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Building a New Life in Australia

The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants

Economic participation of humanitarian migrants in Australia

Research report

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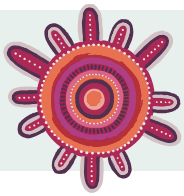

The Australian Institute of Family Studies acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands and waters. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.

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Glossary of key terms/abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACMID	Australian Census and Migrants Integrated Dataset
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AMEP	Adult Migration English Program
BNLA	Building a New Life in Australia
CPP	Career Pathways Pilot
CPD	Centre for Policy Development
CRISP	Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot
CRSA	Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia
DIAC	Department of Immigration and Citizenship
DPMC	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
DSS	Department of Social Services
FIH	Family investment hypothesis
EPRI	Economic pathways to refugee integration
HSP	Humanitarian Settlement Program
ILO	International Labour Organization
IRSD	Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage
JVEN	Jobs Victoria Employment Network
LFS	Labour force status
MU	Migrating unit
NILF	Not in the labour force
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PA	Primary/Principal applicant
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RESP	Refugee Employment Support Program
SA	Secondary applicant
SEIFA	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas
SETS	Settlement Engagement and Transition Support
SIS	Specialised and Intensive Services
SQW	Skilling Queenslanders for Work
SSI	Settlement Services International

Executive summary

> Economic participation is vitally important to refugee settlement and integration. It is through work that refugees are able to build social networks, gain independence and establish a sense of belonging in Australia. (Alison Larkins, former Commonwealth Coordinator-General for Migrant Services, cited in Department of Home Affairs [Home Affairs], n.d., p. 3)

Australia has permanently resettled almost 1 million refugees since World War II and today maintains one of the largest *per capita* resettlement programs in the world. Australia's humanitarian settlement services provide support to refugees and humanitarian entrants to reach their full potential and fulfil their unique aspirations as they make new lives in Australia (Home Affairs, 2023b, p. 1).

However, past studies have argued that 'if there is a weak link in Australia's settlement record,' it remains 'getting refugees into jobs soon after they arrive' (Centre for Policy Development [CPD], 2017, p. 6). Indeed, an independent review commissioned by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC; the 'Shergold Review') noted that refugees and humanitarian entrants experience greater socio-economic disadvantage and higher levels of unemployment than other migrants. While 'refugees want to work and are keen to roll up their sleeves,' the review panel argued, they 'find it relatively difficult to gain a foothold in the labour market' (DPMC, 2019, p. 34).

To inform solutions to this social policy challenge, this report provides evidence of economic participation trends among resettled refugees, the potential or 'latent' labour force capacity in this group and the timing of 'transitions' into the labour force. The report also points to possible barriers that could be reduced or eliminated through policy interventions. Data are sourced from Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA), a longitudinal study that has followed humanitarian migrants who settled in Australia around 2013 over a 10-year period.

Employment and underutilisation

There is considerable economic diversity in the humanitarian migrant cohort. By the tenth year of our study, 39% of women and nearly two-thirds (63%) of men[1] had made the transition to paid work or were actively looking for paid work. Men's individual labour force participation rates, in particular, had almost reached parity with that of the Australian-born male population (see also van Kooy et al., 2024). Just over 1 in 5 (21%) women and nearly half (46%) of all men who were working by the tenth year of settlement had done so for most of the 12 months prior to the survey.

However, among the economically active participants in BNLA, several challenges were identified from our analysis. The post-arrival occupational downgrading of former managers, professionals and other 'white collar' workers, for instance, is cause for concern. This is particularly the case for female refugees who were in skilled employment before migrating to Australia. Community and personal services work accounted for over one-third (36%) of all female employment by the tenth year of settlement – jobs that are generally characterised by poor job quality and underemployment (Charlesworth & Isherwood, 2021; Goel & Penman, 2015; Palmer & Eveline, 2012). By contrast, male employment in the tenth year of BNLA was concentrated in machinery operating, technician and trades work (71% of all those employed).

Occupational downgrading of migrant workers – along with (mis)recognition of skills, qualifications and experience – has long been discussed as an economic integration problem in Australia (see e.g. Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Ressia et al., 2017). Most recently, the 'Parkinson Review' of the migration system, commissioned by the Department of Home Affairs, argued that interventions were needed to 'unlock' the 'unrealised potential' among humanitarian migrants (Home Affairs, 2022). This echoes recent sector reporting that has argued that there is potential for a 'billion-dollar benefit' in the employment of refugees and other migrants thought to have 'chronically underutilised skills' (Settlement Services International [SSI], 2023).

For underutilised refugee workers, there are several policy investments that would be beneficial, including: effective skills and qualification recognition processes (Wagner & Childs, 2006); more inclusive employer recruitment, retention and training practices (Hirst et al., 2023); gender-sensitive approaches to accommodating the diverse backgrounds of refugees (Due et al., 2025); and training to improve language proficiency and understandings of workplace safety (Kosny et al., 2020). Available research data in Australia do not yet provide sufficient detail on the costs and returns of investing in such programs.

1 Aged 15–59 in Year 1.

Self-employment and 'necessity entrepreneurs'

Our analysis also showed that just over 1 in 5 (21%) humanitarian migrants in the sample were self-employed by the tenth year of settlement – higher than the rate of self-employment for Australians overall (16%). The prevalence of sole traders and small business operators in this cohort is sometimes considered a reflection of refugees' 'remarkable business contribution and potential' (Legrain & Burridge, 2019). However, this trend may also be understood as an emergence of 'necessity entrepreneurs' due to the difficulties they face entering the labour market (Newman et al., 2024). Those who are entrepreneurs by choice may need greater access to startup capital, business advice and mentorship (van Kooy, 2016).

Among refugees currently working for themselves, many would prefer salaried employment – however, this group requires support to transition to, and succeed in, open recruitment processes. Our study found that the most common job-seeking method for BNLA participants in the tenth year of settlement was drawing on family or friendship networks – but research has not yet conclusively shown whether these 'informal' job seeking methods are effective for the occupational mobility of refugee populations. Career support and skill upgrading are also critical (Arthur et al., 2023).

The 'hidden unemployed'?

This report reveals a subgroup of 'potential workers' who wanted to find a job but, for reasons of life circumstances, family or household composition, were unable to fully participate in the economy at the time of the survey. Sometimes referred to as 'marginally attached workers' (Gray et al., 2002) or the 'hidden unemployed' (Pečinka, 2011), around one-third (33%) of women and 41% of men in our study who were out of the labour force in the tenth year of settlement indicated that they nevertheless wanted a job. Labour market (re)integration policies for humanitarian migrants need to mitigate spells of prolonged unemployment, which are well-known to lead to the depreciation of skills, knowledge and qualifications and potentially decrease future earnings potential and job quality (Bevelander, 2020; Brell et al., 2020; Hainmueller et al., 2016).

For the 'latent' workforce, participation barriers are significant but not insurmountable. Family obligations, for example, could be addressed by improving childcare support options and strengthening family reunion pathways (Baak, 2015; Singh & Mutum, 2024). Volunteering opportunities could help to improve the long-term participation outcomes for refugees (Wood et al., 2019), while those who face health or mental health barriers would benefit from access to affordable, culturally responsive healthcare services and rehabilitation programs (Khan & Amatya, 2017).

Unavailable for work

In contrast, our analysis also points to a substantial subpopulation of humanitarian migrants who are unlikely to be active in the Australian labour force in either the short or longer term. Some of the common characteristics of this group include people who arrived in later stages of life, women with long-term family and caring responsibilities, and people with ongoing disabilities, health conditions or mental health concerns such as PTSD.

For instance, our analysis found that BNLA participants over the age of 60 in the first year of settlement were almost entirely out of the labour market throughout the 10-year period of study. Participants who lived in larger households with more dependent children were also consistently less likely to be in the labour force than refugees in smaller or single households – and those who transitioned into employment with dependent children typically did so at a later stage than their childless counterparts. Among men, almost half (49%) who were not in the labour force in the tenth year of settlement reported having a disability or long-term health condition.

Tailored services are needed for refugees who are unable to work. At present, programs for refugees who are out of the labour force are largely limited to income support, torture and trauma counselling, case management services for those with 'complex needs' and emergency relief programs (Australian Red Cross, 2025; Olliff, 2010). Ideally, programs would include adequate income support to meet cost-of-living requirements,[2] child and family services, fostering community connections and social participation opportunities.

2 For example, low levels of income support provided to people seeking asylum and those who hold Bridging visas has been found to lead to poverty and destitution (see van Kooy & Hirsch, 2022).

Households and families

Economic participation choices are rarely made by refugees in isolation. For instance, our analysis suggests that choice of residential location for refugee families is important: women may fare better in regional labour markets. Men in the BNLA who moved either alone or with their families to a new residential location in the previous 12 months were 31% more likely to transition to a job in the following year, compared to those who did not move.

The negotiation of roles within couples and the distribution of household and caring responsibilities are additional factors that shape refugees' economic participation trajectories (Kikulwe et al., 2021; Minor & Cameo, 2018). The presence of young children and other adults in the household can have different impacts on the caregiving tasks and economic participation of women and men (Çarpar & Göktuna Yaylaci, 2022; Fendel & Kosyakova, 2023). In the BNLA study, women in couple relationships with children under 5 were 116% less likely to be employed compared to men in the same situation. While relationships between location, family structure, household composition, resources and opportunities are difficult to disentangle, they do highlight that family dynamics need to be understood when considering economic outcomes.

Factors our research shows are likely to shape labour force outcomes include English language proficiency (including individual language skills and that of the partner), cultural and gender norms in the society of origin,[3] the demands on couples when one or both members have significant health or mental health challenges related to their experiences of forced displacement, the variable language skills of multiple family members, and the family demands of having one or more dependent children (or other adults) transitioning to a new society.

While the BNLA study enabled discussion of these important themes, several issues require deeper exploration. These include the need to analyse refugees' earnings from paid work (and income adequacy), employee job satisfaction and relationships with employers, experiences with higher education and vocational education programs, the role of 'word of mouth' and social media for job seeking, and detailed analysis of the economic participation of different family and household types (such as single-parent families, group households of unpartnered individuals, grandparents as informal carers, etc.). Future research should leverage insights from cohort studies such as BNLA and the emerging opportunities of data linkage to examine these issues.

3 Which, by extension, also impact women's pre-arrival economic participation and educational completion rates.

1. Introduction

Australia's Humanitarian Program provides resettlement for individuals and families who have been displaced due to conflict, persecution and human rights abuses. Administered by the Department of Home Affairs ('Home Affairs'), the program is designed to be non-discriminatory, supporting vulnerable refugees while also 'benefiting Australia's prosperity and social resilience' (Home Affairs, 2023a, p. 6).

The then Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) commissioned the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) to undertake a longitudinal study of humanitarian migrants in 2012, referred to as Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA). Six waves of data were collected, with the final wave of the study completed in 2023. These rich data capture a range of individual, family, social and economic information, providing evidence on the long-term settlement outcomes of humanitarian migrants in Australia.

1.1 About this report

This report examines the economic participation of BNLA respondents who were aged 15–59 years when they participated in the first wave of the study in 2013–14. It builds on the 10 Years of Humanitarian Settlement Outcomes report (van Kooy et al., 2024), which provides a statistical overview of 5 settlement domains: economic participation, social connections, self-sufficiency, language and education, and health and wellbeing. The present report offers an in-depth examination of economic participation, including more information on employment characteristics, participants' first transition into employment, and couple and family dynamics. In most cases, analyses are presented separately for men and women to acknowledge the gendered dimensions of the barriers, motivators and facilitators of economic participation (Fossati et al., 2024).

The research questions addressed in this report are:

1. What are the patterns of BNLA participants' economic participation over time, including labour force status and employment? How do patterns vary by socio-demographic and family characteristics?
2. What factors contribute to changes in humanitarian migrants' labour force status over time?

Our analysis focuses on 3 main outcome measures: labour force status (whether the individual was employed, unemployed or not in the labour force); employment outcomes (paid work in the last 7 days); and the first transition to employment in Australia. Where relevant, we use quotes from participant interviews to provide context to the statistical findings.

Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 contains an overview of the literature concerning refugees and economic participation in resettlement destinations. Chapter 3 provides an overview of economic participation among BNLA participants using descriptive statistics. Chapter 4 presents a trend analysis of factors associated with employment transitions across all 10 years of the BNLA study and identifies the factors associated with employment transitions.[4]

Chapter 5 identifies the factors that are associated with economic participation outcomes for men and women in the BNLA at Year 5.[5] It examines labour force status by sex and employment outcomes at the couple level as well as the impact of there being other household members.

Further details on the methodology for this report can be found in Appendices A and B.

1.2 Participant characteristics

Sample characteristics

The analytic sample for this report includes BNLA respondents aged 15–59 in Year 1 of the study. While 'working age' adults are commonly considered to be aged 15–64 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2024a), we further restricted the sample in recognition of the presumed low likelihood that newly arrived refugees aged

4 This report primarily focuses on 3 equidistant time points in the BNLA study: Wave 1 (labelled Year 1, with the data collected in 2013–14), Wave 5 (labelled Year 5, with the data collected in 2017–18) Wave 6 (labelled Year 10, with the data collected in 2023). However, the trend analysis of factors associated with employment transitions used all 6 waves of the BNLA study.

5 Models were estimated using Year 5 data due to low employment rates for women in previous years and the relatively small number of observations in the following wave at Year 10.

over 60 would be active participants in the Australian labour market. In accordance with our hypothesis that older refugees would be outliers, analysis showed that 98% of BNLA participants who were aged 60+ in Year 1 reported not being in the labour force by Year 5, and 100% were not in the labour force by Year 10.

In Year 1 of the BNLA, 2,229 individuals aged 15–59 responded to the survey. Of these, 76% participated in Year 5 and 45% participated in Year 10 (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1: BNLA sample characteristics

	Year 1	Year 5	Year 10
Number of participants (*n*)	2,399	1,881	1,223
Number of participants aged 15–59 (*n*)	2,229	1,685	1,009
% of all participants aged 15–59 in Year 1	100.0	75.6	45.3

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

Demographics

The demographic characteristics of BNLA participants (Table 1.2), who were selected to participate in BNLA in 2013, broadly correspond to the composition of the humanitarian migrant intake at the time.[6]

Table 1.2: Demographic characteristics of the BNLA sample in this study

	Year 1		Year 5		Year 10	
	Obs	Col (%)	Obs	Col (%)	Obs	Col (%)
Sex						
Female	1,210	54.3	891	52.9	521	51.7
Male	1,019	45.7	794	47.1	487	48.3
Respondent type						
Principal applicant (PA)	1,386	62.2	1,088	64.6	N/A[a]	N/A
Secondary applicant (SA)	843	37.8	597	35.4	N/A	N/A
Age group						
15–19	296	13.3	36	2.1	N/A	N/A
20–29	652	29.3	485	28.8	169	16.8
30–39	597	26.8	481	28.5	300	29.8
40–49	450	20.2	419	24.9	288	28.6
50–59	234	10.5	264	15.7	251	24.9
Language spoken at home						
Pashto, Dari, Persian & related	897	41.9	625	38.3	346	35.8
Arabic, Assyrian, Chaldean	925	43.2	759	46.5	422	43.7
Tamil, Nepali, Urdu	142	6.6	111	6.8	82	8.5
Burmese and related	117	5.5	78	4.8	72	7.5
African languages	37	1.7	32	2.0	16	1.7
English & other	22	1.0	28	1.7	28	2.9
Country/region of birth						
Iraq & Syria	861	38.9	725	43.2	401	39.9
Afghanistan	586	26.5	421	25.1	241	24.0
Iran	274	12.4	194	11.6	113	11.3
South Asia	208	9.4	155	9.2	111	11.1
Africa	151	6.8	90	5.4	62	6.2

6 For instance, Iraqi or Syrian refugees are the largest group in the BNLA cohort and were also commonly the top source countries in the Australian Humanitarian Program during the mid-2010s (Home Affairs, 2024a).

