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# Culturally and Racially Marginalised Girls and Young Women in South West Sydney: Equity of Opportunity and Civic Engagement

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# Acknowledgment of Country

With respect for Aboriginal cultural protocol and out of recognition that its campuses occupy their traditional lands, Western Sydney University acknowledges the Darug, Dharawal, Gadigal, Gundungurra and Wiradjuri peoples and thanks them for their support of its work on their lands (Greater Western Sydney and beyond).

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# Key Findings and Recommendations

## This report is the outcome of research conducted with culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) girls and young women from migrant and refugee backgrounds in South West Sydney in 2025.

This research was carried out as a partnership between Western Sydney University (WSU) and Western Sydney Migrant Resource Centre (WSMRC) with the aim of exploring the barriers and enablers impacting girls and young women's civic engagement – that is, their relationship to the Australian state through rights, services, obligations and formal participation, for more see Fozdar and Hartley 2014) and their aspirations within Australian society through a place-based approach (Fincher 2003; Williamson 2016).

The subsequent questions arising from these aims concerned the nature of access and equity of opportunity including: (a) what are the experiences of CARM girls and young women in relation to education, health, housing, and employment related support, and subsequently, what are the primary barriers they face in these areas; (b) how do socio-economic and cultural factors affect the equitable distribution of opportunities among CARM girls and young women in South West Sydney; and (c) how do CARM young women aspire to participate in Australian society, and what do they view as being barriers to participation if they are not able to meet those aspirations.

The research team undertook data collection at the WSMRC office in Liverpool over a series of inter-connected sessions: (i) creative mapping of services and programs followed by a focus group discussions with groups of girls and young women in two age groups – 16-18 years and 19-24 years and (ii) individual storytelling sessions. Four discussion groups were held with 22 participants, scheduled in the afternoons and evenings outside of school hours. At subsequent sessions, 11 participants consented to individual storytelling sessions, of which 3 took up the option to prepare a digital story (audiovisual) centered on their experiences in South West Sydney. Another 8 of them engaged in narrative-based one-on-one storytelling session with a researcher.

All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription company. Participants were also invited to a de-briefing session where initial research findings were shared for their feedback. All participants were compensated for their time with a gift voucher.

Overall participants originated from several countries – Afghanistan, Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq and Ukraine. Some had spent long periods of time in transit in other countries including India, Pakistan and Indonesia. The majority of participants were recently arrived (first five years in Australia) and undertaking full time study in Intensive English Centres (IEC), high school or tertiary preparation. They lived with their family or extended family mainly in the Liverpool area although some travelled from other parts of South West Sydney to attend sessions.

Noting the multiple demands on their time the girls and young women responded well to being given space to speak in groups, often with peers from other backgrounds who they might not ordinarily meet. The focus groups in particular were active spaces for discussion highlighting the benefit of an approach that does not limit conversations to one specific ethnic group and facilitated a space for women to speak freely. For as one participant commented;

> *We are women, we have different emotions and how we go through this society, not only refugees but also as women. We have different ways to engage in the society, we have to be strong and more knowledgeable.*

The girls and young women spoke about their key stresses and challenges, hopes, dreams, and aspirations, supports they receive at present and where there are gaps or mismatches between available services and what they need. Broader themes also emerged around a sense of belonging, racism and gender. Some of their main concerns focused on financial stress, seeking employment to support their family or to be able to afford day to day expenses, housing pressures, education challenges especially for newer arrivals enrolled in IECs, travel and transport and an overall sense of a lack of time. These themes are elaborated upon in this report which includes excerpts from narratives of the girls and young women collected from both the focus group and narrative storytelling methods, and images from multimedia elements. All references to participants in this report are anonymized and data has been de-identified including creative images following the guidelines of Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee for which this research received approval.

A number of key findings emerged from the research that are summarised next followed by recommendations. An overarching theme was the way in which participants experienced service fragmentation, uncertainty about the availability of and access to information about local services, what supports they were entitled to, and pathways were available to them and how to navigate them. Older teenage participants were especially keen to know how to access university pathways, driver education programs and employment services. Further, while participants had access to education, their experiences navigating education were shaped by the compounding impacts of travel time, family responsibilities, and English language proficiency. Many were especially keen to start work or obtain more hours in their part-time employment to support their family. For girls and young women who had spent long periods in transit countries, they had seen their parents struggle to make ends meet. During this research a deep sense of familial responsibility emerged to help within their households both as a day-to-day necessity but also to ease the burden on parents who had been working hard for many years.

Participants repeatedly described having to navigate unfamiliar systems alone, receiving inappropriate or discriminatory advice, and lacking culturally safe environments when engaging with education, employment, or health services. Settlement services were safe spaces with staff who understood CARM experiences, as were local libraries, but due to the demands of work and study girls and young women were not always able to attend centres outside of one-off events or school holiday activities.

An ongoing concern is a lack of data that accurately captures the realities of CARM communities more broadly that can allow service providers to plan targeted programs (Refugee Education Australia 2026). This research supports findings from existing studies that show CARM youth face overlapping structural barriers spanning employment, education, finances, healthcare, mobility, and household responsibilities (Baak et al 2019, 2023; Block et al 2014; Lobo 2010; Mupenzi 2018; Naidoo 2015; NSW DoE 2020; Uptin et al 2013; Watkins & Noble 2022).

