. We put it in the fridge.

– Layla, 23 y.o.

What she was doing was voluntary... she furnished my kitchen... when I was pregnant, they'd come to me with food. They'd reach out, they'd call.

– Wafaa, 29 y.o.

Most community members – it doesn't matter where they are from – once they heard our story, they knew we were coming from Gaza, would try to help as much as they can... Community was a big part of our settlement process.

– Amal, 49 y.o.

The needs that participants outlined in interviews came alongside suggestions for how services, systems, and issues could be addressed to meet these needs and facilitate settlement and independence. Predictably, one of the most pressing issues was the visa

situation, which left some families unable to work or access government supports, and all families unable to plan for the future and settle with the security of knowing their safety in Australia was guaranteed. Participants hoped to see these visa issues resolved and some type of indication from the Australian government that they would be permitted to stay in Australia long-term at the end of their three-year humanitarian visa.

"I just want stability, like to feel home... what happens after three years?"

There was also a desire to see eligibility for government supports including HECS to be widened to include those on the 786 visas. While these changes are at the discretion of the federal government, many participants felt that there could be greater advocacy from services, especially migration legal services, to push for such changes.

First is that their immigration status needs to get changed straight away... I think that they should be able to get to the schools, unis, if they want to study and stuff.

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 2

I just want stability, like to feel home... We have this concern as what happens after three years? Do we stay or do they send us somewhere? So, do we start to feel like we are home and then we are told we have to leave so it's very – there's a lot of uncertainty.

– Mariam, 33 y.o.

What was clear from interviews was that many of the challenges that families faced stemmed from financial insecurity, which was related to the visa restrictions, but also barriers to accessing employment due to language, limited social connections, or lack of recognition of overseas qualifications and experience. Consequently, many participants

suggested that one of the most pressing support needs was pure financial support to allow families to meet their needs while they work towards financial independence.

I think at the end of the day, they actually needed – I mean, at that point in time maybe now too – just financial support... you can't underestimate the need for just money. You know, you can provide all these things, but they need money to buy groceries, to buy nappies, to buy food for the kids.

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 1

Though financial aid was seen as a vital support need – and necessary for varying lengths of time, depending on individual contexts and situations – the importance of longer-term financial independence was also stressed. To achieve financial independence, participants spoke about the need for more employment supports and programs to allow families to overcome some of the barriers to employment, for those who had obtained working rights. Other employment challenges were structural, in that many individuals were highly skilled and experienced, but were prevented from gaining secure and meaningful employment due to the lack of recognition of overseas qualifications. Participants emphasised the need for clearer and faster pathways to enable individuals to continue their careers in Australia, and alongside this the intensive supports to allow individuals to take up these opportunities to gain recognition of their qualifications.

"Real estate is always coming and knocking on our door, saying 'you need to pay, or you've got to get out'... "

As mentioned, many families were facing challenges related to housing security, which was tied back to the high cost of private

rentals, but also the quality and suitability of housing. Participants suggested that further rent subsidies would allow some of this pressure to be alleviated. Another suggestion was widening the eligibility criteria for housing supports such as head leasing programs to allow Palestinian families priority access to appropriate housing.



I feel still the focus needs to be on housing stability. And for that to happen they need support with more accessible and cheaper housing... Even the ability to be able to have some programs where the eligibility is extended to this specific cohort. For example, the head leasing programs. That's where a homelessness service will take charge of the lease. There's gradual support for people to allow them to access housing for 12 months. You can only access those programs – even for FV survivor – it's limited. For some it's only ten vacancies.

– AMWCHR Case Manager 1.

[Most in need of] some support with rent and bills. We could live off bread and zaatar. We don't care what we eat but we feel like real estate is always coming and knocking on our door, saying 'you need to pay, or you've got to get out'... it's getting high and high the rent.... We can't find something less... plus the bills. Especially in winter you have to pay for the heating.

– Salwa, 42 y.o.

The most important thing is housing, because we had to move, and we are going to have to move again soon. So, if we had come knowing we have stable housing, that would be the number one thing we would ask for.

– Amal, 49 y.o.

The critical importance of facilitating this support for families was stressed, as can be shown through the following quotes from AMWCHR staff.