	Year 1		Year 5		Year 10	
	Obs	Col (%)	Obs	Col (%)	Obs	Col (%)
Myanmar	132	6.0	94	5.6	76	7.6
Religion[b]						
Christian	889	39.9	700	41.5	431	42.8
Muslim	916	41.1	661	39.2	369	36.6
Buddhist/Hindu/other	250	11.2	212	12.6	136	13.5
No religion/not important/ unknown	174	7.8	112	6.6	72	7.1
Local socio-economic disadvantage						
Low/medium	503	22.6	419	25.0	337	34.0
High	1,726	77.4	1,259	75.0	653	66.0
Remoteness area						
Regional	221	9.9	133	7.9	65	6.4
Major city	2,008	90.1	1,552	92.1	943	93.6
Total	**2,229**	**100.0**	**1,685**	**100.0**	**1,009**	**100.0**

Notes: Unweighted proportions. BNLA participants aged 15–59 in Year 1.
a Principal Applicants (PAs) and secondary applicants (SAs) completed the same questionnaire in Year 10. Secondary applicants were primarily spouses of PAs. b Religion measured in Year 1.
Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. Observations (Obs) represent the number of participants responding to each item (unweighted).
N/A = Not available.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

2. Economic participation in context

2.1 Benefits, barriers and enablers

Economic participation influences the financial status, mental health and social integration of resettled refugees in host societies. Research has consistently shown that employment is central to refugees' ability to rebuild their lives in a new country (Llinares-Insa et al., 2020; Ott & Montgomery, 2015). Stable employment has the potential to provide financial security and increase refugees' social connectedness and sense of belonging (Shaw et al., 2021).

Engaging in paid work can enhance refugees' sense of agency and control over their lives, which is particularly important for individuals who have experienced traumatic migration journeys (Pannu et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2019). Employment can also give refugees the opportunity to interact with local populations and build relationships, which can ease their transition to the host society (Fleay et al., 2013; Khawaja et al., 2019). Studies have indicated that employment can lead to improved mental health – the act of contributing to society and supporting one's family can alleviate feelings of helplessness and depression (Kikulwe et al., 2021; Sidorchuk et al., 2017).

Employment provides significant benefits for refugee families. Income earned from employment can assist families to reduce their reliance on social assistance and enable better access to housing, health care and education (Kerwin & Nicholson, 2021). When both parents are employed, household income increases, which not only supports immediate needs but also fosters a sense of self-sufficiency (Wood et al., 2019). Employed family members are more likely to build social networks and participate in their communities, which helps to overcome the isolation that often accompanies resettlement (Agbényiga et al., 2012).

Employed parents also often report lower levels of stress and anxiety, positively impacting family dynamics (Hirst et al., 2023). The financial stability that can come from employment allows families to focus on other priorities, including children's educational outcomes. Studies indicate that children from refugee households with employed parents tend to perform better academically and have higher aspirations for their futures due to increased resources and parental involvement in their education (Newman et al., 2018).

The quality of employment that refugees obtain can significantly influence their integration experience. Jobs secured by refugees – particularly their first job – may not match their skill levels, leading to occupational downgrading (Correa-Velez et al., 2015; Knappert et al., 2019). This mismatch not only affects refugees' economic contribution but can lead to feelings of frustration and disillusionment, as well as a loss of 'professional capital' – the skills, knowledge and networks to enable workers to practice their profession effectively (Smyth & Kum, 2010). Jobs in sectors where cheap labour is required – such as meat-packing or cleaning – can set in motion a downward or at least stagnant occupational trajectory for migrant workers (Gonzalez Benson & Taccolini-Panaggio, 2019). Like other migrants, refugees who are ready and able to work need to be able to access 'decent' opportunities (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024) that utilise their skills and qualifications (Bonoli & Otmani, 2023; Kasrin & Tübbicke, 2024).

Self-employment is another avenue through which refugees can participate. Studies have shown that refugee entrepreneurship can contribute positively to local economies by creating jobs and fostering innovation (Schmich & Mitra, 2023; Shaw et al., 2022). However, refugee self-employment depends on access to resources such as startup capital, networks and support systems to aid the process of navigating the complexities of starting a business in a new country (Reis et al., 2024; Street et al., 2022; van Kooy, 2016). It is also important to recognise that self-employment may sometimes be the only income generation option for many new migrants, given the hurdles they face in accessing the mainstream labour market (Newman et al., 2024). Thus, as 'necessity entrepreneurs', refugees can be exposed to considerable financial and personal risk (Zighan, 2021).

The barriers to employment for refugees are dependent on individual attributes and local context and may include limited language proficiency, lack of social networks, misrecognition or undervaluation of qualifications and discrimination by employers. Language barriers are particularly significant, as they hinder effective communication and limit opportunities (Loosemore et al., 2021; Wachter et al., 2016). Many resettled refugees lack relevant social networks that can provide job leads, mentorship and support during the job search process (Albers et al., 2021; Okenwa-Emegwa et al., 2019).

Financial obligations to family in the country of residence as well as abroad sometimes necessitate that refugees prioritise immediate work and income generation over education and career pathways (Nunn et al., 2014). The responsibility to remit money to extended family can limit refugees' long-term occupational mobility and

economic security. Nevertheless, the sacrifices made by first-generation humanitarian migrants, who often work in 'menial' jobs, can help ensure their children integrate successfully in Australia (Hugo, 2014).

The economic participation of refugees is also shaped by gender, ethnicity, age and disability (Taha, 2019). Refugee women, for example, often face unique economic challenges compared to men, including cultural and societal norms that may restrict their mobility and access to employment opportunities (Al-Hamad et al., 2024; Cheung & Phillimore, 2017). Women are more likely to bear the primary responsibility for child care, limiting their availability for work and work-related activities such as language training programs (Gan & Shin, 2024).

Disability and mental health issues – both of which are prevalent in refugee populations (Blackmore et al., 2020; Crock et al., 2017) – present several challenges for economic participation. Barriers can include a lack of awareness or health literacy among refugee communities, limited access to disability-related supports, lack of cultural competency or trauma-informed approaches among service providers, and wider social stigma or institutional discrimination (Korntheuer et al., 2021; Rfat et al., 2023; Shah, 2024).

2.2 Government policy and programs

As permanent residents in Australia, people who are resettled through the Humanitarian Program are eligible for free or subsidised vocational education and training; full work permissions with the same rights and protections as citizens; and access to Australian Government employment services (Workforce Australia) and income support streams.

The Department of Home Affairs contracts private and non-profit agencies to provide settlement services for humanitarian migrants through the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP). Examples include casework support and the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). Clients generally receive HSP services for up to 18 months after arrival in Australia – however, actual time in the program is dependent on individual needs. Newly arrived refugees can at any time voluntarily participate in Workforce Australia and access the full suite of employment assistance (House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, 2023). The Australian Government also funds Specialised and Intensive Services (SIS) for individuals or families with complex settlement needs (Home Affairs, 2024b). The Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program is offered for up to 5 years to participants who do not have family or other community supports.

In addition to the HSP and SETS, the Australian Government has funded several targeted economic participation programs and initiatives, such as:

- Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI): a grant program that aims to create job opportunities and pathways to employment and self-employment. It focuses on those with low skill levels and low English proficiency (Home Affairs, 2024c).
- social enterprises and community programs: organisations receive funding to support refugees in gaining employment. These programs often include vocational training, job-specific skills training and supported work experience (Home Affairs, 2024c).

A previous investment in this area, the Career Pathways Pilot (CPP), aimed to help humanitarian entrants with professional qualifications and skills to find employment in their field in Australia. An evaluation of the pilot study found that financial support and career advice were rated as the most important services by clients. The pilot showed promise but the evaluation argued that more time was needed to achieve long-term employment outcomes (Deloitte, 2019).

State and territory governments have also offered a range of employment programs tailored to the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants, such as:

- NSW's Refugee Employment Support Program (RESP), which provided job placement assistance, resume and cover letter preparation, and workshops to enhance employability skills (NSW Government, 2019)[7]
- Queensland's Skilling Queenslanders for Work (SQW) scheme, which funds community-based organisations to provide tailored opportunities to participants such as work skills traineeships, job search assistance, and language and literacy training (Queensland Government, 2024)
- Victoria's Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN), which engages employers to identify suitable job opportunities for disadvantaged jobseekers, and provides clients with job search assistance, resume writing, interview preparation and training programs (State Government of Victoria, 2016).

7 The program concluded in June 2024, and participants have since transitioned to Commonwealth-funded employment support programs.

Despite the proliferation of programs, a 2019 review commissioned by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet found that employment service offerings 'remain poorly coordinated, across and between governments' (DPMC, 2019, p. 2). Mainstream providers were criticised for not delivering personalised assistance and for compelling humanitarian migrants to apply for jobs they were not prepared for (DPMC, 2019). Peak bodies in the settlement sector have also argued that services for refugee jobseekers need to be delivered by organisations that have specialist experience working with diverse communities (House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, 2023).

It has previously been argued that there is insufficient evidence on the effectiveness of different state and regional programs in comparison to the federal service offerings (Hugo, 2014). Systematic research on effective migrant worker integration strategies across different industries in Australia is lacking (Loosemore et al., 2021), as is an understanding of the most effective interventions to support long-term career development and prevent occupational downgrading (DPMC, 2019). This report unpacks the economic participation dynamics of humanitarian migrants in Australia to highlight possible solutions and ways forward.

3. Economic participation in the BNLA

Key points

- The labour force participation rate of BNLA participants more than doubled from 22% to 52% over the 10 years of the study. Women's participation rates reached 39% by Year 10, while men's participation was substantially higher, reaching 66% at Year 5 before decreasing to 63% in Year 10.
- The employment rate increased nearly sevenfold from 7% to 45% over the same period. Women's employment rates reached 31% by Year 10, with men's reaching 56%.
- Participants in good health and who were proficient in spoken English had higher participation and employment rates.
- By the final year of the study, just over 1 in 5 (21%) women had been employed for most of the past year (7–12 months). Nearly half (46%) of men indicated that they had been in paid work for most of the past year.
- Forty-three per cent of workers were permanent/ongoing employees by Year 10, while just over 1 in 5 (21%) reported being self-employed.
- There was an overall occupational downgrading among both women and men. Before arriving in Australia, 30% of employed women and 19% of employed men had been managers or professionals. After 10 years in Australia, these proportions were 17% and 10%, respectively.
- Looking for work through family or friendship networks was the most common job-seeking method for both women (16%) and men (17%) who were unemployed in Year 10. Women (13%) were slightly more likely than men (11%) to visit an employment agency for support.
- One-third (33%) of women and 41% of men who were not in the labour force in Year 10 indicated that they would like to get a job.
- Almost half (49%) of the men who were not in the labour force in Year 10 reported having a disability or long-term health condition that prevented them from looking for work. For women not in the labour force, the prevalence of disability in Year 10 (33%) was lower than for men but family caring responsibilities was a bigger barrier to looking for paid work (33%, compared to 25% for men).

This chapter provides an overview of the labour force status (LFS)[8] of BNLA respondents at different time points in the study, disaggregated by demographic and socio-economic characteristics including age, sex, household composition, health, English proficiency and social connections. We also examine select features of economic participation by sex at different time points in the study.

3.1 Demographic and socio-economic patterns

Table 3.1 shows the labour force status of participants by selected demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Among respondents aged 15–59 in Year 1, the overall employment rate increased from 7% to 45% in Year 10, while the participation rate increased from 22% to 52% over the 10 years. The employment rate showed an increasing trend across all age groups from Years 1 to 10.

Participants who were in good health had consistently higher employment rates than those in poor health – by Year 10, the employment rate of participants with good to excellent self-rated health was double that of participants with fair to very poor health. Humanitarian migrants who were proficient in spoken English also had an employment rate (61%) that was around double (30%) that of participants with low levels of spoken English in Year 10.

8 The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines the categories of 'labour force status' (LFS) as individuals who are either (1) employed, (2) unemployed and seeking employment, or (3) neither. Persons aged 15 years or older are considered employed if they worked one hour or more in the week preceding the Labour Force Survey and unemployed if they are not working but have sought work in the previous 4 weeks (ABS, 2023). All other persons aged 15 or older are considered not in the labour force (NILF). The BNLA questionnaire uses similar wording to the Labour Force Survey to derive these proportions (see AIFS, 2024).

The proportions of participants who were employed, unemployed or not in the labour force did not vary greatly based on whether they were married/partnered or in a couple relationship over the 10 years. Fewer dependent children was associated with higher rates of employment or labour force participation – though the gap between participants with children and those without was narrowing by Year 10. A similar association was observed regarding smaller household sizes over the 10 years. Participants with mostly 'mixed' friendships (i.e. friends from different ethnic backgrounds) had a larger increase in their employment rate (from 10% in Year 1 to 60% in Year 10) than those who had more co-ethnic friendships (from 5% in Year 1 to 40% in Year 10).