Finally, a central outcome of the research was the sense of empowerment participants experienced when invited to express themselves, share stories, and recognise shared struggles with peers. The research process itself became a form of community building, particularly through shared creative activities. The discussions became a space where the girls and young women exchanged the knowledge and resources they had with each other. By leaving intentional space for participants to guide conversations, the research was shaped by their voices, ensuring their perspectives and priorities were central to the process. In doing so, the project became a practice of civic engagement in action, facilitating the active participation CARM girls and young women to share knowledge, and influence the spaces and decisions that affect their lives. This research reinforces how building trust and inclusion through ongoing, community-led engagement in policy, program design, and research can offer an environment where CARM girls and young women have equitable opportunities to explore their strengths and future dreams (Mehta et al, 2025). This approach provides a strong foundation to channel their potential and strengthen civic engagement and belonging (Fozdar and Hartley, 2014)

The following recommendations are put forward to address the challenges identified in this report:

In response to findings that education is both a key priority and stressor for CARM girls and young women, it is recommended that further research be conducted to map referral pathways and coordination mechanisms at the local level (LGA) to better understand educational programs that can inform ongoing advocacy to develop a national framework for refugee education.

Settlement networks and organisations should be resourced to document how the wider issue of a 'transport desert' (Rachwani, 2026) in South West Sydney specifically impact newly arrived CARM girls and young women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. This takes up a finding from this research that transportation is a major stressor for CARM girls and young women who reported feeling unsafe using public transportation particularly at night, face long commute times, and may have limited access to a car or driver's license.

Strengthen culturally safe services by embedding cultural competence and anti-racism training across sectors, co-designing services with CARM communities and youth advisory groups. Ensuring funding for settlement services and community-led organisations with professionals who understand CARM experiences in addition to casework to include activities that include but are not limited to excursions, school holiday activities and after-hours events could help to address the sense of isolation experienced by participants.

Provide appropriate information and resources (including multilingual information) so that girls and young women and their families are adequately supported when making decisions about pathways into Vocational Education and Training (VET) or higher education. This also includes addressing long-standing concerns about recognition of prior learning and English language proficiency requirements.

Provision of trauma-informed, culturally appropriate professional development and support for employment services as a measure to assist young women seeking greater job support as well as recognition of work experience in home or transit countries. Improved employment prospects can reduce cost of living strains and increase equity of opportunities for CARM girls and young women.

Further investigation is required into the concerns raised by participants about mainstream healthcare services. This is compounded by a persistent gap in data that accurately reflects the realities of CARM communities – without which service providers cannot effectively plan or deliver targeted programs.

# Introduction

## Australia's social landscape is shaped by longstanding patterns of migration, humanitarian settlement, and cultural diversity, positioning it as one of the most multicultural nations globally.

The experiences of culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) communities are continually evolving with the arrival of new groups of migrants and refugees to different regions in Australia. The Greater Sydney region of New South Wales (NSW), specifically, South West Sydney is among the fastest-growing areas in Australia and is also characterised by a notably youthful population, by which girls and young women are prominently represented in this demographic. South West Sydney also has one of the highest concentrations of recent arrivals (James et al. 2018), many of whom arrive with complex migration histories, disrupted schooling, limited English proficiency, or experiences of trauma – factors that shape their educational, economic, and social trajectories (CorreaVelez, Gifford & Barnett, 2010; MYAN & Foundation House, 2020; Jakubowicz et al, 2014).

Significantly, South West Sydney faces longstanding structural pressures including underinvestment, housing unaffordability, workforce precarity, and limited access to culturally safe services (Roth & Gilyana, 2023; Maddison, 2023). These challenges are further compounded by cultural barriers, stigmatisation, and discrimination, which limit access to resources and opportunities (Forray et al. 2024). As a result, high proportions of young people in the area experience significant socio-economic disadvantage (ABS, 2021; O'Neill 2017). The broader policy and service environment often fails to capture these intersectional realities.

Existing research has highlighted the challenges faced by CARM youth in domains, such as, education, employment, health, and social participation, yet, much of this work has focused either on broad culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) populations, more general localities within Australia at state or national levels, or on localised topics in the health sciences published with medical journals (see, for example, Cordato et al., 2022; Childs et al., 2025; Jamal et al., 2025). As a result, the lived experiences, resource needs, and aspirations of CARM girls and young women remain underexamined, despite their centrality to wider concerns about equity of opportunity, belonging, and access to services. The need for focused attention afforded to qualitative and participatory methods to sociologically understand the intersectional experiences of young CARM women in South West Sydney specifically represents a critical gap.

This research was undertaken in 2024 – 2025 to examine the barriers and enablers that shape equity of opportunity and civic engagement for CARM girls and young women aged 16–24 years residing in South West Sydney. Necessarily, a focus on South West Sydney in our research is significant to migration and youth discourse given the region's continuing expansion and unique demographic profile. This project was designed in partnership with Western Sydney Migrant Resource Centre (WSMRC) and was supported with funding from the Whitlam Institute and Western Sydney University's School of Social Sciences.

Grounded in a qualitative phenomenological framework and employing creative methods – including resource mapping, focus groups, and digital or narrative storytelling – the research centres on the importance of youth voice, and foregrounds the meanings participants attach to their lived experiences. This methodological design is well suited for exploring the layered intersections of gender, race, class, age, cultural background and migration status, while also highlighting agency, resilience, and aspirations.

An intersectional lens provides an understanding on how social systems that appear neutral are navigated through socio-cultural positionalities and produce patterned inequalities in access, recognition, and participation. This report aims to provide an empirically grounded account of the everyday experiences of CARM girls and young women in South West Sydney. In doing so, it contributes new knowledge to an under researched area and establishes to inform policy development, community engagement, and future research aimed at strengthening opportunities, equity of access, and civic inclusion for CARM youth.

This report begins by providing an overview of data and scholarly literature relevant to contextualising CARM girls and young women in South West Sydney, next it provides the methodology, and introduces the participants whose insights form the foundation of this research. The report then presents the thematic findings that emerged across the data, including themes of belonging, identity, gendered expectations, and community connection, highlighting how intersectional forces shape access to education, employment, health, and civic engagement. The findings further examine key stressors (such as, financial pressure, educational barriers, housing instability, transport challenges, and experiences of discrimination), as well as, the hopes, dreams, and aspirations demonstrating participants' resilience, agency, and future orientations. The report offers recommendations for culturally safe, evidence-based policy and service responses that align with the lived experiences of CARM girls and young women in South West Sydney.