They need employment support... If we leave them in this situation sometimes you find clients trying to save resources because they know there's going to come a time where they need them... by the time the resources are dry, the issues around the housing will not be fixed, the issue around the employment will not be fixed. And then you will see these issues emerge – the impacts of the trauma will emerge and the mental health impacts of what they've gone through, FV will emerge because of the overcrowding, the children will feel isolated and like no one is listening to them. These are things that are going to all emerge in the next year or two.

– AMWCHR Case Manager 1.

I think something that everyone in the community would need, nearing two years in Australia, is more counselling services. Because I feel like the issues they have that have been kind of suppressed are starting to come out more now. So I think in the next year or two those things will become more prevalent... just because of the change in their demeanour and other things, it looks like they do need this kind of support.

– AMWCHR Programs Coordinator 3

Participants argued that the short- and long-term impacts of leaving families without the necessary resources and connections to address their physical and mental health and wellbeing needs, will be severe. Improving service provision to meet the unmet needs of newly arrived Palestinian families and removing government restrictions will allow families to achieve independence, safety, and security in Australia.



Discussion & recommendations

This exploratory research sought to document and understand the support needs of newly arrived Palestinian communities in Victoria, as well as the support gaps in meeting these needs. Our findings show that considerable issues continue to prevent Palestinian communities from safely and securely settling in Australia, and there are several ways in which governments and services may be able to alter supports to address these issues. In order to highlight these findings, let us return to the research questions.

1. What are the support needs of newly arrived Palestinian communities in Victoria?

This research first set out to understand the specific support needs of newly arrived Palestinian communities in Victoria. Our findings showed that families continue to face challenges with relation to visa issues, housing, employment, economic security, healthcare, and transport. Many of these issues are interlinked; for example, a lack of employment opportunities or restrictions on employment rights mean families are unable to bring in an income, which contributes to housing insecurity. Likewise, challenges related to transport are restricting access to essential services, such as healthcare.

While these needs are ones that are often expressed by newly arrived migrant and refugee families, Palestinian communities are

in a unique position in that their past and ongoing visa precarity have placed them at a considerable disadvantage as they were prevented from accessing settlement services, Medicare, Centrelink, as well as obtaining employment and study rights. It was clear from interviews that many of the challenges stemmed from the visa situation, the effects of which can still be felt even for those who have transitioned on to humanitarian or bridging visas.

Findings demonstrated significant concerns related to mental health, including mental health of children and young people. The impacts of pre- and post-settlement trauma, survivor's guilt, and an uncertain visa situation are driving mental health issues, which may be escalating as families continue to settle and mental health needs go unmet.

Our research also highlights the importance of taking a gendered lens when assessing needs of newly arrived Palestinian communities. Interview and program participants spoke of the need for childcare to facilitate women's access to employment and independence. Women were also barred from adequate reproductive, prenatal, and postnatal healthcare, and mothers were often taking on roles of carers in the home due to the lack of disability supports.

2. What are the barriers and facilitators to the provision of accessible and high-quality services to meet community needs?

Palestinian families are accessing a range of formal services during the settlement period. Some of these services are larger, 'mainstream' organisations, while others are specialist, community-led organisations. Participants had mixed experiences of the services they had engaged with to meet their needs. Some of the barriers that participants experienced that prevented their engagement with services included ineligibility, services not being available in their area, language, and limited awareness of what services were available and how to access these supports. Other issues arose post-engagement and included challenges such as limited communication between the service and participants, service options and structures not matching community member needs, and a lack of culturally or linguistically relevant and sensitive programs.

However, there also appeared to be services that identified these barriers and ensured that Palestinian community members had the supports required to engage with the service. This included through client-centred practice; engaging with clients on a one-to-one basis to provide intensive supports when Australian systems were a 'closed loop'. Organisations that delivered services in Arabic, based services in accessible locations and/or provided transport options, and who knew and understood the context of Palestinian families' migration and settlement were also spoken of positively by participants. Normally, these services were community-led.

It is also important to highlight that some community-led organisations are providing supports on volunteer and unfunded basis, while others have been funded to deliver services to Palestinian communities. The quality of service was not necessarily tied to organisations' levels of funding, but rather to

their provision of tailored supports and their connection to Palestinian communities. Community-led supports have been integral in supporting access to additional services including health supports, providing trauma-informed services, building capacity to navigate Australian systems, and linking Palestinians with other community members to support social connection.