Table 3.1: Labour force status by selected demographic and socio-economic characteristics

	Year 1				Year 5				Year 10			
	Employed (%)	Unemployed (%)	NILF (%)	Obs	Employed (%)	Unemployed (%)	NILF (%)	Obs	Employed (%)	Unemployed (%)	NILF (%)	Obs
Age at each year[a]												
15–19	2.3	13.0	85.0	294	22.6	25.8	51.6	36	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
20–29	11.0	17.0	72.0	651	39.9	17.2	43.2	484	60.0	6.0	34.0	158
30–39	7.4	19.2	73.2	595	43.4	10.4	46.3	480	55.2	7.3	37.5	289
40–49	5.8	13.8	80.5	447	38.1	8.9	52.9	419	47.4	8.2	44.1	279
50–59	2.0	6.9	91.2	234	19.3	11.3	69.3	264	34.9	5.9	58.8	244
Self-rated health												
Fair/poor/very poor	1.9	11.1	87.0	763	19.3	12.2	68.3	599	27.5	7.0	65.2	365
Excellent/very good/good	9.5	17.7	72.8	1,458	45.7	12.4	41.8	1,084	60.2	7.0	32.7	595
Literacy in own language (not English)												
Low	5.0	10.4	84.6	749	24.9	8.3	66.8	568	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
High	7.7	17.5	74.8	1,417	41.5	14.4	44.1	1,084	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
English-speaking proficiency												
Not well/at all	3.5	11.3	85.1	1,525	28.4	8.6	63.0	805	30.1	5.6	64.1	373
Well/very well	13.8	24.0	62.2	670	39.1	15.8	45.0	638	60.8	7.8	31.4	579
Married/has partner												
No	8.9	18.5	72.7	842	38.9	16.6	44.7	578	46.5	8.7	45.3	272
Yes	6.5	14.6	78.8	1,250	36.2	10.4	53.4	1,105	49.4	6.5	44.0	698
Household size												
Single person	21.1	22.8	56.0	232	53.8	13.9	32.3	151	62.3	4.9	32.8	57
Two people	4.3	19.7	76.1	184	40.3	12.1	47.6	135	57.8	6.9	36.3	98
Small (3–4 people)	7.1	16.5	76.4	776	40.0	13.0	46.8	573	48.9	6.6	44.7	378
Medium (5–6 people)	4.6	12.5	82.9	686	32.3	11.3	56.6	603	43.5	7.5	49.1	319
Large (7 or more people)	3.6	12.4	84.0	343	27.8	12.4	59.8	217	46.6	9.3	44.1	118

	Year 1				Year 5				Year 10			
	Employed (%)	Unemployed (%)	NILF (%)	Obs	Employed (%)	Unemployed (%)	NILF (%)	Obs	Employed (%)	Unemployed (%)	NILF (%)	Obs
Number of children in household												
0	15.3	26.3	58.3	807	56.1	12.5	31.4	499	57.3	7.1	35.6	333
1–2	2.4	9.7	87.9	964	31.0	12.1	56.9	783	45.7	7.4	46.9	310
3 or more	1.9	8.3	89.5	450	25.0	12.6	62.4	401	42.6	6.9	50.8	327
Sources of friends												
No friends or mostly own ethnic	5.2	12.4	82.4	1,328	30.3	9.6	60.3	703	40.0	4.4	55.6	414
Mixed/other communities	9.9	20.4	69.8	844	42.3	14.3	43.5	965	59.5	9.0	31.5	445
Ease of making friends in Australia												
Hard/very hard/ don't know	6.5	14.2	79.3	1,281	30.2	12.1	57.7	669	51.4	7.5	41.0	N/A
Easy/very easy	7.8	17.2	75.1	940	41.4	12.5	46.0	1,014	37.1	7.6	55.6	N/A
Total	**6.5**	**15.7**	**77.4**	**2,229**	**33.3**	**12.9**	**53.8**	**1,685**	**44.6**	**7.2**	**48.1**	**1,008**

Notes: Weighted proportions. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. The analysis is limited to respondents aged 15–59 years in Year 1. See Appendix Table A1.1 for the codes of variables included in this table. Observations (Obs) represent the number of participants responding to the items (unweighted). N/A = Not available; NILF = not in the labour force.

a In this table, age is represented at the time of the survey (Years 1, 5 and 10). As such, the large increase in the employment rate for 15–19 year olds between Years 1 and 5 may be partially explained by a cohort ageing effect. In other words, those who were under 20 years old in Wave 1 included the youngest participants who were more likely to be in school than seeking employment. By Year 5, only n = 32 participants remained in this age bracket, and all were 18 or 19 years old. By Year 10, all respondents in this bracket had aged into the next category.

Sources: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

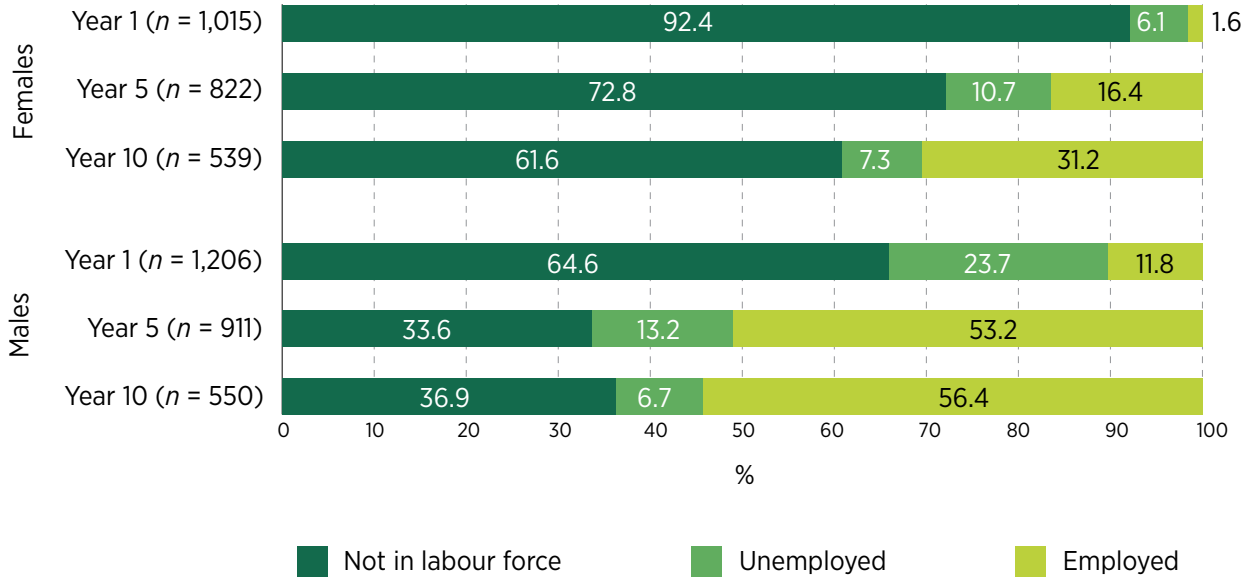
3.2 Features of participation and non-participation

Research has shown that the economic contributions of refugees generally increase over time and with subsequent generations (Hugo, 2014). This longer-term view was articulated by one participant:

> [I'm] worried about the future of my children to be able to find a job, and for myself to find a job … [To] find a job and learn good English. This will make everyone's life much easier.
> (Female, late 40s, Afghanistan, Year 5)

Both men and women in the BNLA had increased rates of employment and overall participation in the labour force over the 10 years of the study (Figure 3.1). Women's employment increased substantially from 1 in 50 (2%) in Year 1 to nearly 1 in 3 (31%) by Year 10. The biggest increase for men was between Year 1 (12%) and Year 5 (53%). While the proportion of men who were not in the labour force increased slightly between Year 5 (34%) and Year 10 (37%), it declined among women (from 73% in Year 5 to 62% in Year 10).

Figure 3.1: Labour force status of BNLA participants by sex[9]



Notes: Weighted proportions. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. Sample limited to participants aged 15–59 in Year 1. *n* = number (unweighted) of participants responding to each item.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

9 Note that all charts and output tables in chapters 3, 4 and 5 present weighted proportions. The weights used in this report adjust for non-response in each wave by comparing the responding sample at each wave with the eligible population in the Settlement Database on several socio-demographic characteristics. For more information on how weights were calculated, see the BNLA Data User Guide (Stevenson & Rioseco, 2024).

Time in employment

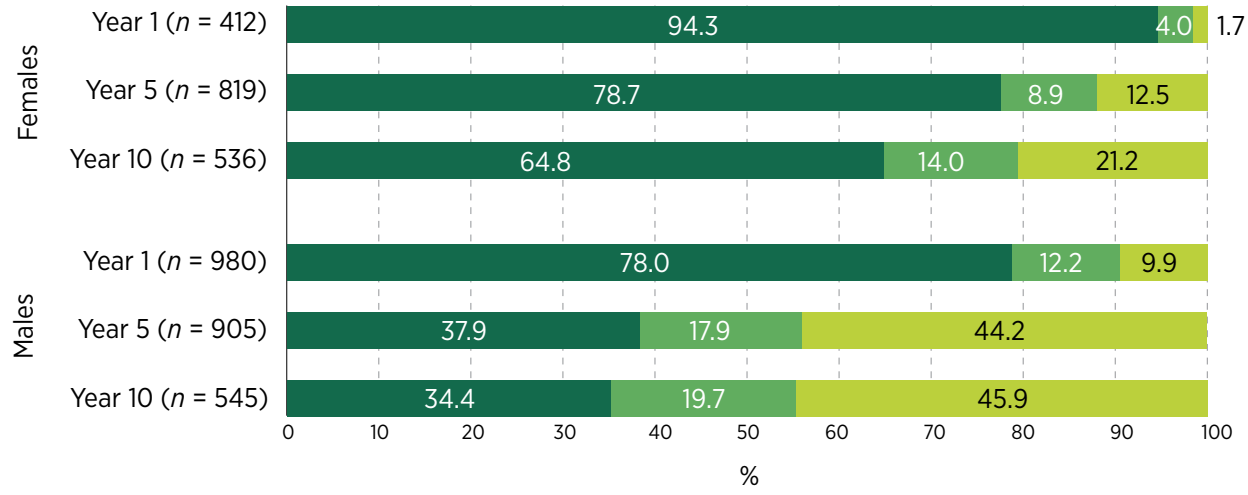
Humanitarian migrants typically move in and out of the labour force during the early years of settlement and stable employment can be elusive (Kosny et al., 2020; Llinares-Insa et al., 2020). The challenges of job security faced by humanitarian migrants in Australia were summed up by one respondent:

> In my country of origin I had work and no security. In Australia we have security but no job opportunity. Migrants need assistance to find jobs It would be good to encourage ethnic communities to assist with finding jobs for the new migrants. (Male, mid-20s, Iraq, Year 2)

The BNLA questionnaire asked employed participants to indicate how long they had been employed over the previous 12 months. Figure 3.2 illustrates the gradual increase over time in the proportion of respondents who said they had worked for more than half of the previous 12 months.

Among women, though nearly two-thirds (65%) had no employment in Year 10, the proportion of those who had been employed for 7–12 months increased to 21%. By contrast, 46% of men indicated that they had been in paid work for 7–12 months in Year 10; and, as with the previous figure, the biggest improvement among men was between Years 1 and 5.

Figure 3.2: Time in employment in last 12 months by sex



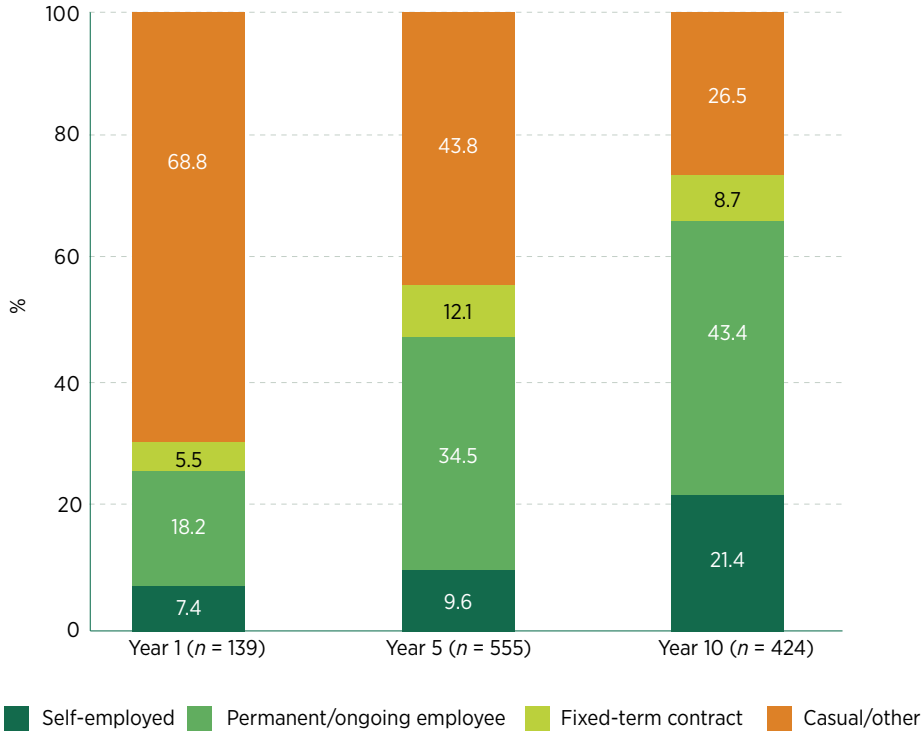
Notes: Weighted proportions. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. Sample limited to participants aged 15–59 in Year 1. *n* = number (unweighted) of participants responding to each item.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

Job security and self-employment

Among participants who were employed in Years 1, 5 and 10, a steady increase in both permanent/ongoing employment and self-employment was observed (Figure 3.3). While more than two-thirds (69%) of employed persons were in casual forms of work in Year 1, this proportion had fallen to just over one-quarter (27%) by Year 10. Conversely, 43% of workers were in permanent/ongoing employee roles by Year 10, and just over 1 in 5 (21%) reported being self-employed. The rate of self-employment for participants was higher than that of the overall Australian working-age population in 2023 (16%) (ABS, 2024d).

Figure 3.3: Employment by contract type



Notes: Chart not disaggregated by sex due to small cell counts for females. Weighted proportions. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. Sample limited to participants aged 15–59 in Year 1. *n* = number (unweighted) of participants responding to each item.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

Occupations

Resettled refugees typically experience sharp downward occupational mobility compared to other migrant groups (Brell et al., 2020; SSI, 2023). Women, in particular, face a 'double burden' related to both their status as refugees and prevalent gender stereotypes in the labour market (Fossati et al., 2024). As such, they may be more likely to be channelled into lower-paid, 'female-dominated' occupations in receiving countries such as aged or disability carers, early childhood educators and education assistants (ABS, 2024c).

Among women in the BNLA, the largest pre-arrival occupational group was Managers and Professionals (30%) (Figure 3.4). However, after 10 years in Australia, the proportion of employed women in managerial or professional roles was only 17%. This suggests an overall occupational downgrading among women in the BNLA sample. For women, the major occupational group became Community and Personal Service Workers (36% in Year 10) and Machinery Operators, Drivers and Labourers (24%).

'White collar' male professionals in the BNLA also experienced an occupational downgrading after migrating to Australia, with the overall employment of men becoming concentrated in technical, trades and labouring work. Almost half (49%) of all male participants with pre-arrival work experience were previously employed as Technicians and Trades Workers or Machinery Operators, Drivers and Labourers (Figure 3.5). These 2 occupational groups accounted for an even larger share of men's employment in Australia by Year 5 (74%) and Year 10 (71%). In addition, though nearly 1 in 5 (19%) men had previously been employed as Managers and Professionals, by Year 10 this had almost halved to 1 in 10 (10%).