# Background

## New South Wales has a long and well-documented history of receiving and supporting individuals from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

This commitment can be traced to the large-scale postwar migration programs that reshaped Australia's demographic landscape and established the foundations of contemporary settlement policy. Over successive decades, NSW has continued to play a central role in national humanitarian intake, developing specialised settlement and refugee support services that reflect both the state's multicultural ethos and its institutional experience in assisting newly arrived communities, as outlined in the Multicultural NSW Settlement Strategy (Multicultural NSW, 2025). Notably, the region of South West Sydney, located approximately 40km from the Sydney Central Business District (CBD), and part of the 'Greater Western Sydney' area, is the fastest-growing region in NSW, already larger than Newcastle or Canberra (SWSA, 2025). Comprising local government areas (LGAs), such as, Fairfield, Canterbury-Bankstown, Liverpool, Campbelltown, Camden, Wingecarribee, and Wollondilly, the region is home to over 1.2 million people, accounting for approximately 23% of Greater Sydney's population (DCJ, 2025; ABS, 2021).

South West Sydney is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse regions in NSW, shaped by long-standing migration, humanitarian settlement, and intergenerational demographic change. According to the Department of Communities and Justice of NSW (2025), 40% of residents were born overseas and 48% speak a language other than English at home; moreover, a large portion of the youth population in the region has overseas-born parents (ABS, 2021). These figures are significantly higher than state averages and reflect the region's role as a major settlement area for migrant and refugee communities.

This research employs the use of the term CARM in preference to the critiqued term Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) (Maturi and Munro, 2023; Plage et al., 2025). In Australia, the term CALD has varying definitions, though it is typically used to refer to individuals who identify with a cultural background that is not Australian (Howard & Lobo, 2020) or individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds (AIHW, 2018; ABS, 1999). The term CARM, while drawing on these foundational conceptualisations, goes beyond describing difference in background to make explicit "the weaponisation of cultural and racialised subjectification in the perpetuation of social exclusions" (Plage et al., 2025). In other words, its use highlights connotations of discrimination and emphasises the impact of marginalisation. For individuals from migrant and refugee backgrounds, "the relational nature of belonging" and identity further suggests that the dynamics of power and discrimination are also relevant, particularly in relation to understanding systemic barriers for those "who should otherwise 'feel' like citizens" (Khorana, 2023, p.243). Some studies implicate labels that create societal conceptualisations of "marginalised civic actors in both scholarship and policymaking…waiting to be emancipated" (Pan and Maree, 2024), inevitably impeding individuals against "voicing their experiences for mainstream audiences" (Mansouri et al, 2013, p.7). These debates and distinctions highlight how multiculturalism is both a policy and an everyday experience (Khorana, 2023, Harris 2013, Wise 2005).

The South West Sydney region is also characterised by a distinctly youthful population profile, with 41.8% of the population aged 29 years and below, and the median age being 35 years – lower than the state average of 41 years (DCJ, 2025; ABS, 2021; ABS, 2025). Notably, girls and young women represent a substantial group, with females making up 50.4% of the region's total population. The feature of the region is particularly relevant to this research's phenomenological approach to intersectionality and underscores the transition to adulthood not as a linear sequence of events, but rather, a socially structured process. This research also supports scholarship that identify girls as "members of a unique demographic group" rather than a category or 'future women' (Kearney, 2009, p.18). Research on labour force participation in Western Sydney has highlighted how geographical location compounds gender inequity in the labour force and how intersecting factors such as socio-economic status, identity and spatial proximity to jobs converge to shape women's economic circumstances. According to a 2024 report, women in Western Sydney are "spatially divided along socio economic lines, with significant labour market variation between LGAs in the region" with women from diverse backgrounds having the greatest negative impacts on their labour force participation compared with other groups in Western Sydney (Itaoui et al 2024, p9).

Although broader Western Sydney records lower overall levels of formal educational attainment relative to other parts of metropolitan Sydney, "the myth of a region that is uneducated is unfounded" (Centre for Western Sydney, 2023, p.6). A report published by the Centre for Western Sydney (2023) clarifies that the proportion of Western Sydney residents holding a university qualification now surpasses the national average, underscoring the region's evolving educational profile and challenging deficit-based

preconceptions. Socioeconomic indicators nonetheless reveal, however, persistent socioeconomic disadvantages in South West Sydney (ABS, 2021; Vidyattama et al 2019).

Data reveals, for example, a widening gap between rent and income in South West Sydney whereby households are spending more than 40% of household income on rent, surpassing both NSW (35.5%) and Australia (32.2%) alike (ABS, 2021). For Troy (2024, p.343), "housing has been a central feature of Australia's model of citizenship over the past 70 years". Yet, with the median weekly household income significantly lower compared with many other Sydney regions, this suggests a higher prevalence of housing affordability challenges within the South West Sydney, particularly in the context of low workforce participation (DCJ, 2025; ABS, 2021). These economic conditions intersect with gendered and racialised barriers to shape access to education, employment, and health services. These factors particularly affect people of migrant and refugee backgrounds who face challenges in having overseas qualifications recognised.

Since 2021, a confluence of factors including post-COVID-19 population fluctuations, supply-chain disruptions, labour shortages, rising interest rates, and an influx of migration largely due to geopolitical tensions, have exacerbated housing pressures and limited meaningful progress on financial wellbeing (Nance, 2023). This has meant that the number of households in Western Sydney utilising social housing (5.3 percent) is higher than the rest of Sydney (3 percent), and that household sizes are larger, indicative of multigenerational living arrangements. Concerningly, women, especially young women and those from CARM backgrounds, are more likely to experience 'hidden homelessness', such as, couch surfing and overcrowded dwellings, an issue largely underreported in literature (Homelessness Australia, 2023). Additionally, the need to radically increase public transport options has been raised in multiple studies of Western Sydney (see for instance Morrison et al 2022; Rachwani 2026; O'Neill 2017).