3. What complementary informal supports are community members engaging with to meet their needs?

Separate to formal supports provided by both funded and unfunded organisations were the informal supports that many Palestinian families have engaged with during their settlement. Many newly arrived Palestinians have been provided assistance by family members, friends, and community groups in the form of housing, food, furniture, clothing, information, and employment.

These supports have been critical in filling gaps left by formal support systems, especially when families were ineligible for certain services. While informal supports have complemented those provided by services – and in some cases families may prefer to engage with informal supports – the presence of such supports also highlights the under-resourcing of the service sector. The under-funded formal service sector has resulted in families having unmet needs, which necessitates community members stepping in to ensure that Palestinian families have food on their tables and a roof over their heads. This support was primarily provided by established Palestinian communities, as well as broader migrant, refugee, and Muslim communities. The generosity of these individuals, families, and communities had not gone unnoticed by participants. However, it reflects a failure on the government's part to provide sufficient formalised settlement supports.

4. Are there any service support gaps and if so, how can these gaps be addressed?

Our findings have shown that there are several key service support gaps in Victoria when it comes to enabling safe and secure settlement of Palestinian communities. These support gaps are identified through the unmet needs within the community, as well as suggestions from participants as to how the service system may be improved to better support newly arrived Palestinian communities.

Conclusion

Palestinian families who have arrived in Australia since October 2023 have endured considerable challenges during their settlement. Many of these challenges may have been avoided with appropriate government support and structural changes to our visa systems. As one participant aptly highlighted, Palestinian families 'are not on stable ground'. This research sought to document these experiences of settlement and service access. In doing so, we have identified persistent needs that often remain unaddressed within the existing service system. Through the implementation of the recommendations we have outlined, we hope that Palestinian communities are afforded the stability, security, and supports to enable their long-term safety, wellbeing, and recovery in Australia.

Recommendations

The gaps and issues discussed in this report can be addressed through the following recommendations, directed at both services and funders, including government:

Recommendation 1: For the Australian Government to immediately provide permanent humanitarian visas for all Palestinians who have arrived in Australia from Gaza

Of primary concern among the participants in this research and community members who attended our weekly sessions was the impact of Australia's visa system. This system restricted Palestinian community members' capacity to address their immediate needs, prevented them from having a sense of security and stability in Australia, and severely impeded settlement outcomes. The current visa system and associated restrictions have left many Palestinians open to or already experiencing exploitation in employment and housing markets. It has left them with no options for recourse and many fear that speaking out about their rights being violated will negatively impact their visa situations.

A temporary three-year visa option that is issued at the discretion of a single government minister is not a just, appropriate, or equitable solution to these issues. We question why this new pathway was created when Palestinians already meet the criteria for permanent humanitarian visas, and as any other community does, have a right to apply for such visas. We strongly recommend that the Australian Government provide permanent humanitarian visas to all Palestinians who have arrived in Australia from Gaza as soon as feasibly possible. These humanitarian visas should be a special allocation issued in addition to the 2025-2026 Humanitarian Program. Further, this visa pathway should be extended to all future Palestinians arriving in Australia after fleeing the violence in Gaza.

Recommendation 2: That the government provide additional resources to community services to allow for the dissemination of financial aid

Many of the challenges that newly arrived Palestinians face relate to the financial insecurity they and their families are experiencing. Families continue to work towards economic independence, though in the interim, financial aid is needed to allow them to meet their most basic needs. The limited funding provided by governments and the restrictions around what grant funds can be used for are negatively impacting services' ability to provide aid. We strongly recommend that further funds are made available for distribution to Palestinian families facing financial hardship.

Recommendation 3: That governments and universities provide further pathways for employment and education opportunities for newly arrived Palestinian communities

Newly arrived Palestinian communities face significant barriers to employment, and have, due to the restrictive visa situation, been prevented from working or have faced exploitation and unsafe work environments out of necessity. Further supports are required to allow Palestinians to access education options including vocational training, university qualifications, and other courses and accreditation. These supports will not only improve employment prospects, but they will also support overall wellbeing, dignity, learning, and social engagement. These issues should be addressed through:

- a) Expansion of visa eligibility for employment and education support schemes, such as Parent Pathways and the Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program to include newly arrived Palestinians on bridging, 786, and 449 visas.
- b) Funding for employment programs that support community members to secure work commensurate to their experience and expertise. Such programs should work with clients to identify opportunities for upskilling or reskilling, and recognition of overseas qualifications.
- c) Universities should introduce sponsorship or scholarship opportunities for newly arrived Palestinians to support access to higher education opportunities. Governments should subsidise the costs of such scholarships to ensure that there are enough opportunities to meet community need.