Figure 3.4: Occupational distribution, females

Notes: Weighted proportions (except pre-arrival). Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. Sample limited to participants aged 15–59 in Year 1. *n* = number (unweighted) of participants responding to each item.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

Figure 3.5: Occupational distribution, males

Notes: Weighted proportions (except pre-arrival). Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. Sample limited to participants aged 15–59 in Year 1. *n* = number (unweighted) of participants responding to each item.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

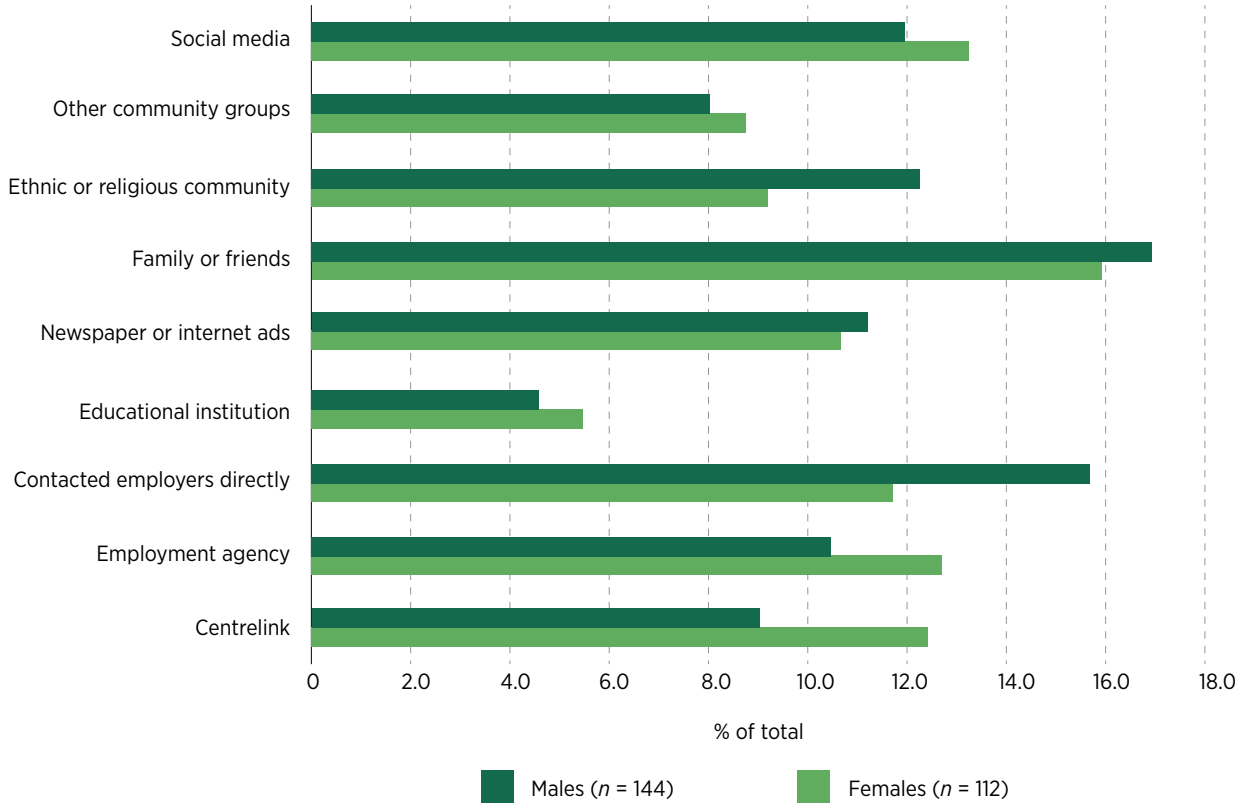
Job seeking

As previously noted, mainstream employment services may not be appropriate for refugee communities (DPMC, 2019). Several BNLA participants expressed a similar view, for example:

> [The] job network – we don't know what they do exactly. They did not help that much to get a job. They don't help to get a study course.[10] (Female, mid-30s, Sub-Saharan Africa, Year 2)

When searching for employment, refugees often rely on community networks and informal, 'word-of-mouth' methods (Hugo, 2014). Community-based organisations can also play an important role in offering pre-employment training or CV help (Szkudlarek, 2019). Of those BNLA participants looking for employment in Year 10, the most common job-seeking strategy for both women (16%) and men (17%) was contacting family or friendship networks (Figure 3.6). By Year 10 many respondents were also using social media channels to find employment (13% of women and 12% of men). Women (13%) were more likely than men (9%) to be seeking employment through Centrelink. The least common responses were looking for work through an educational institution and through other community groups (people from other ethnic backgrounds).

Figure 3.6: Job seeking methods in Year 10, by sex



Notes: Percentages represent the weighted count of responses to each multiple-choice item. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. Sample limited to participants aged 15–59 in Year 1. *n* = number (unweighted) of participants who responded to the question in Year 10.

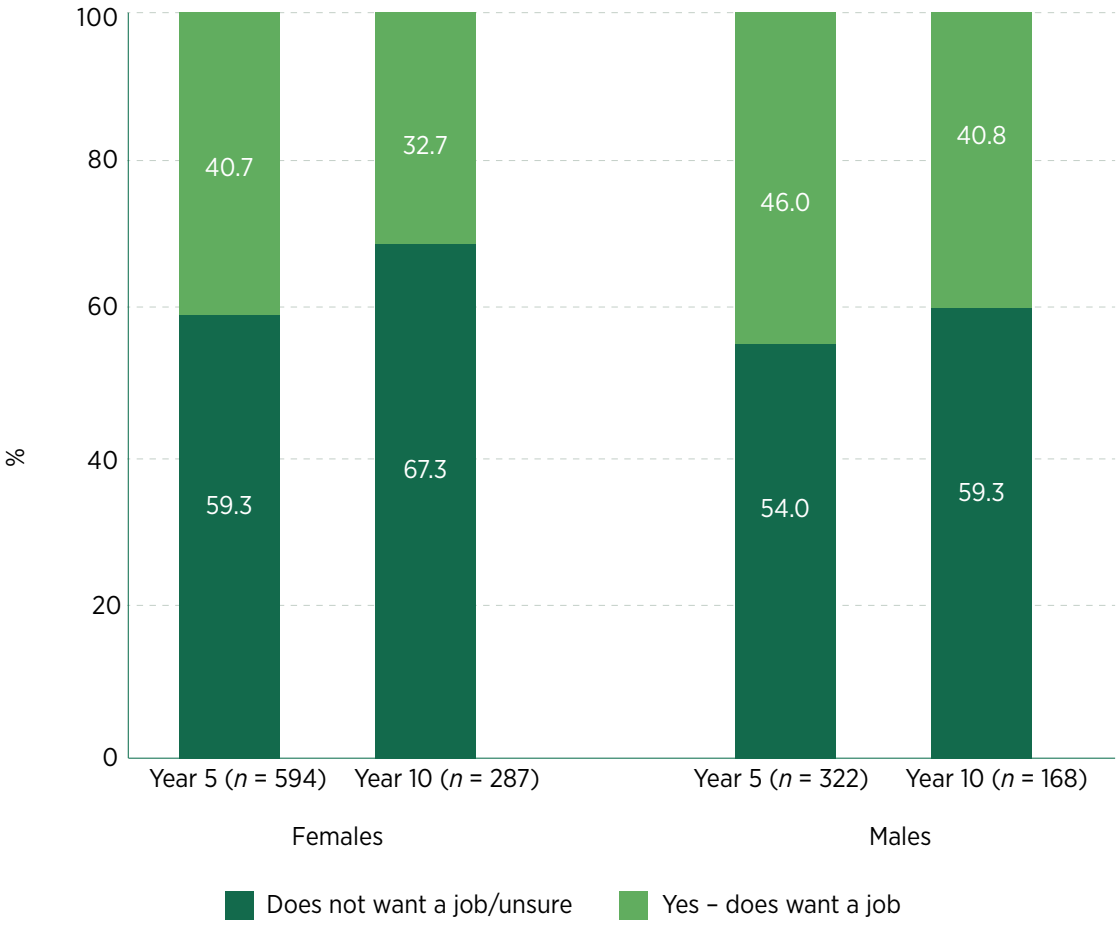
Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

Not in the labour force: 'potential' workers?

The ABS defines 'potential workers' as people who want to and are available to work but may have difficulties that prevent them from looking for a job (ABS, 2024b). Earlier we showed that, after 10 years of permanent residence, 62% of women and 37% of men in the BNLA were not in the labour force (NILF). Of this group, the BNLA survey asked, 'Even though you are not currently working, would you like to get a job?' In Years 5 and 10, between 33% and 46% of women and men who were NILF indicated that they did want a job (Figure 3.7).

10 The term 'job network' is a reference to the former name of Commonwealth Employment agencies; now called 'Workforce Australia'.

Figure 3.7: Proportion of NILF respondents who wanted a job, by sex



Notes: Weighted proportions. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. Sample limited to participants aged 15–59 in Year 1. *n* = number (unweighted) of participants responding to each item.
Source: BNLA Waves 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023).

Despite the desire to find employment, there are several key reasons why refugees may not be actively looking for work. These may include poor physical and/or mental health and trauma from forced displacement (Lai et al., 2022), family responsibilities and caring for young children (Al-Hamad et al., 2024), and the prioritisation of education as a long-term strategy to securing sustainable employment – particularly for younger refugees (Bonoli & Otmani, 2023).

The eagerness for younger refugees to find employment as soon as possible was expressed by one participant:

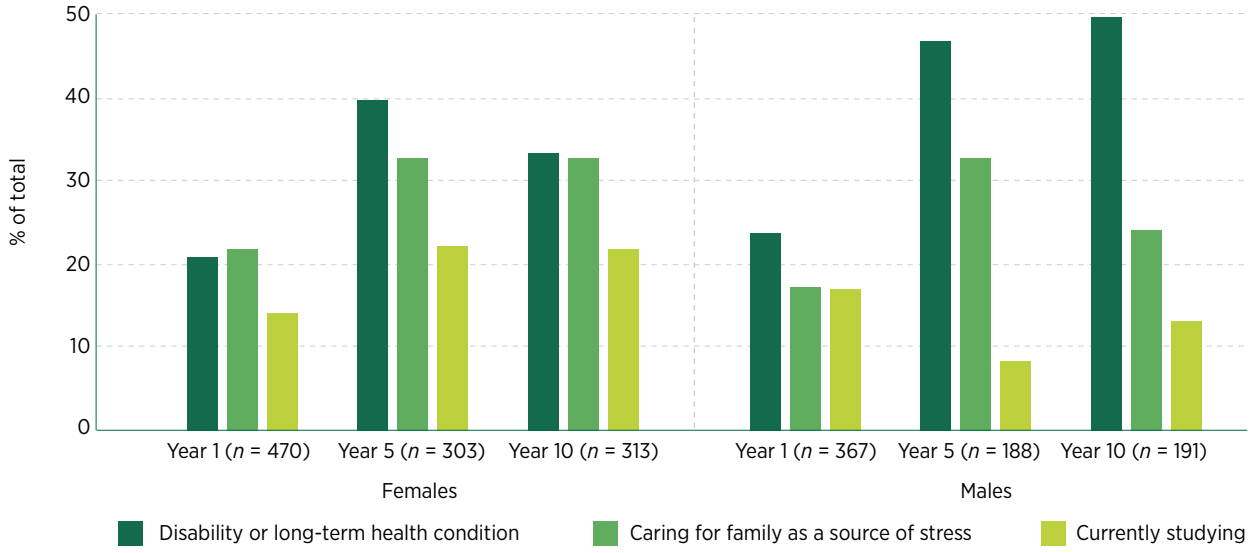
> [Provide] services that can assist young people to find jobs and training in an encouraging atmosphere, at the beginning perhaps in their own language. Lots of young new arrivals are desperate to find a job and do proper training and learn the language different to the older people. (Male, early 20s, Iran, Year 5)

Figure 3.8 compares the prevalence of disability or long-term health conditions, caring responsibilities (as a source of stress), and current study or job training – which were selected by respondents as reasons why they were not actively looking for work in the previous year. Almost half (49%) of men who were NILF in Year 10 reported having a disability or long-term health condition. A further quarter (25%) of men reported experiencing stress because of caring for family,[11] and 13% reported currently studying at the time of the survey.

11 Note that 'caring' is not defined for the respondent in the questionnaire, and the interpretation of this term as a source of stress may differ between men and women. For example, male partners may take on more caring and family responsibilities when female partners are in the workforce. However, the stress for men that is produced by care work has been theorised as being more related to the disruption of 'traditional' male 'breadwinner' roles and what is perceived as compromised masculinity (Locke, 2017). For women, the stress associated with care work can be related to practical challenges, social isolation and the absence of social support (Kim, 2018).

For women, the prevalence of disability in Year 10 (33%) was lower than men but stress related to family caring responsibilities was higher (33%). Just over 1 in 5 (21%) women who were NILF in Year 10 also reported being currently engaged in study or job training.

Figure 3.8: Proportion of NILF respondents with selected barriers to seeking work



Notes: Disability is measured at Wave 4 due to changes in wording to the question in the Wave 5 survey. Weighted proportions. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding. Sample limited to participants aged 15–59 in Year 1. *n* = number (unweighted) of participants responding to each item.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 4 (Year 4 = 2016–17), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

This chapter highlighted the features of the BNLA participants' economic participation in Australia. To provide an overview of outcomes and trends by subgroup, the analysis shows the different labour force patterns observed between women and men, particularly the nature of occupational downgrading, job-seeking strategies and reasons for non-participation in the labour force.

4. The first job in Australia

Key points

- Recently arrived refugees typically take longer than other migrant groups to (re)enter the labour market post-resettlement.
- In the BNLA study, better health facilitated earlier transitions to employment. Around 9 in 10 (90%) participants who found their first job in Year 1 rated their health as good–excellent. The proportion of those who transitioned to the workforce while in good–excellent health declined in the following years.
- Having dependent children affected the timing of the first transition. Participants who made their first transition to employment in earlier years of the study were much more likely to have no children or 1–2 children.
- Participants who arrived in Australia via the onshore pathway were more likely to already have been employed when the study began, while offshore arrivals mainly entered employment from Year 2 onwards. Among those who had not transitioned into employment by Year 10, less than 10% were onshore arrivals.
- Women who studied English in the previous year were more than twice as likely (132%) to be in paid work compared to women who had not studied English in the previous year. However, women's availability to take English classes may be limited by other priorities and circumstances such as caring responsibilities.
- For men, English language training in the previous year was also significant, increasing the probability of their first employment transition by 55%. However, if men lived with dependent children (under 18) or if they reported having a disability or long-term health condition, the probability of the first transition to work was reduced by around 34%.
- For every additional adult present in the household, the probability of the first transition to employment reduced by 15% for men, with the effect double for women (31%). Caring for larger households can detract from women's time to pursue employment opportunities, while the presence of additional adults can create additional financial burdens for both men and women.
- Women with post-school qualifications or who had held professional and managerial positions before arrival were 88% more likely to transition to employment the following year than those who never attended school or were unemployed.
- Living in a major city (compared to living in a regional location) reduced the probability of the first transition to employment the following year by 106% for women; most of the women (around 9 in 10) lived in major cities during the study.
- Men who reported a change of residential location over the previous 12 months were 31% more likely to transition into a job in the following year compared to those who did not move.

Finding a job in a new country represents a significant turning point for most humanitarian migrants, signifying their entry into the formal labour market (Klaesson et al., 2021). The time it takes for refugees to find their first job is critical, as prolonged periods of unemployment can lead to depreciation of 'human capital',[12] with adverse effects on health and mental health (Bevelander, 2020). Delays entering the labour market can also lead to a decrease in future earnings potential and job quality, as well as the accumulation of stigma associated with long-term unemployment (Brell et al., 2020; Hainmueller et al., 2016).

This chapter examines BNLA participants' first transition to employment. First, we show the timing of the first transition to work from Years 1 to 10 by demographic and pre-arrival characteristics. A 'transition' is counted if the respondent did not report being employed in the last 7 days in a given year (from Years 1 to 4) and then reported

12 The productive capabilities, skills, knowledge and attributes embodied in individuals that can generate economic value (Cheng, Wang, & Taksa, 2021).