Specialist settlement services, such as, those provided by WSMRC are located across South West Sydney. There is a lack of culturally appropriate mainstream services, especially for mental and reproductive health; for example, only 8.6 percent of Medical General Practitioners in South West Sydney have specialised training for CALD and refugee populations (SWSPHN, 2024). The findings of Kovai et al's (2022) research on the South Western Sydney Local Health District revealed the significant role and responsibility of local governments for the provision of equitable and accessible health services to its residents, through 'promotion', 'protection', and 'maintenance'. The authors specifically highlight the impact local government has on "the structural social determinants of health through its regulatory powers, community services, local leadership and contribution to the creation of a healthy environment" (Kovai et al., 2022, p.2). This highlights how coordinated action at all levels of government are crucial to enabling the settlement outcomes for its communities. Similar concerns are highlighted in this report for issues related to employment and education. Settlement support and equitable civic engagement are both experienced at regional and local levels highlighting the need for place-based responses (Dastyari et al 2024).

Understandings of the lived experiences of CARM girls and young women within South West Sydney is critical for informing policy, service delivery, and community initiatives aimed at fostering equity, inclusion, and empowerment. It is evident that South West Sydney is a region of immense cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity. Ongoing population growth and socio-economic barriers in the region continue to drive demand for youth, education, and settlement services (SWSA, 2025; Forray et al. 2024). Addressing these intersecting pressures requires a nuanced understanding of the communities being served – one that centres the lived experiences of CARM girls and young women.

# Methodology

**The intersectionality of gender, race, class, age, cultural background and migration status has not been the primary focus of the existing literature on the lived experiences of CARM youth in Australia. This has limited the comprehensive understanding of the specific multifaceted experiences of CARM girls and young women.**

This research aims to fill existing gaps by addressing the region's demographic complexity and the unique vulnerabilities faced by CARM girls and young women residing within it.

Phenomenology as the guiding epistemology within this research, aims to shed light on stories "put together with the help of culturally available instruments and ingredients" (Järvinen, 2000, p.372); that is, to describe and interpret the structures of experience as lived by participants within broad socio-cultural contexts, rather than to explain causal mechanisms. This research aims to capture "...the essence of what the subject perceives" (Houston & Mullan-Jensen 2011, p. 268). This approach considers youth participants as indispensable epistemic agents central to the theoretical tenet that phenomena can be best understood by those experiencing it (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio 2019).

In this context, a qualitative approach was adopted in this research that utilised creative methodologies – participatory resource mapping, focus group discussions, and individual storytelling. This approach foregrounds participant voice and multimodal expression to better understand the lived experiences of CARM girls and young women from migrant and refugee backgrounds in South West Sydney and, necessarily, illuminate the meanings participants attach to the phenomenon under study. Creative methods generate data that is not only linguistic, but also support diverse artistic, relational, tacit, and layered communication of knowledge that may have otherwise been unspoken. Creative methods have "experienced immense popularity among researchers" in recent years for various reasons, including the general attempt to explore alternate approaches, and additionally to attempt to address or shift power dynamics inherent in more 'standard' methodologies through direct participation (Ravn, 2019, p.103).

The creative methods employed in this research were designed to directly complement the oral narratives collected and analysed. According to Andersson et al (2005, p.4), in order for research to emanate from a social justice, grassroots perspective and "lay the foundations for empowerment", it is the duty of researchers to employ methods that aptly "shift the traditional balance 'from closed to open, from individual to group, from verbal to visual, from measuring to comparing' (Chambers, 1997, cited in Andersson et al., 2005, p.4). The aim, as reflected in this research, is to "stimulate the articulation of multiple voices and positions" through "reflection, debate, argument, dissent and consensus" (p.4).

The research questions were designed to explore and understand the intersection – that is, barriers and enablers – between CARM girls and young women's aspirations and available resources (programs, people, materials, institutions, and services) in South West Sydney. This research aims to identify gaps in resources, and the ways and capacities in which existing resources are being used. It set out to understand the ways intersectionality impacts CARM girls and young women's equity of opportunity and civic engagement in society within socioeconomic, cultural, geographic, and institutional constraints. While considerable focus is given to participants' experiences of marginalisation by way of their linguistic, rural and cultural background, the research simultaneously emphasises their resilience and agency vis-à-vis structural barriers. The questions arising from these aims are:

1. What are the experiences of CARM girls and young women in relation to education, health, housing, and employment related support, and subsequently, what are the primary barriers they face in these areas?
2. How do socio-economic and cultural factors affect the equitable distribution of opportunities among CARM girls and young women in South West Sydney?
3. How do CARM girls and young women aspire to participate in Australian society, and what do they view as barriers to participation if they are not able to meet those aspirations?

## Research Methods

The research was conducted at the WSMRC office in Liverpool – a setting already familiar and accessible to participants. The research employed a multimethod participatory design delivered across two sessions: a resource mapping exercise and subsequent focus group discussion, as well as an individual digital or narrative-based storytelling session.

The first session centred on a collaborative resource mapping exercise in which participants visually represented their experiences, relationships, and connections to services, programs, and supports in South West Sydney. This participatory method served as a foundational tool for eliciting collective perspectives, contextualising participants' access to, and navigation of, local resources, and supporting young people's practice of civic engagement by foregrounding their voice in the research process. The resource mapping activity was guided by prompts delivered by the researchers, including:

- → What services or programs are you using? How and why? Why not?
- → What challenges or gaps do you encounter? What works well?
- → What do you need in terms of services, programs, people, or material resources?

Following the resource mapping exercise, a focus group discussion was conducted to deepen reflection on shared themes, divergences in experience, and the broader social and structural factors shaping participants' engagement with services and programs in South West Sydney. The focus group created space for collective meaning making and the articulation of insights. This participatory method served as a foundational tool for eliciting collective perspectives and contextualising participants' access to, and navigation of, local resources.