Recommendation 4: That state and federal governments provide additional funds to ensure community-led services are adequately resourced to deliver fit-for-purpose programs and services that are tailored for the needs of newly arrived Palestinian communities

Community-led services have been critical in supporting Palestinian families' settlement and wellbeing in Australia. These are services that are often grassroots, deeply embedded within, and representative of the communities that they support. This allows the provision of in-language, in-culture programs and services that are tailored to overcome many of the barriers to engagement that newly arrived Palestinian families face.

However, community-led organisations are often under-funded and under-resourced, and some are even providing supports to Palestinian communities with no funding at all. These services are crucial not only in providing direct supports, but also as a 'link' to other services and systems that families may otherwise be prevented from accessing. Meanwhile, larger, more 'mainstream' organisations are funded comparatively well, though don't necessarily have the community connections or cultural and linguistic capacity to deliver suitable and trauma-informed programs for Palestinian communities. This has left community-led organisations under considerable pressure with demand for supports outpacing capacity. Further funding and resourcing of community-led organisations who are specialists in delivering programs and services to Palestinian, Muslim, migrant, and refugee communities is urgently needed.

Recommendation 5: That increased housing supports are provided to Palestinian communities

Housing was a key issue among the participants in this research, and many community members remain at high risk of homelessness or housing insecurity. The responsibility for these challenges lies with governments as well as service providers. To address these concerns, we recommend that increased funding packages are provided to housing services to allow for the provision of rental subsidies. We also recommend that eligibility for housing programs, such as head leasing programs, should be expanded to allow Palestinian families to access stable and affordable housing. Lastly, the Victorian State Government must address sub-standard housing through ensuring that laws around minimum standards on rental properties are enforced.

Recommendation 6: That governments support increased accessibility of mental health programs and supports for Palestinian communities, including children and young people

As is well established and also clear in our findings, Palestinians have experienced immeasurable trauma, violence, and grief. This has been pronounced since October 2023, but has been ongoing for decades, impacting multiple generations. The trauma that Palestinians are experiencing is therefore continual.

As families settle into Australia, the mental health issues arising from past and ongoing trauma may begin to escalate. While some participants and community members have already been engaging with mental health supports, many have not, or have had negative experiences. It is therefore critical that further support options are provided to address the range of needs and readiness to engage. Governments can address this need through:

- a) Expansion of Medicare services to 449 Visa holders to allow access to mental health treatments;
- b) Increased funding for community-led organisations to deliver diverse modalities of programs to support the mental health of newly arrived Palestinians, not limited to formal therapy. This includes through group-based mental health programs, other group-based programs that build social connections and bolster protective factors for mental health, and one-to-one clinical supports delivered in-language by practitioners with strong understanding of the context and collective trauma surrounding engagement.

Recommendation 7: That services delivering programs and supports to Palestinian communities acknowledge the impacts of anti-Palestinian racism, Islamophobia, and discrimination and facilitate a safe environment for Palestinians to engage and access supports

Newly arrived Palestinians face considerable barriers to supports and service access. They have also faced continual exposure to anti-Palestinian racism and discrimination that has proliferated Australian society through political rhetoric, public discourse, and the media. It is critical that when engaging with services to facilitate their settlement that they are not further exposed to racism and discrimination. Services that are providing supports to Palestinian communities must therefore foster a culture of inclusion and resist replicating harmful discourse.

Newly arrived Palestinians are in Australia because they have been ethnically cleansed from their homes and forced to relocate in order to survive. When agencies are not prepared to hold a position against the genocide, or when they remain 'neutral', this demonstrates they do not recognise the gravity of the situation, the trauma Palestinian clients are experiencing, and the needs that arise from their experiences pre- and post-settlement. The culture within such services is therefore unsafe for Palestinians.

We therefore encourage services to assess how their organisation and practitioners are providing services to Palestinian communities, and how they can better validate and support their experiences both publicly and during direct engagement. Cultural capacity building training is also recommended to provide practitioners with the confidence and skills to discuss these issues internally, advocate for their Palestinian clients, and ensure that they are engaging in safe practice.

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