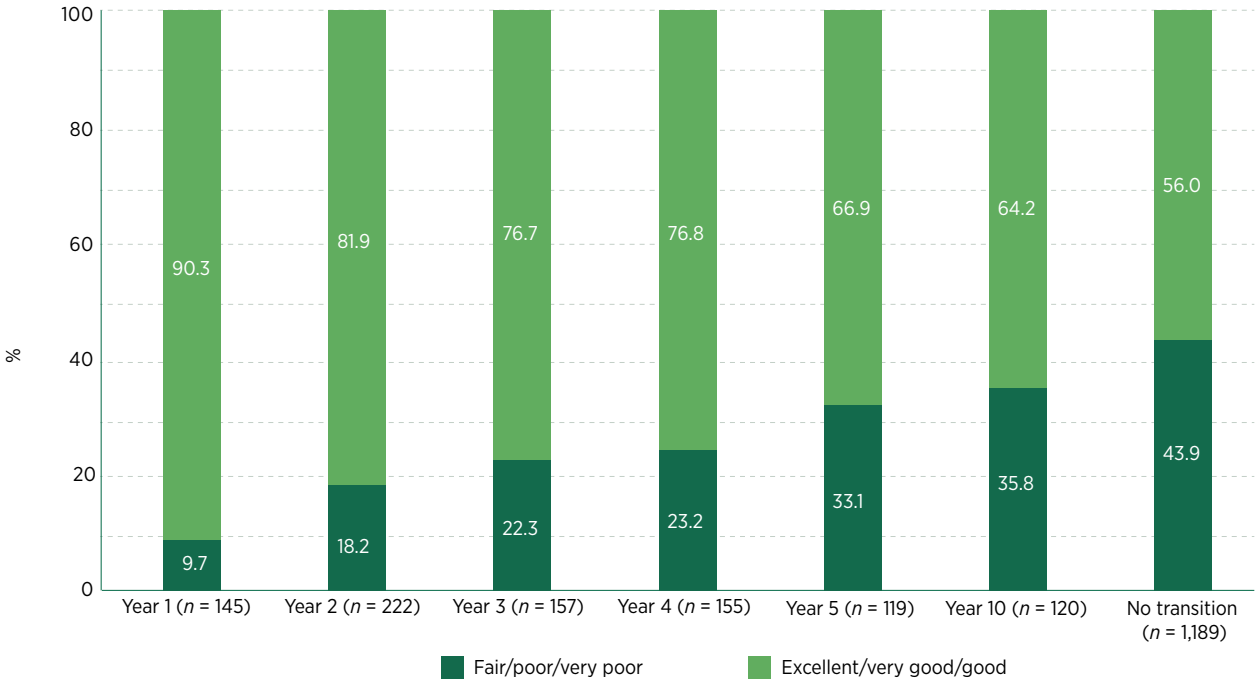
being employed in the following year (from Years 2 to 5).[13] Respondents who were already employed when the study began (Year 1) are excluded from this analysis (*n* = 145).

We then look at factors associated with the first transition for men and women using data from the first 5 years of the study.[14] Factors associated with transitions focused on individual and relationship-level variables.[15]

4.1 When did participants make the first employment transition?

Participants who were in good health at the start of the study transitioned to employment earlier (Figure 4.1). Nearly half (44%) of those not employed between Years 1 and 10 also reported having fair or worse health in Year 1.

Figure 4.1: Time of first transition by health status in Year 1



Notes: Unweighted proportions. Participants aged 15–59 at Wave 1.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 2 (Year 2 = 2014–15), 3 (Year 3 = 2015–16), 4 (Year 4 = 2016–17), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

Noting that the number of children can change over time, respondents who had no children on arrival (81%) were more likely to be in paid work in Year 1 (Figure 4.2).[16] A higher proportion of participants who had children (19%) in Year 1 transitioned to employment in later years. Of those who did not transition to employment by Year 10, almost three-quarters (75%) had children on arrival.

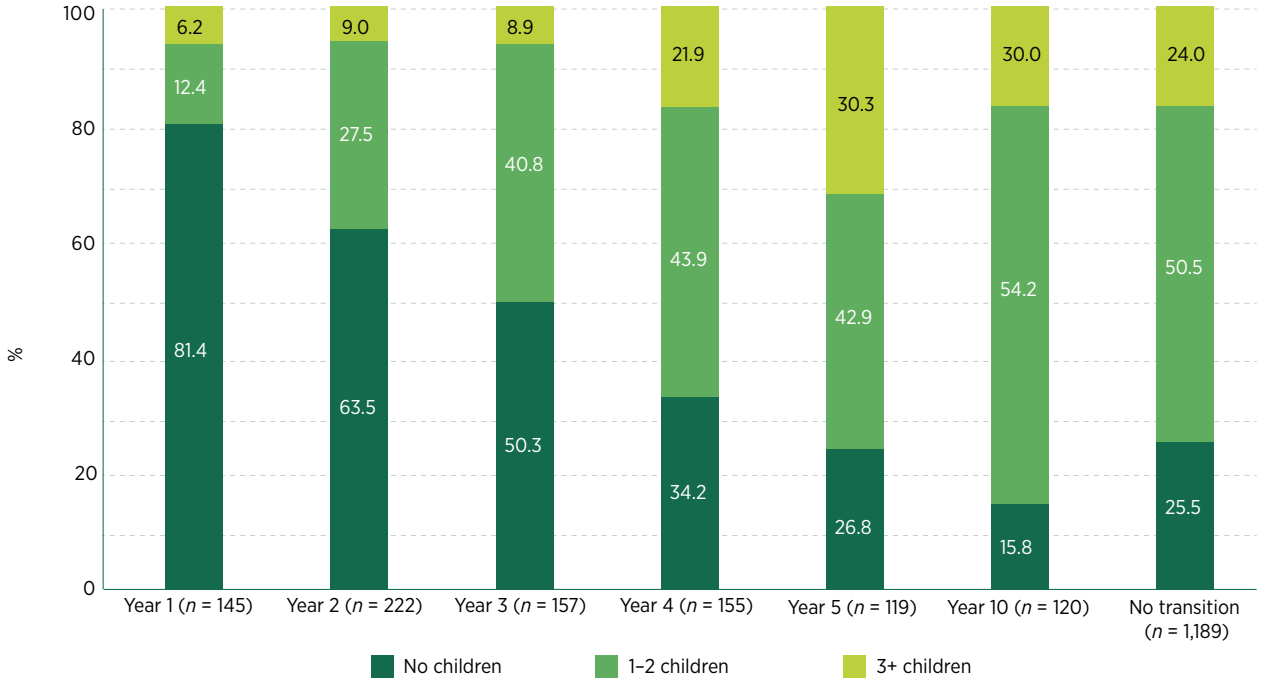
13 Participants who did not report a transition to employment from Years 2 to 5 were coded as 'no transition'.

14 Only data from Years 1 to 5 were analysed as the models included predictors in the year before employment was first reported. Given the 5-year gap between Waves 5 and 6 (Years 5 and 10), data for the 12 months preceding Year 10 were unavailable. Hence, data for Year 10 could not be included in this analysis.

15 See Appendix Table A1.1 for the list of variable codes included in this chapter.

16 It should be noted that this outcome is correlated with visa/arrival pathway, among other factors. For instance, those who arrived via the onshore pathway (former asylum seekers or those who entered Australia on a different visa) were more likely to be employed in Year 1 (or before the study commenced) and were also largely single/unaccompanied younger men. Offshore arrivals were, on average, older and arrived in family or household units.

Figure 4.2: Time of first transition by number of children in Year 1



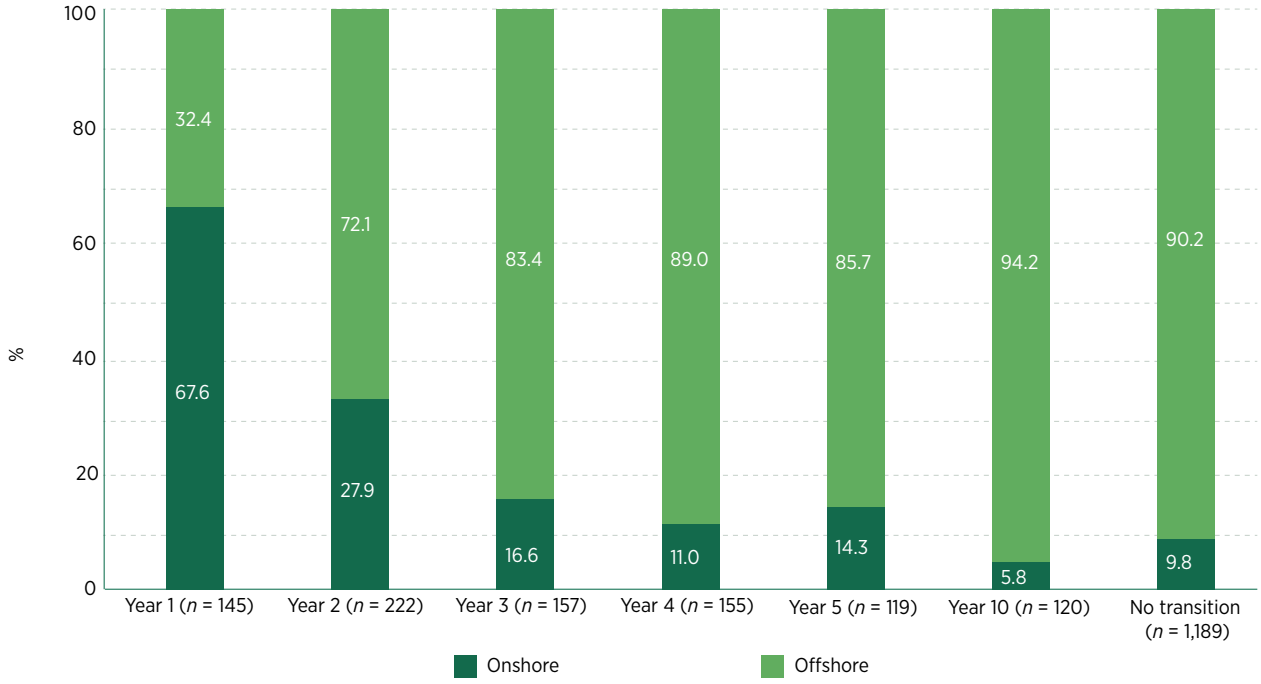
Notes: Unweighted proportions. Number of children may change over time. Participants aged 15–59 at Wave 1.
Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 2 (Year 2 = 2014–15), 3 (Year 3 = 2015–16), 4 (Year 4 = 2016–17), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

The mode of arrival also affected individual transitions to employment (Figure 4.3). Those who arrived via the onshore pathway[17] were more likely to be employed in Year 1, while offshore arrivals mainly entered employment from Year 2 onwards. Among those who did not transition to employment in the 10 years of the study, less than 10% were onshore arrivals.

The difference between onshore/offshore groups may be partly explained by duration of residence in Australia. Most onshore arrivals had been in Australia for at least 1 year before being granted a permanent visa and becoming eligible to participate in the BNLA study. By contrast, 96% of offshore arrivals had been in Australia for fewer than 6 months in Year 1. In addition, onshore arrivals in the BNLA sample had a lower median age than offshore migrants, as well as higher relative rates of pre-arrival work experience and education.

17 On average, more likely to be unaccompanied younger men living in single households.

Figure 4.3: Time of first transition by migration pathway



Notes: Unweighted proportions. Participants aged 15–59 at Wave 1.

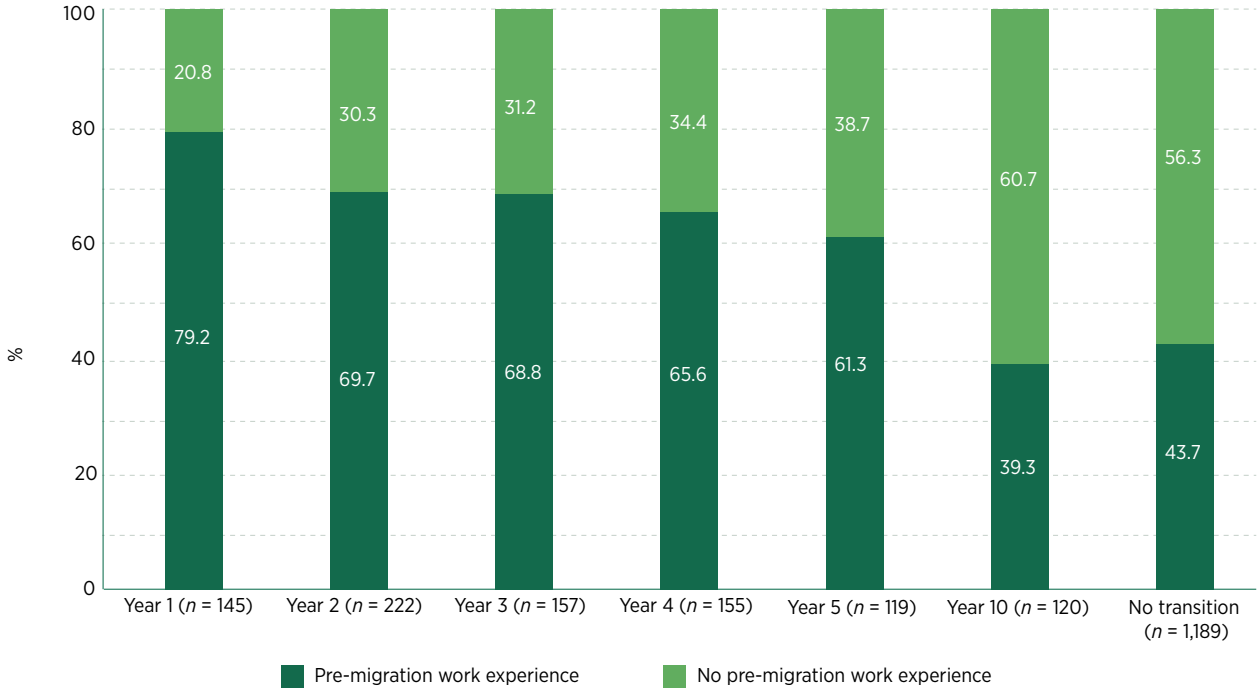
Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 2 (Year 2 = 2014–15), 3 (Year 3 = 2015–16), 4 (Year 4 = 2016–17), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023).

Though employment was a priority for many BNLA participants, several quotes from the study highlighted concerns around 'putting too much pressure' on humanitarian migrants to find work in the early post-arrival years given the complexities they face on arrival. For example:

> Give new migrants more time to settle in life and to get a house before force them to find any job. They need to improve their English and to understand Australian lifestyle then to start to look for a job. (Female, mid-40s, Iraq, Year 5)

Respondents with pre-migration work experience were able to enter employment earlier (Figure 4.4). In Year 1, almost 4 in 5 (79%) of those who were employed had pre-arrival work experience, while nearly 7 in 10 (69%) of those who transitioned to employment in Years 2 and 3 had pre-arrival work experience. Those with no pre-arrival work experience transitioned at a slower rate; among those who were transitioning to employment for the first time in Year 10, 61% had no pre-arrival work experience.