The second session involved an individual storytelling component in which participants developed and shared stories about their lived experiences, including their interactions with resources, services, and programs in South West Sydney. Participants could choose between digital storytelling format (audiovisual or audio only) or a narrative based format, one-on-one storytelling session with a researcher. These stories provided deeper insight into individual trajectories, personal reflections, and the nuanced ways CARM girls and young women make sense of their circumstances. Researchers were not explicitly involved in the production or filming of digital stories; rather, participants exercised full creative control over the content, structure, and presentation of their stories. Participation in the individual storytelling component was voluntary, inviting individuals to engage only if they felt comfortable (whether visual, audio, or a narrative only). This method further strengthened participants' agency by giving them ownership over how their stories were expressed, ensuring their experiences were communicated accurately and uncompromised by misunderstanding.

The combined use of participatory resource mapping, focus groups, and storytelling offered a robust and contextually sensitive approach to exploring the experiences of CARM girls and young women in South West Sydney. Focus groups facilitated collective dialogue, enabling participants to identify shared challenges, compare experiences, and generate insights that might otherwise remain unspoken. Individual storytelling sessions foregrounded individual agency, facilitating participants to craft and communicate their narratives in their own voice and on their own terms. Together, these methods provided a holistic and multilayered understanding of participants' lived realities, capturing both collective dynamics and individual perspectives. These methods were intentionally employed to elevate youth voices, support empowerment, and engage both shared and personal dimensions of experience.

## Participants

For the purposes of this research, individuals were considered for participation in accordance with several criteria. First, recruited participants were girls and young women in the age group between 16 to 24 years of age, in accordance with the United Nations definition of youth. This characteristic was also relevant to understanding the gender-specific challenges and experiences in accessing education, employment, health and social services. Second, participants consisted of 1st to 3rd generation girls and young women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. This criterion was applied to understand the unique experiences of participants from CARM migrant and refugee backgrounds. Thirdly, given the research's focus on, and localisation within South West Sydney, participants were recruited on the basis that they resided in this region who could provide context-specific insights into the socio-economic and the cultural dynamics of the area.

Lastly, as part of the qualitative research methodology, purposive sampling was used by "...recruiting participants from places where they are easily accessible" (Miner-Rubino & Jayaratne, 2007, p. 310). As the partner organisation of this research, participants specifically associated with WSMRC were, considered for participation to ensure rapport and trust throughout the entirety of the research process. As per ethical guidelines, staff of WSMRC were not involved in the consent process. Participants were recruited through an expression of interest based on the recruitment flyer, distributed by WSMRC.

Twenty-two CARM girls and young women participated in the research. The participants had diverse ethnic backgrounds from West Asia, Africa, and Europe, and identified with the Islamic and Christian faiths. Most participants' living situation was with family, and some lived with a partner or with children. Most participants' formal education was High School Certificate and Tertiary Preparation Certificate, with those who recently immigrated to Australia noting their completion of English language courses at an IEC. Participants also noted their employment status as either unemployed or working part-time due to ongoing study commitments. The sample size appropriately allowed for a smaller, more intimate setting within the resource mapping exercises and focus group discussions, encouraging open dialogue and detailed discussions which would not have been possible with a larger sample size. Sessions were, separated further into two individual ages groups – the first group including participants from ages 16 – 18 years, and the second group including those aged 19 – 24 years. Both participant groups experienced the same two sessions. Pertinent to the research's objective to obtain an in-depth exploration, rather than a representative analysis, the sample size ensured a focused and manageable research process which produced rich, detailed narrative data whilst remaining feasible within the research's logistical constraints.

For the purposes of ensuring confidentiality, pseudonyms have been assigned to the participants within this report, and any identifying demographic details have also been excluded.

## Data analysis

The narratives of the girls and young women collected from both the focus group and narrative storytelling methods, and multimedia elements, underwent a detailed thematic analysis using NVivo 15 software. Thematic analysis is a process of pinpointing, examining and recording patterns that are important to the description of the phenomenon that the research aims to explore (Walter, 2013). In this research, thematic analysis was selected for its coherence, flexibility and applicability in analysing qualitative data, particularly that which has been developed through a phenomenological lens (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The synthesis of the thematic analysis undertaken with a phenomenological lens allowed recurring themes and patterns to be appropriately coded whilst reflecting, and giving power to, phenomena through participants' lived experiences. The thematic analysis applied to the focus groups concentrated on the group interactions. Côté-Arsenault (cited in Traynor, 2015, p.44) suggests that the usefulness and uniqueness of focus groups lie in their ability to "gain an understanding of a group's responses to similar experiences". In this way, the interaction and dialogue that took place in focus groups were salient to the thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was utilised effectively for the multimedia elements of the data collection, where the researchers were to able analyse text or visual elements to derive themes related to participants' experiences, challenges, and reflections.

# Research Findings

## The findings of the resource mapping exercise, focus group discussions and storytelling sessions revealed in-depth insights into the lived experiences of participants in South West Sydney.

The creative methodologies employed in this research provided an avenue of expression amongst the youth participants which raised themes related to both barriers and enablers of equity of opportunity. Three main themes have emerged, relevant to the objectives and questions posed in this research: participants' experiences of resettlement and belonging as CARM youth; primary barriers and challenges affecting CARM youth's access to opportunities; and participants' aspirations for civic engagement in Australian society. The research findings contribute to existing literature by encapsulating both the collective and individualistic nature of CARM girls' and young women's lived experiences.