Figure 4.4: Time of first transition by pre-migration work experience



Notes: Unweighted proportions. Participants aged 15–59 at Wave 1.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 2 (Year 2 = 2014–15), 3 (Year 3 = 2015–16), 4 (Year 4 = 2016–17), 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18) and 6 (Year 10 = 2023)

It should be highlighted, however, that merely having experience was not a guarantee of employment. As one respondent noted:

> For those who are more than age of 40, language is one of the barriers but with basic English we can find a good job. The main reason is that the new arrivals cannot get a job in what they have done and experienced. Please let them to work in their own occupation and train them, that would be very helpful. (Male, mid-40s, Afghanistan, Year 5)

4.2 What factors were associated with securing the first job?

This section measures the effect of several factors *in the year before* the first employment transition, including English proficiency, English study, other education, mental health and overall health. The models that follow also include factors measured *at the same time* as the employment transition, such as household structure and caring responsibilities. Selected findings are presented below with the complete results in Appendix Table C3.1.[18]

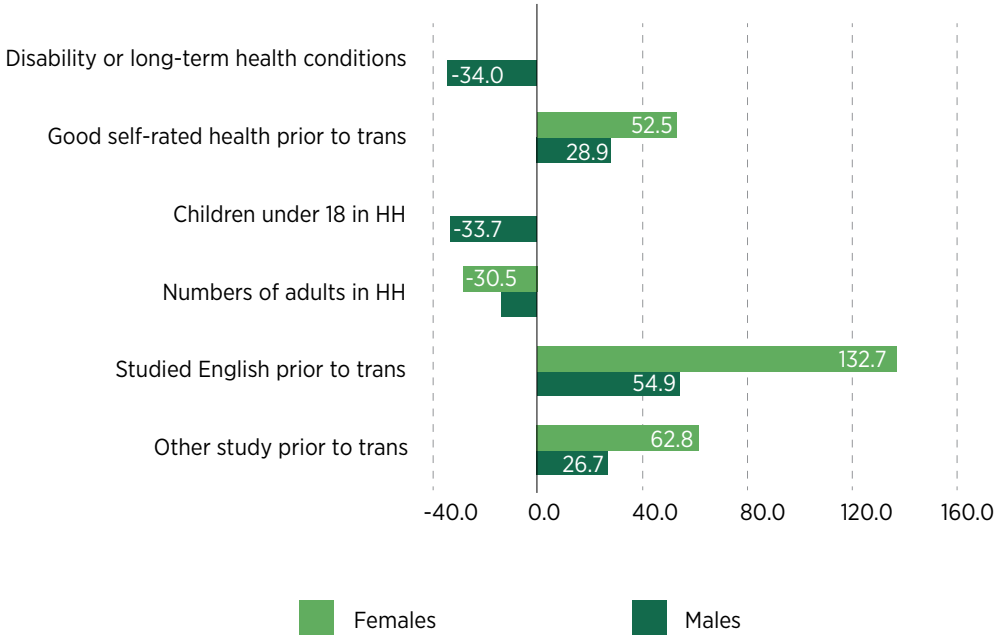
For women, having studied English in the previous year had the largest positive effect on their transition to employment (Figure 4.5). Women who studied English in the previous year were more than twice as likely (132%) to be in paid work compared to those who had not studied English in the previous year. This accords with Cheng, Wang, Jiang and colleagues (2021), who found that local language skills in the early years of migration were strongly associated with employment, and Flavel and colleagues (2024), who found that undertaking study or job training in Australia was strongly associated with employment for refugee women.

For men, English language training in the previous year was also significant, increasing the probability of the first employment transition by 55%. However, if men in the BNLA study lived with dependent children (under 18) or if they reported having a disability or long-term health condition, the probability of the first transition to work was reduced by 34%.

18 To assist in interpreting our findings, we present the probability of employment (as percentages) in relation to explanatory variables linked to employment. For instance, the probability of employment for females can be understood as 'the % change in employment of women who studied English in the previous year compared to those who did not study English in the previous year.'

For every additional adult present in the household, the probability of the first transition to employment reduced by 15% for men, with the effect double for women (31%). A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that caring for larger households can detract from women's time to pursue employment opportunities (Sánchez-Domínguez & Abenza, 2021). The presence of additional adults can also create additional financial burdens for both men and women (Ballarino & Panichella, 2018).

Figure 4.5: Percentage change in the probability of first employment transition by household composition and human capital, males and females



Notes: Participants aged 15–59 at Wave 1. HH = household; trans = transition. Children under 18 and disability or long-term health conditions were not significant for females and are not presented here. The significance of the results was assessed at 3 levels: 1% ($p < 0.01$: highly significant), 5% ($p < 0.05$: significant), and 10% ($p < 0.10$: marginally significant). This means the results are statistically significant if the *p*-value is less than 0.01, 0.05, or 0.10, respectively.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 2 (Year 2 = 2014–15), 3 (Year 3 = 2015–16), 4 (Year 4 = 2016–17) and 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18)

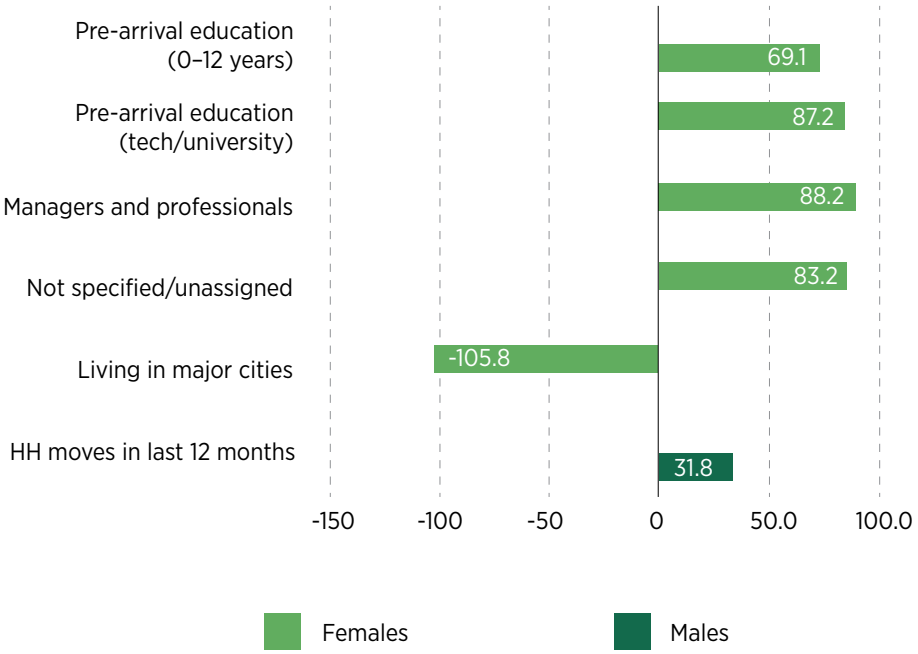
Women with post-school qualifications or who had held professional and managerial positions before arrival were 88% more likely to transition to employment than those who never attended school or were unemployed (Figure 4.6). As discussed in chapter 3, refugee women tend, however, to be engaged in low-skilled occupations, even after 10 years post-migration. While they are likely to be employed sooner than their lower-educated peers, educated women remain concentrated in low-skilled occupations.

Living in a major city reduced the probability of the first transition to employment the following year for women by 106% (Figure 4.6). This may be partly explained by higher competition for low-skilled jobs in metropolitan areas, which could hinder humanitarian migrants' initial transition to paid work (Wong et al., 2023). Regional or rural areas may offer more favourable conditions for refugee women, including greater demand for labour in less competitive markets and stronger local community networks that are more supportive of integrating refugee women into the workforce (Carlbaum, 2022; Fang et al., 2018).

However, it should be noted that only around 10% of BNLA participants were living in regional areas at any point in the study. Furthermore, of the 11 fieldwork sites selected for data collection in Wave 1, 7 were capital cities. Therefore, findings related to rurality and employment, though significant, should be treated with caution given the small sample in BNLA.

Recently arrived refugees are highly mobile populations, often relocating multiple times for reasons of employment opportunities and housing affordability and availability (Wiedner & Schaeffer, 2024). Men in the BNLA who reported a change of residential location over the previous 12 months were 32% more likely to transition to employment in the following year compared to those who did not move (Figure 4.6). This finding suggests that local opportunities play a crucial role in influencing where refugee men decide to live and work.

Figure 4.6: Percentage change in the probability of first employment transition by pre-arrival education and occupation, area of residence and household movement, males and females



Notes: Participants aged 15–59 at Wave 1. HH = household. Pre-arrival education, pre-arrival occupation in different categories and living in major cities were not significant for males, while household moves in the last 12 months were not significant for females and are not presented here. The significance of the results was assessed at 3 levels: 1% (p <0.01: highly significant), 5% (p <0.05: significant), and 10% (p <0.10: marginally significant). This means the results are statistically significant if the p-value is less than 0.01, 0.05, or 0.10, respectively.

Source: BNLA Waves 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14), 2 (Year 2 = 2014–15), 3 (Year 3 = 2015–16), 4 (Year 4 = 2016–17), and 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18).

This chapter has reinforced the link between English language tuition and the first transition to employment. Other forms of education and perceived good health also had a positive but lesser impact, indicating that practical communication skills might be one of the most immediately valuable assets for refugees in the job market. However, living in a major city compared to regional areas, household dynamics and childcare responsibilities presented significant barriers to the first employment transition, with varying effects on men and women. The chapter demonstrates that, for groups with low/no pre-arrival education and employment experience, and those caring for several dependent children, there is a comparatively low probability of early transition to the Australian labour market.

5. Gender, couple and family dynamics

Key points

Individuals

- Among individual men and women, having pre-arrival work experience, completing studies in Australia, being in good health and living in a regional location all increased the probability of employment, with the effects stronger for women.
- Conversely, caring responsibilities decreased the probability of employment for men and women. The effect was twice as large for women than men.
- Finding it easy to make friends in Australia was associated with an increase in the probability of employment for men but with a decrease for women. This finding may be explained by differences in the social and professional networks of men and women.
- Having arrived via the onshore pathway, being proficient in spoken English or having friends from a mix of cultural or ethnic backgrounds increased the probability of men gaining employment. These associations were not significant for women.

Couples and families

- Around 80% of refugees arriving in Australia come as part of family or household units. Among refugee couples, most principal visa applicants were male (89%) and most spouses were female (88%).
- The probability of employment initially increased with participants' age at arrival, peaking at age 35 for principal applicants and age 40 for spouses, after which the likelihood of employment declined.
- Factors that improved the probability of employment for principal applicants and spouses were an individual's completion of study or training in Australia and having a partner who was proficient in spoken English. For both factors, the effect was twice as high for spouses compared to principal applicants.
- There was no statistically significant association between the principal applicants' own self-assessed health and their employment outcomes. However, when their spouse or partner reported being in good health, the probability of employment for principal applicants increased.
- Within couples, a spouse's pre-arrival work experience more than doubled their own probability of employment but prior work experience was not significant for the principal applicants.
- Living in an area with a low or medium level of socio-economic disadvantage increased the probability of employment for principal applicants but was not significant for spouses.
- Among couples, 45% had adult relatives living with them and 32% had children under 5 at home. Living with other adult relatives lowered the probability of employment for principal applicants but did not have a significant effect for spouses. Having children under 5 lowered the probability of employment for spouses but was not significant for principal applicants.
- The combined presence of other adult relatives and children under 5 in the household did not have a significant effect on employment outcomes. That is, we found no evidence that other adult relatives are facilitating either the principal applicant's or spouse's probability of employment by assisting with child care.

Previous research has examined the barriers and facilitators of economic participation for refugees at the individual level, revealing patterns of gender inequality in labour force participation and employment outcomes (Flavel et al., 2024). However, individual attributes can have different effects on economic participation when in a couple or family relationship.

While some refugees do come to Australia unaccompanied, most others migrate as couples or in family units. The negotiation of roles within couples and the distribution of household responsibilities are critical factors that shape refugees' employment trajectories and overall economic participation (Kikulwe et al., 2021; Minor & Cameo, 2018). There is, however, a lack of research on the economic participation of refugees at the couple or household level. Partners play a crucial role in the division of both market (Cobb-Clark et al., 2005; Cobb-Clark & Crossley, 2004; Derby et al., 2020) and non-market work (Fendel & Kosyakova, 2023), as well as the acquisition of dominant language skills (Chiswick et al., 2005). These relationships are important for understanding the economic integration patterns of humanitarian migrants in Australia.

This chapter starts with further analysis of the drivers of employment and unemployment (compared to not being in the labour force) for men and women in BNLA, before focusing on employment outcomes for couples who migrated together.[19],[20] We used the BNLA data from Year 5 only, given the higher numbers of refugees in the study, particularly women, who reported being in paid work (for similar arguments, see Flavel et al., 2024).[21]

Appendix Tables C3.2–C3.4 contain the full results of the analyses presented in this chapter.

5.1 What drives labour force participation for refugee women and men?

Refugee men and women often experience divergent employment outcomes due to a combination of structural, cultural and individual factors. Men typically have higher labour force participation rates because of traditional gender roles and labour force demand for male workers with specific skills (Salikutluk & Menke, 2021; Zwan & Tubergen, 2022). Refugee women usually face significant challenges in balancing family responsibilities with labour market engagement (Schiestl et al., 2021). The combined pressures of family duties and the necessity of work can greatly affect refugee women's ability to create social networks and obtain community support (Salikutluk & Menke, 2021). This challenge has been described as the 'double disadvantage' for refugee women (Zwan & Tubergen, 2022).

What drives employment for individual men and women?

Pre-arrival work experience, completion of study or training in Australia, good health and living in a regional location were important factors in the probability of employment for both men and women (Figure 5.1). However, the effects of these factors were stronger for women. The value of prior work experience for women may be related to women overcoming normative or structural barriers (e.g. traditional gender roles and stereotypes) to participate in the labour market (Tibajev & Nygård, 2023). At the same time, completing studies or training locally helps refugees, particularly women, increase the transferability of pre-existing skills and improve their employability compared to men (Cheng, Wang, & Taksa, 2021).

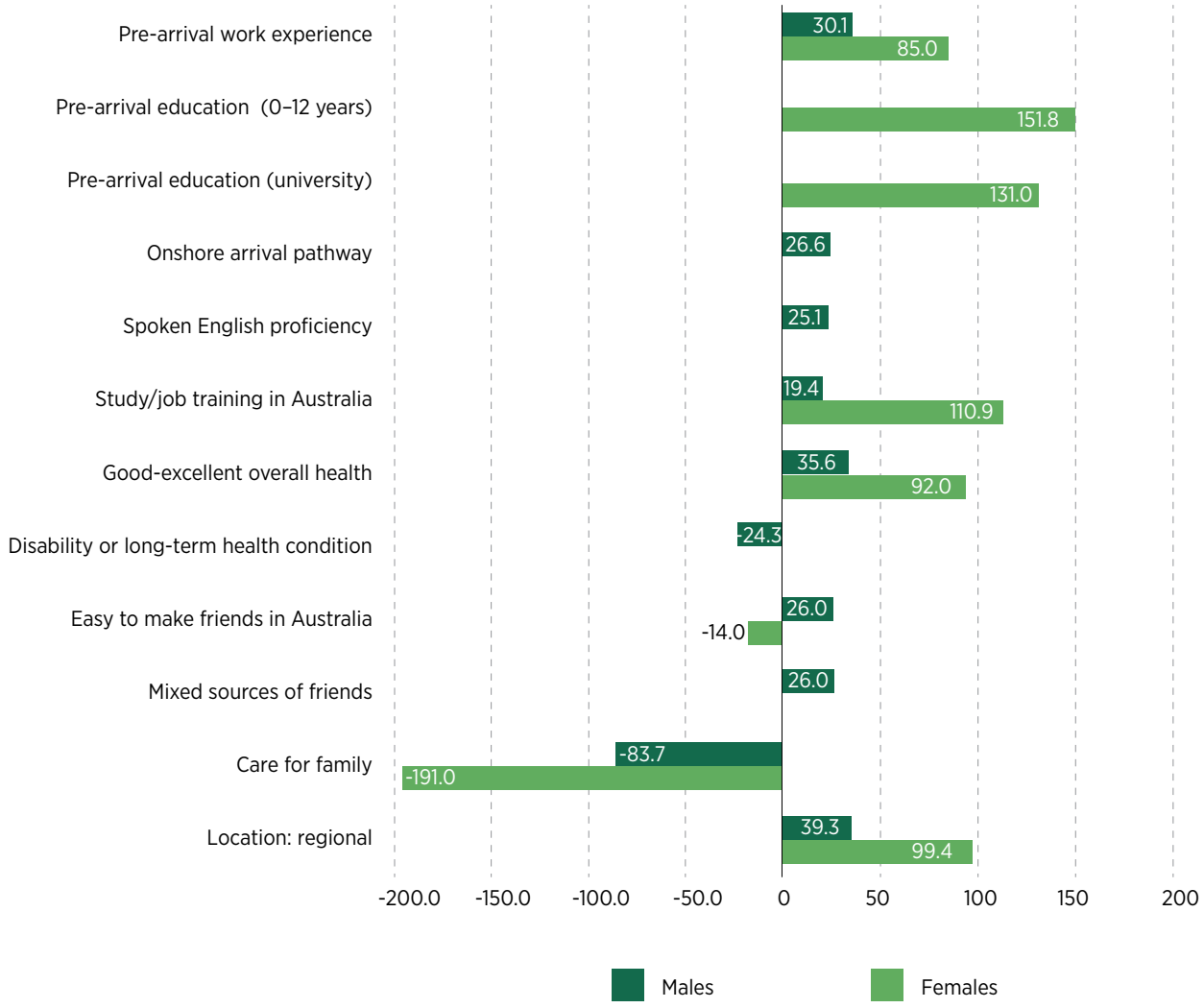
Programs targeting women's health and employment may help address refugee women's unique challenges, leading to higher employment rates (Dawson et al., 2025). The significant effect of regional areas may reflect how regional locations offer employment in industries that suit the occupational profiles of some refugee women compared to men (Flavel et al., 2024).