### Belonging, identity, and adaptation

Youth participants, particularly those with recent migration experiences, recalled and described broader complex feelings and experiences of how their journey of resettlement and having to 'start over' – often several times – has shaped them. These narratives reflected the practical and emotional challenges of separation from loved ones, rebuilding networks, adapting to new systems, and negotiating cultural identities in unfamiliar environments. As Patricia noted:

> *I was thinking that everything that I've experienced when we moved from [country name redacted] to [country name redacted], it's going to happen again because I'm leaving my friends, I'm leaving the school, I'm leaving – I'm going to a completely new place. I don't have cousins my age either, so it was a bit hard. Then I thought it's going to be so hard, and it was a bit hard the first four to five months.*

For participants like Jacqueline, the process of migration and resettlement is jointly a process of identity formation and socialisation:

> *I'll say moving from my own country to another country and living as a refugee and then coming to the third country … it's like starting your life three times. Once when you're born and then once when you go to the second country and then once when you go to the third country and like you experience three different lives in three different countries with different kind of people, different kind of traditions, religions, mindsets and environments. So, I would say that's what's shaped this personality that I have right now.*

This statement reflects CARM girls and young women's experiences of liminality, or 'in-betweenness', not merely in terms of the physical process of relocating to another state, but as a state of being in which they simultaneously interact, interrogate, and adjust to new socio-cultural spaces and contexts they are placed within.

The challenges of migration and resettlement were compounded when CARM girls and young women were confronted by racism. Several participants also reflected on their experiences of racism and discrimination in Australia because they are "a refugee or immigrant" (Focus Group, 19 – 24 years), and described how these encounters shaped their everyday interactions within their communities, and their sense of identity:

> *Also, I did the counselling course at [name redacted] as well, and the person that was giving me advice, was not giving me proper advice. She was just telling me … you are Muslim, if you wear a scarf you can't be a creative person or you can't be this or that. So, there is so much discrimination. (Focus Group, 19 – 24 years)*

This statement directly conveys how labels and processes of 'othering' affect the life experiences of CARM youth which may, in turn, limit their equity of opportunities. In her digital story, Hope reflects on experiences of racism, and closely relates them to notions of trust and self-reliance:

> *It is important to recognise the experiences of racism. It is essential to remain resilient; such circumstances can occur even within one's own country. It is essential to seek out those who uplift and believe in you, even if it's one person. But the first this is to believe in your instinct, trust in yourself before anyone else.*

In addition to the discriminatory challenges participants encounter in Australia as refugees, the findings further illuminated the complex intersectionality of inequities they navigate – particularly for CARM girls and young women, who face layered forms of marginalisation shaped by gender, race, age, cultural background, and migration status. As one focus group participant asserted:

> *We are women, we have different emotions and how we go through this society, not only refugees but also as women. We have different ways to engage in the society, we have to be strong and more knowledgeable…So I'll say we have problems, we have situation that are not bright right now, but to me I'll tell myself, I have to be strong … to overcome anything.*

The discussions surrounding participants' lived experiences and perceptions of gender inequality, and the ways in which these dynamics shape their everyday lives, identities, and opportunities, revealed complex, multilayered, and often divergent perspectives. For some participants, Australia has provided them with more equitable access to services and institutions, alongside greater capacity to participate in social, educational, and civic life – conditions that they contrasted with the structural barriers and constrained opportunities experienced in countries of origin or being stuck in transit countries:

> *It's been easier from the other countries have been cause most of them they don't give women their rights and push them lower and say that you're not as good or as smart as men. But in here they give you rights what you deserve. Yeah, so, it's easy in here.*

> *… in [country name redacted] it was really hard to study, especially if you're a girl and stuff, and you had to pay a lot of money if you wanted to get the minimum amount of education. In here, what's really helpful is that if you want to continue your education, it's really easy to go in any field and without having to face real difficulties.*

When discussion centred around the differences in rights between Australia and the participants' countries of origin, participants pointed to the often inflated representations of traditionally conservative and/or patriarchal states within the Western media with regard to issues concerning gender rights and equality. For Olivia as a CARM girl in Australia, maintaining her "Afghan identity is really important to [her]". She adds:

> *… I boast about my culture, a lot actually, especially when it comes to media and stuff, they portray Afghan people, especially Aghan women, in a very different light than I feel like. Because they really – when they portray Afghan women in media, they're like, "oh, all they think about is how women are restricted" – whereas I do not feel like that. I feel like Afghan culture is really inclusive when it comes to women or males. It is true that it's really patriarchy dominated country, I won't deny that, but women also have rights.*

For other participants, their experiences of gender inequality may be attributed to the social and cultural dynamics within their family, where gender or cultural norms may limit mobility and autonomy. This was the case, for example, for Patricia who recounted her father not giving her permission to work at the same place as her brother due to safety concerns:

> *My father wouldn't give me that much money, so I was like, if I work, it's going to be more convenient for me. … He was like, if you go to work after school, because your school is far and then you come from school, you have to go straight to work, and then if you work, it's going to be until 9:00 p.m. and it's going to be dark and who is going to take you, come and pick you up? …and you are a girl, I can't let you be out until 9:00 p.m., it's going to be dangerous and stuff. He was like, you wouldn't catch up on your school stuff too.*

It may be derived from Patricia's narrative that gender and cultural norms may take on a more restrictive form in a context where newly arrived parents might be uncertain about safety in public spaces especially at night or on public transport. Public safety was a topic of concern at the time this research was being conducted with a high-profile case of an aggravated sexual assault having been reported in the news (ABC News 18 June 2025) should be noted that at the time of this research being conducted a high-profile case had been reported in the news of an aggravated sexual assault in Liverpool (Hyland and Rix 2025).

Participants noted their impressions of the broad Australian society and culture, particularly immigrating from localities with limited opportunities, such as, social freedoms and education. In the illustration Figure 1, for example, a participant depicted during the resource mapping exercise, aspects of living in Australia that they like, including 'receiving financial help', fresh produce, accessibility of services and industries, as well as the generally kind disposition of Australians.