19 Refugee couples migrating to Australia may do so with other family members or on their own. Many arrive as part of family or household units, including extended family. However, some couples might migrate independently, depending on their circumstances and available pathways.

20 To assist in interpreting our findings, we presented the probability of employment/unemployment in relation to explanatory variables linked to employment/unemployment. Probabilities are shown as percentages. For instance, the probability of employment for females with prior work experience can be understood as 'the % change in employment when women had prior work experience compared to those who had no prior experience.'

21 We provide some descriptive analysis but due to low employment rates for women in Year 10, we did not conduct a detailed quantitative assessment focused on gender differences in employment outcomes and predictors. As principal and secondary applicants completed the same questionnaire in Year 10, we were also unable to identify spouses separately with Year 10 data.

Figure 5.1: Percentage change in the probability of employment in Year 5 (vs NILF) by selected characteristics, by sex



Notes: Participants aged 15–59 in Wave 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14). Reference groups – pre-arrival education: not attended school; offshore arrival pathway, very poor/poor health; hard/very hard/don't know; no friends/mostly from own ethnic community; major city. Pre-arrival education was not significant for males, while migration pathways, spoken English proficiency, disability status, and mixed sources of friends were not significant for females, and these results are not presented here. The significance of the results was assessed at 3 levels: 1% (p <0.01: highly significant), 5% (p <0.05: significant), and 10% (p <0.10: marginally significant). This means the results are statistically significant if the p-value is less than 0.01, 0.05, or 0.10, respectively.

Source: BNLA Wave 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18)

Caring responsibilities were associated with a decrease in the probability of employment. Men with caring responsibilities had an 84% decrease, with this effect more than double for women (191%). This finding echoes the findings related to gender dynamics in existing research (Salikutluk & Menke, 2021).

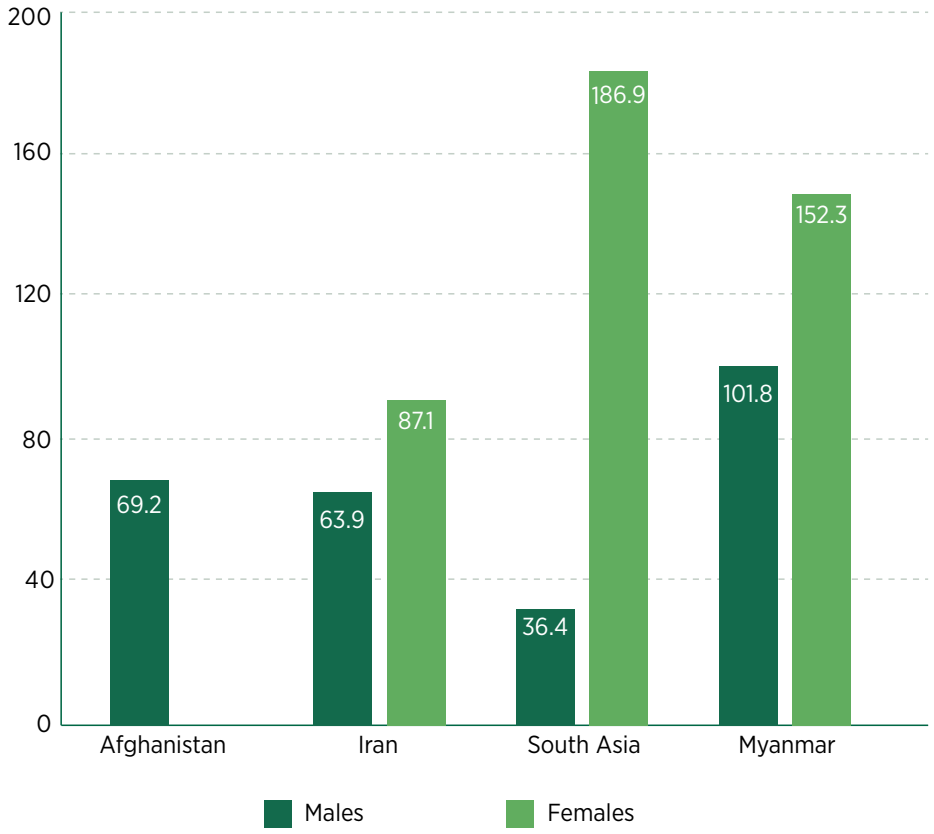
However, caring responsibilities also affect resettled refugee men, who commonly share daily chores and child care with their spouses more equally than in their home countries, reflecting the influence of new societal contexts and situations (Bergnehr, 2022).

Factors that only had significant effects on men included having arrived via the onshore pathway, proficiency in spoken English, having a disability or long-term health condition and having friends from a mix of cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Disability was associated with a 24% decrease in the probability of employment for men, while each of the other factors was associated with an increase of around 25%–26% in the probability of men gaining employment. On the other hand, pre-arrival education appeared to be a significant predictor of the probability of employment for women only.

The ease of making friends in Australia was associated with a 26% increase in employment for men and a 14% decrease in the probability of employment for women. This finding may be explained by differences in the network composition of immigrant men and women, as men tend to have more social interactions that can provide information about vacancies or informal knowledge about how the labour market operates (Kosyakova et al., 2023). Refugee women have more social interactions with co-ethnic and kinship groups (Hartmann & Steinmann, 2021), which are less likely to support job-seeking activities directly.

Male and female BNLA participants born in Iran, South Asia and Myanmar were more likely to gain employment than those born in Syria or Iraq (the reference group and largest origin group in the study) (Figure 5.2). Refugee men born in Afghanistan were more likely to be employed than Iraqi or Syrian born people but the effect was not significant for women. This may be explained by the strictly defined gender roles in Afghan culture (Hamidi et al., 2021), which is a well-known barrier to women's active participation in the labour force (Rostami-Povey, 2007).

Figure 5.2: Percentage change in the probability of employment in Year 5 (vs NILF) by sex and country of birth



Notes: Participants aged 15–59 in Wave 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14). Reference group: Iraq and Syria. Other countries include countries from Africa, and the effects of these countries were not significant for men and women and are not presented here. The significance of the results was assessed at 3 levels: 1% (p <0.01: highly significant), 5% (p <0.05: significant), and 10% (p <0.10: marginally significant). This means the results are statistically significant if the p-value is less than 0.01, 0.05, or 0.10, respectively.

Source: BNLA Wave 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18)

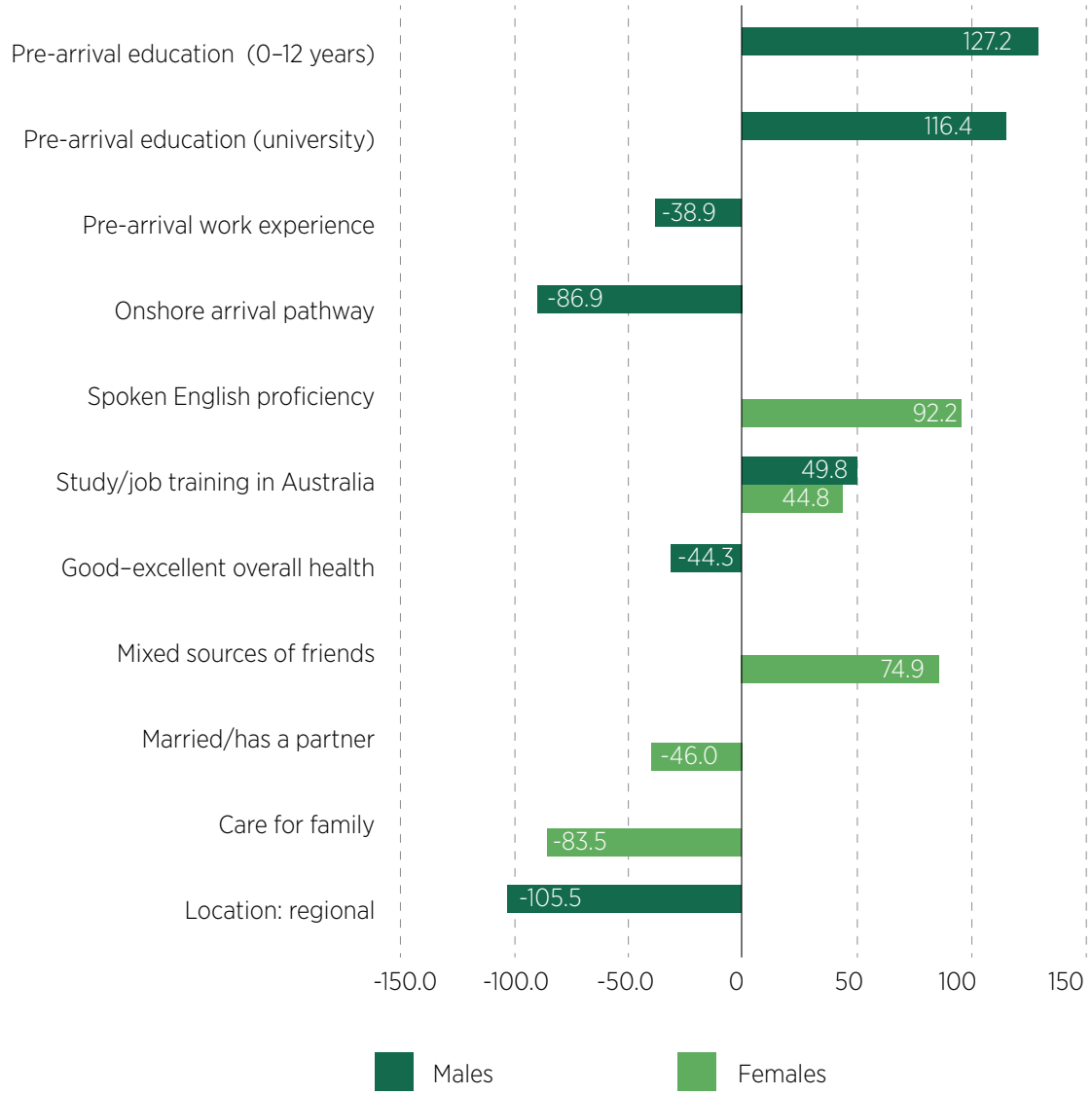
What drives job seeking for men and women?

We also found gender differences in the probability of being unemployed/looking for work compared to not being in the labour force (Figure 5.3). For example, men who rated their health positively in Year 5 had a lower probability of looking for work than of being out of the labour force altogether (the effect of overall health was not a significant factor in job seeking for women). One possible explanation is that because refugee men encounter greater challenges finding work than job seekers in general and have the cultural expectation to be primary income earners within their households, the overall mental and physical health of refugee men may be impacted (Salikutluk & Menke, 2021; Ziersch et al., 2023; Zwan & Tubergen, 2022). As noted earlier, once employed, men experience improved health and wellbeing through a sense of identity, contribution to society and the development of social networks.

Similarly, men with pre-arrival work experience had a lower probability of unemployment (job seeking) compared to being out of the labour force. This may be because, in general, refugee men in the labour force who had prior work experience were more likely to have already found employment (see Figure 5.2). However, men who have worked in professional or high-skilled jobs before coming to Australia experience initial downward mobility and discrimination, which can lead to disillusionment and withdrawal from the labour market (Cheng, Wang, & Taksa, 2021; Loosemore et al., 2021; Tsolak & Bürmann, 2023).

Other results were in the expected direction, with the exception of the onshore arrival pathway and regional location for men. Men who arrived via onshore migration pathways and lived in regional areas were less likely to be unemployed compared to being out of the labour force altogether. The result was not statistically significant for women.

Figure 5.3: Percentage change in the probability of unemployment in Year 5 (vs NILF) by selected characteristics, by sex



Notes: Participants aged 15–59 in Wave 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14). Reference groups – pre-arrival education: not attended school; offshore arrival pathway, very poor/poor health; no friends/mostly from own ethnic community; major city. Pre-arrival education and work experience, migration pathways, self-rated health, and location of residence were not significant for females, while spoken English proficiency, partnership status or caring responsibilities, and mixed sources of friends were not significant for males These results are not presented in this figure.The significance of the results was assessed at 3 levels: 1% (p <0.01: highly significant), 5% (p <0.05: significant), and 10% (p <0.10: marginally significant). This means the results are statistically significant if the p-value is less than 0.01, 0.05, or 0.10, respectively.

Source: BNLA Wave 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18)

5.2 Do refugee couples have different employment outcomes?

Refugee women usually have lower rates of participation in the Australian labour market than refugee men and native-born women (van Kooy et al., 2024). Refugee women are generally 'tied movers', meaning they participate in moves that could result in a net loss for themselves but positive net returns for the family (Compton & Pollak, 2007). As such, women are likely to have a secondary role in family migration decisions, resulting in their lower human capital and earning potential in the destination country (Cooke et al., 2009). This disadvantage is particularly pronounced among married couples with children due to female migrants' greater focus on non-market work such as caring responsibilities (Grönlund & Fairbrother, 2022).

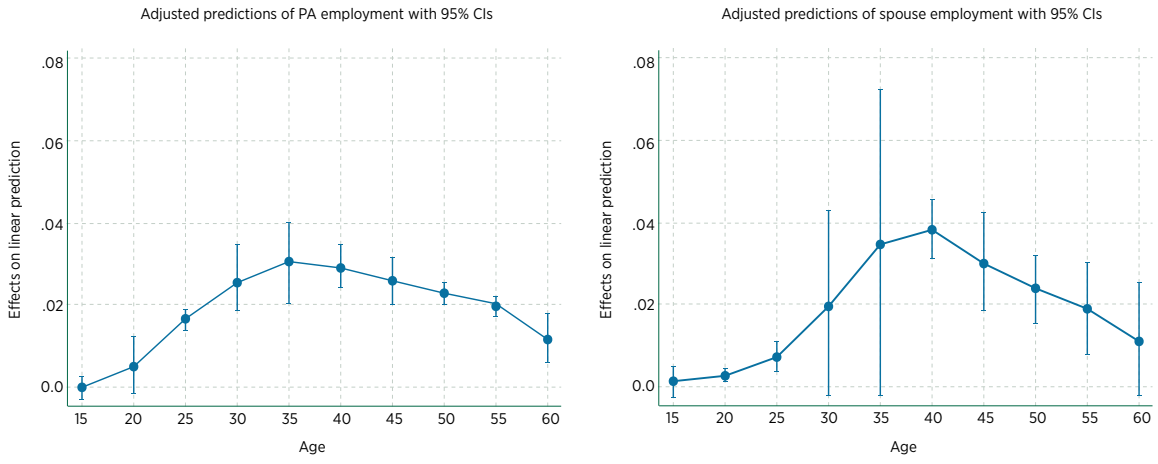
In this section, we analyse the employment outcomes of principal applicants (PAs) and their spouses. As 89% of PAs were male and 88% of spouses were female, we have used this split as a proxy for men and women here.[22] The average employment rates in Year 5 were 37% for PAs and 18% for spouses. We present analyses for PAs and their spouses, which provide direct evidence for whether couple and family dynamics influence the probability of employment.