Figure 1: Good aspects of Australian society

The creative methodologies in this research provided participants with the opportunity to interrogate and understand their emotions vis-à-vis their transitory experiences. The screenshot taken from Hope's digital story (Figure 2), for example, portrays a text she is reading on the topic of navigating 'fear'. She narrates:

> *I cry a lot, but then I remember that I am blessed with an opportunity many girls may never have. I feel deeply connected to Australia that gave me this chance and to the women who may one day see me as a symbol of hope.*

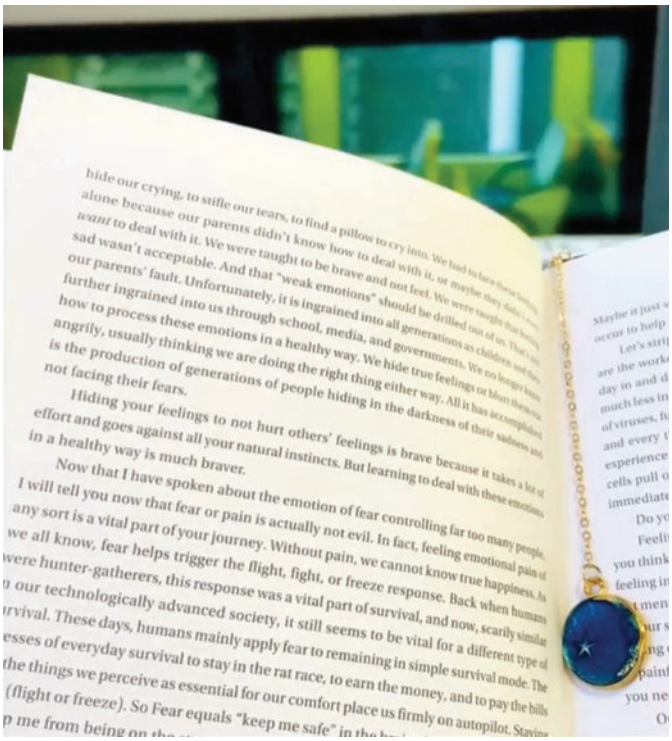



Figure 2: Adaptation

As seen in Figure 3, one focus group participant creatively attempted to articulate the multifaceted complexities associated with CARM girls and young women navigating their gendered identities, by likening the topic of gender equality to the structure and nature of a tree – a symbolic representation that enabled her to illustrate the deep-rooted, interconnected, and evolving nature of the social, cultural, and structural forces shaping one's experiences and opportunities.

She explains:

> *...this tree right here and these notes right here, it looks so empty, right? Yeah, it is empty, and it doesn't have a lot of colours and shine bright. The reason why this tree is like this, it's like me, you, all of us right here, as women. We want something to come to us that will make us motivated, make us feel like we are motivated to start a journey again. When I was speaking to everyone right here, everyone wants something, a change. They want something to be different, they want something, like, they can make them have them more knowledge and understanding.*
>
> *Trees mostly are something that comes from down and it goes up, right. It's not*


Figure 3: Metaphorical 'gender' tree

> *something that can grow overnight, and I have learned that since I came to Australia.*
>
> *So, in this drawing that I have put here, when I say I want peace, some people here want peace. They want something that can be a little bit more easy with the pressure to them. She wants understanding, she wants to know more why it is this happening the way it is.*
>
> *She wants success with her studies and more of what she has been dreaming of. So, if we can put more water to this tree, I think we can grow to more understanding, how we … face our problems. So, this tree is us, who we are right now.*

Figure 4, drawn by another participant portrays the female gender symbol alongside personal inspirations shared with the group.


Figure 4: Girl power

Within the continuing thematic scope, participants emphasised the centrality of community in shaping their sense of belonging, identity formation, and access to emotional and practical support. At the same time, several participants articulated significant tensions arising from weakened or disrupted community connections, particularly when migration and forced relocation necessitated distancing from familiar networks. These ruptures frequently generated feelings of isolation, ambivalence, and identity conflict, as participants navigated the complex task of integrating into a new sociocultural environment while simultaneously striving to maintain meaningful ties to their cultural heritage and established communal norms. As noted by several participants during a focus group:

> *I struggle with the same problem, as you said. I started uni last year, and in first semester I was very quiet, I wasn't talking with anyone. So, I felt like I don't belong to anyone, what I should do, with who I should talk. They don't know the way you communicate, or you are, but still, I am sure there are a lot of people, even they're Aussie.*
>
> *I'm new here, I want to know how I can involve myself in that society.*
>
> *Yeah, I prefer to be around Afghan families. I do have Afghan neighbours but they don't really have people my age where I could actually go and talk to. So, I wouldn't say that I belong there that much.*

Callan added that while her and her family do retain some connection to the local Congolese community in Australia "it's not that close", and instead wishes...

> *...to have like, not just community, but every people. Everyone. Yeah, some activity. So, they can join in. I wish. Because it's way I can learn something new. It's way I can see something new for me.*

For some participants, notions of 'belonging' and the (in) ability to form new community connections was integrally linked to being separated from family. When asked whether she feels like she belongs in, or feels connected to, Australian communities, Callan stated, "Not that much. Because my dad is not here. Yeah, I wish him to come here so that I can feel that connection".

Relevant to the theme of belonging, discussion amongst participants also centred around the creative methodologies employed within the research itself, which a participant affirmed was "...so fun, and we could express ourselves to each other". As one participant describes in relation to her illustration (Figure 5), "we're sharing our story from different background but we're in the same situation – in Australia, in the same building."