Since the majority of humanitarian migrants live within family units in a neighbourhood, we assume that personal, partner, family and neighbourhood traits all influence each spouse's employment outcomes. We include the country of origin to highlight the role of cultural attitudes or ethnicity.

Gender and age at arrival

Age at arrival influences future employment, and immigrants tend to have better employment outcomes if they arrive at younger ages (Wong & Edwards, 2023). Our analysis indicates that couples who migrated to Australia in the later stages of life were less likely to be employed than their younger counterparts (Figure 5.4). Within couples, the probability of employment was initially highest for PAs (who were mostly men) at age 35 and for spouses (mostly women) at age 40, after which the likelihood of employment declined. This is consistent with research that suggests women experience more career interruptions due to family responsibilities, which can affect their employment prospects differently at various ages compared to men (Stypińska & Gordo, 2018).

Figure 5.4: Relationship between employment in Year 5 and age at arrival for PAs and spouses



Note: Average marginal effects of age at arrival on employment based on logit models. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Source: BNLA Wave 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18)

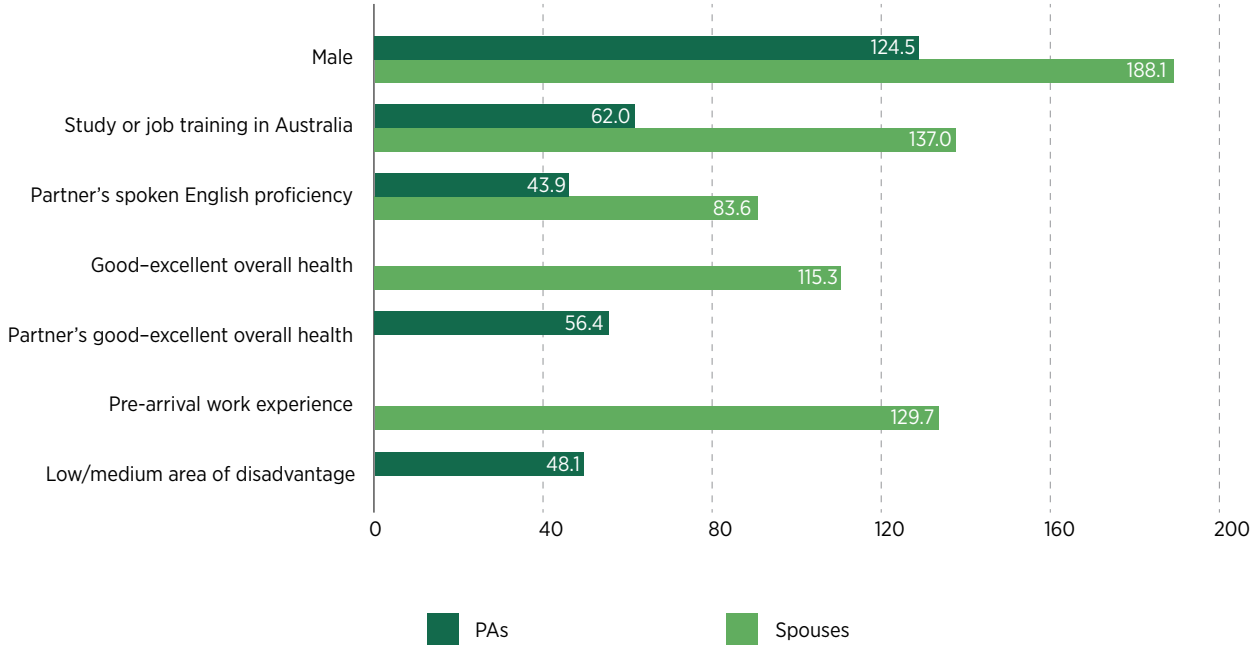
22 We further examined the results in Figures 5.4–5.6 by limiting the principal applicants to males only and the spouses to females aged 15–59. The key results remained broadly the same.

Factors associated with employment outcomes for couples

Chapter 3 noted the significance of pre-arrival work experience for individual men and women. Within couples, our findings indicate that a spouse's *own* pre-arrival work experience more than doubled their probability (130%) of employment but this effect was not significant for PAs. This may be related to the greater occupational concentration of women in caring jobs (see chapter 3), whereas men's pre-arrival experience has less equivalence to the jobs they find in Australia. For PAs', who were mostly men, different demands and expectations from employers pose a challenge for them to find employment that matches their prior work experience (see also Tibajev & Nygård, 2023).

Research has found that post-immigration human capital (local qualifications/experience) tends to be more valued by employers in the host society (Llinares-Insa et al., 2020). We also found that when part of a couple, an individual's completion of study or training in Australia was associated with a 62% increase in the probability of employment for PAs and more than double that (137%) for spouses in Year 5 (Figure 5.5). Flavel and colleagues (2024) suggest that refugee women often show resilience and determination to overcome educational barriers in a host country. This resilience could be contributing to higher completion rates and employment prospects for spouses than PAs.

Figure 5.5: Percentage change in the probability of employment for couples in Year 5 by selected factors



Notes: Participants aged 15–59 in Wave 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14). Reference groups – Female, pre-arrival work experience: none; completion of study or training in Australia: no; fair/poor/very poor health; high area of disadvantage; partner's English proficiency: not at all/not well; partner's fair/poor/very poor health. Low/medium areas of disadvantage and partners' good health were not significant for spouses, while pre-arrival work experience was not significant for PAs, with these results not presented here. The significance of the results was assessed at 3 levels: 1% (p <0.01: highly significant), 5% (p <0.05: significant), and 10% (p <0.10: marginally significant). This means the results are statistically significant if the p-value is less than 0.01, 0.05, or 0.10, respectively.

Source: BNLA Wave 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18)

Language skills are often considered an important component of immigrant human capital (Cheng et al., 2020; Chiswick & Miller, 2001). However, we found that when part of a couple, the PA or the spouse's *own* spoken English proficiency had no statistically significant association with their employment prospects.

In contrast, having a partner who was proficient in spoken English *was* associated with a 44% increase in the probability of employment for PAs and an 84% increase for spouses (Figure 5.5). Research has found that where one partner possesses superior language skills, they may be better positioned to navigate job markets and indirectly support the other partner's employment outcomes through shared resources and networks (see e.g. Pluut et al., 2018).

Figure 5.5 shows that self-assessed good health more than doubled (115%) the probability of employment for spouses but there was no significant association for PAs. This suggests that, when in a couple or family unit, PAs' pursuit of paid work was largely unaffected by their subjective health status.

A supportive and healthy home environment is critical for PAs' employability. When their spouse or partner reported being in good health, the probability of employment for PAs increased by 56%. One respondent described this situation in terms of the need for more support:

> [B]ecause I work full-time the Centrelink does not support my wife. She is sick (heart condition) and she cannot work. Unfortunately, there is not enough support from Government. (Male, mid-40s, Iran, Year 5)

In contrast, the PA's health status was not associated with the spouse's probability of employment. This finding echoes existing research showing that while a male partner's good health may contribute to a stable home environment (Baranowska-Rataj & Strandh, 2021), it is not a direct determinant of spousal employment (see also Mendolia, 2014).

This analysis also shows that living in an area with a low or medium level of socio-economic disadvantage (compared to high levels of disadvantage) was associated with a 48% increase in the probability of employment for PAs but was not significant for spouses (Figure 5.6). This finding is consistent with Flavel and colleagues (2024), and suggests that spouses' employment outcomes are less likely to be affected by neighbourhood characteristics in comparison to their personal circumstances, education and skills.

5.3 How does family affect employment outcomes for refugee couples?

A third set of measures that significantly impact the probability of employment for couples is the make-up of the household, including the presence of other adult relatives and young children. Among couples, 45% had adult relatives and 32% had young children living with them.[23]

Evidence suggests that other adult relatives in the household can enable a mother to be in paid employment, while having dependent children has the opposite effect (MacPherson & Stewart, 1989).[24] For refugee men, however, the effect of family dynamics is inconclusive. In some cultures, men may not be traditionally involved in child care; displacement can change family dynamics, requiring men to take on more caregiving activities (Çarpar & Göktuna Yaylaci, 2022). At the same time, the presence of other adult relatives at home can create additional responsibilities that can impact work performance and productivity for household members who are employed. Therefore, in the model that follows, we included an interaction term between the presence of adult relatives and children aged under 5 to capture the possible effect of care provided by other adults.

Our findings show that having adult relatives living in the same household was associated with a 58% lower probability of employment for PAs but did not have a significant effect on spouses' employment (Figure 5.6). On the other hand, having children under 5 in the household was associated with a significantly lower probability of employment for spouses (116%) than not having children under 5. The effect of children under 5 in the household was not significant for PAs.

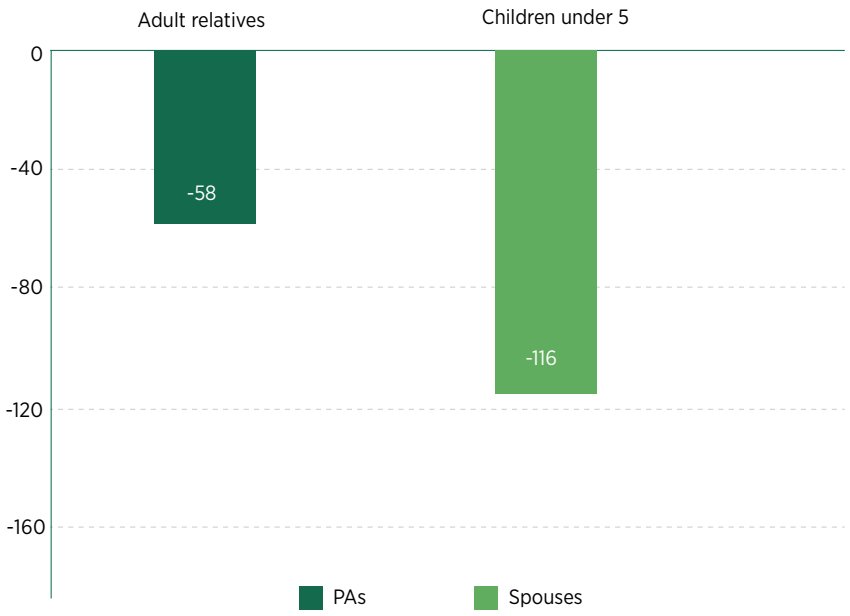
In addition, the combined presence of other adult relatives and children under 5 in the household did not have a significant effect on employment outcomes. That is, we found no evidence that other adult relatives are facilitating either the PA's or spouse's probability of employment by assisting with child care (see Appendix Table C3.4).[25]

23 Unweighted.

24 While the study by MacPherson and Stewart (1989) provides valuable insights into the role of extended family members, it is important to note that the field has not evolved significantly in the context of refugee households since its publication. The article's observations on the influence of other family members on employment remain valid based on our findings.

25 There may be several reasons why other adult relatives are not significantly affecting the employment prospects of the PAs or their spouses through childcare assistance. Further research could help identify specific factors that might be influencing this trend.

Figure 5.6: Percentage change in the probability of employment in Year 5 for couples by family dynamics



Notes: Participants aged 15–59 in Wave 1 (Year 1 = 2013–14). Adult relatives: couples with children and no adult relatives and only couples are the reference group. Couples with children under 5: couples with no children under 5 are the reference group. Adult relatives were not significant for spouses, while having children under 5 was not significant for PAs, and these results are not presented here. The significance of the results was assessed at 3 levels: 1% (p <0.01: highly significant), 5% (p <0.05: significant), and 10% (p <0.10: marginally significant). This means the results are statistically significant if the p-value is less than 0.01, 0.05, or 0.10, respectively.

Source: BNLA Wave 5 (Year 5 = 2017–18)

Couple differences in the effects of having children under 5 can be attributed to the distinct roles that refugee men and women often assume in caregiving and household responsibilities. Research indicates that immigrant women generally take on more caregiving tasks compared to men, irrespective of their relative earnings, leading to different impacts on their employment prospects (Fendel & Kosyakova, 2023).

The analysis in this chapter adds to the debate on the importance of family composition in the economic integration of refugees. It provides empirical evidence that the effect of human capital on employment outcomes extends beyond individuals to affect the employment prospects of family members. In particular, as PAs (mostly men) are usually likely to be the primary income earners within couples, their spouses' good health may be more crucial for their employment than their spouses' employment status. PAs' characteristics hardly have any effect on a spouse's probability of employment with the exception of a PA's English proficiency skills, which significantly increase their spouse's employment prospects.

The presence of children has little to no effect on PAs' (mostly male) employment but a significant adverse effect on spouses' (mostly females) employment. This suggests that the traditional division of domestic and childcare tasks still prevails among refugee women. In other countries where female labour force participation levels are high and the returns to human capital have risen, career costs may be more important considerations.

In sum, our analysis indicates that an assessment of economic participation outcomes among humanitarian migrants should include the participants' family members. Our findings demonstrate how family matters in the economic integration of humanitarian migrants in Australia and suggest that settlement and integration policies need to reflect the family dynamics of refugee households.

6. Conclusion

This report has presented new analysis of the economic participation of humanitarian migrants who settled in Australia around 2013, tracing their participation over a 10-year period. As a longitudinal study, the BNLA provides evidence of economic participation trends over time, the timing of 'transitions' into paid work, and possible barriers that can be reduced or eliminated through policy interventions.

Our analysis demonstrates a diversity of outcomes for men and women, and for principal visa applicants and their spouses within refugee households. Many of these patterns are well-established in the literature, such as the gendered nature of labour force participation, lower rates of participation among older migrants, occupational downgrading, and the challenges that humanitarian migrants face in accessing effective job-seeking support (Cheung & Phillimore, 2017; Khawaja & Hebbani, 2018; Olliff, 2010; Ressia et al., 2017).

However, the novel findings in this report help to advance our understanding of refugees' economic participation in Australia. These include:

- the prevalence of self-employment (more than one-fifth of the overall cohort) by Year 10
- the preference for informal sources of job information (friends, family, social media)
- the sizeable 'latent' labour force of humanitarian migrants – 33% of women and 41% of men – who were not actively looking for work in Year 10 but nevertheless wanted to get a job
- the impact of dependent children in the household, which delays labour market entry for refugees, especially those with 3 or more children
- caring responsibilities, which decreased the probability of employment, especially for women.

Some of these areas are being addressed by tailored pilot programs and initiatives that have potential to be scaled up. The Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP), for example, is designed in part to address humanitarian migrants' need for trusted community information and support, and to marshal local resources to welcome newly arrived refugee families (Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia [CRSA], 2024).[26] Another example, the Stepping Stones to Financial Wellbeing program, supports migrant women to gain employment or start a small business by providing online workshops, free childminding services, peer support and mentoring, and training in business development and financial literacy (Kabare, 2023).

Building on this existing knowledge, priorities for future research on humanitarian migrants' economic participation should include: rigorous evaluation of the outcomes from pilot programs; the use of surveys and qualitative methods to understand perceptions, decision making and attitudes to work among humanitarian migrants; and taking advantage of new opportunities to link administrative datasets to cohort studies (especially where data are available on employment and service use information) of resettled refugees.

26 An evaluation of the CRISP program is ongoing.

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