Figure 5: Branch of kinship

Bringing youth together with shared experiences fostered a consciousness-raising experience of empowerment for the participants, that not only encouraged freedom of expression in safe and supportive spaces, but also encouraged participants to recognise, articulate, and collaboratively address the common challenges they faced. As stated during focus group discussions:

> *...I really had no idea in mind what specific thing I was coming to do. I really didn't know it was a problem. So for coming here I get the knowledge that there is a problem that other people are going through, than what I can see for myself. So I get to know what she went through, or what is the problem in the society and whereabout looking forward to see where is the problem...and how you can solve it*
>
> *I'll say it's having the same experiences as someone who comes in Australia as a refugee, because when all of us coming here, we all went through the same difficulties, either if it's with health or education or transport or any services. We've all been through all those difficulties, but when you talk to someone that's lived in here or was born in here, they don't know about those difficulties because they grow up in this environment. But for us when we come here, we have never been to the school in Australia, we don't know about the education system or health system or we don't know about any services. We don't know what's available for us, what services are available, what helps can we receive from different services. So it's,*

> *like, all of us shared the same problems that we have together, and it was just, like, I have this problem, and she also went through the same problem, or she also went through the same problem. So that's just, like, we found something common with each other.*

A peer-support dynamic also emerged during the resource mapping exercise, even in the absence of facilitator intervention or prompting. For instance, when one participant grappled with conceptualising how to "get a better future for us [that] we couldn't get in our own country", another participant quickly affirmed her efforts and acknowledged the significant progress she had already made:

> *Don't worry, it's going to be fine here. It's much more better than – I don't know. In my country it's been really bad. I don't know if I was alone or with my mum, could I survive there or not? Here I just – I don't know. You're already making – you already travelled to the country, and you had to learn another language and find a job. You're still doing it. You're still keeping it. That's good.*

Hope's digital story (Figures 6 and 7) similarly captures this exchange in a personal reflection on the importance of fostering one's own agency and freedom of expression both individually and collectively as a 'sisterhood', whilst acknowledging their unique social and cultural positionality as CARM youth in South West Sydney:

> *I believe communication is key to success, connecting with others leads to insights and growth. Even if you don't have basic English language knowledge, the key is to speak.*


Figure 6: Sisterhood

Hope concludes:

> *There is a significant part of me that belongs to my country, but Australia feels like home now. Liverpool is my comfort zone.*


Figure 7: Free as a bird


Figure 8: Key challenges

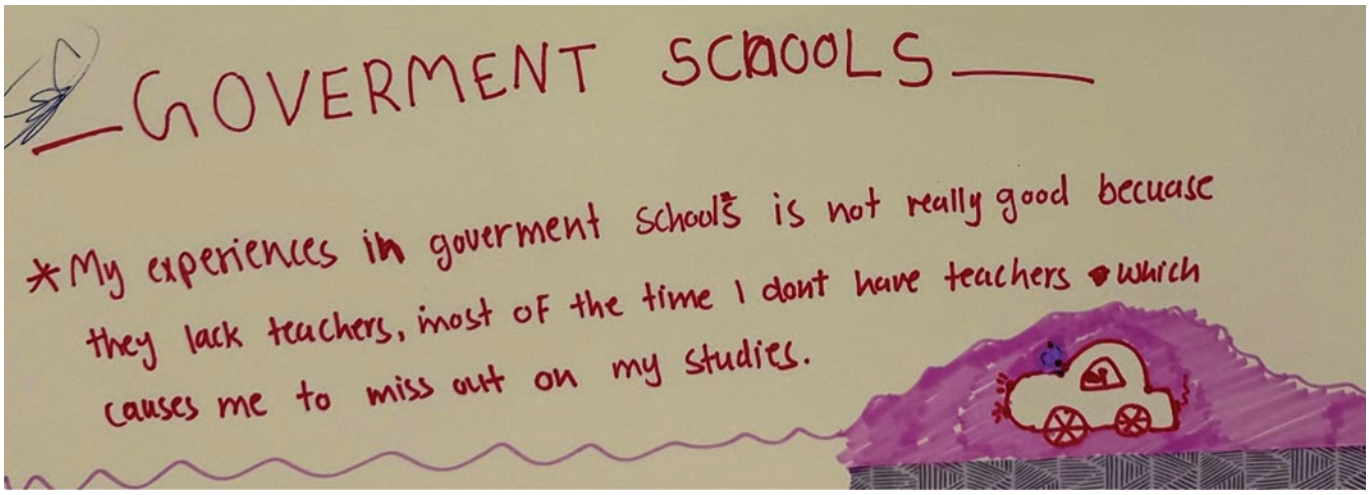



Figure 9: Government schools

## Key stressors and challenges

Youth participants in South West Sydney faced various challenges that compounded barriers to higher education and employment, including managing education costs and bureaucracy, housing, transport, and daily expenses. As will be presented within the section, Figure 8 highlights some key stressors and challenges raised by most participants, including, cost of public transportation, lack of financial help, rental issues, English-language difficulties, and healthcare systems.

### EDUCATION

Education (synonymously, 'study' and 'school'), emerged as a central theme – both as an aspiration and a stressor. This included educational institutions including secondary school, tertiary, TAFE, and Intensive English Centres (IEC). For teenage participants between 16 to 18 years of age, education was quoted as "the actual most important [matter] in our age". At the same time, teenage participants also highlighted that "the main problem for us [at] our age is the schooling". The value of the resource mapping and discussion activity in relation to sharing their lived experiences in safe group spaces was further shared amongst the group that helped them realise that "all of us mainly have problems with schools" (Focus Group, 16 – 18 years).

For many participants, education was understood not simply as a formal institution but as a critical pathway toward personal autonomy and long-term socio-economic security:

> *After 18 and graduating school, [issues] can be like around the Centrelink and stuff because you're going to get older and you need a job and money. But before that it's the education that we need the most. So that would be the problem. (Focus Group, 16 – 18 years).*

As conveyed in the resource mapping illustration (Figure 9), some participants highlighted a shortage of teachers in government schools, thereby limiting participants' meaningful engagement with their studies:

For participants who recently migrated to Australia, one of primary barriers contributing to educational challenges was in relation to disrupted schooling. This was largely attributed to systemic inconsistences, such as, enrolment confusions and miscommunication between CARM youth and their families, and educational counsellors or staff. A couple of participants recounted, for example, the difficulties they encountered transitioning from IECs into mainstream public schools on account of age restrictions, consequently restricting their access to equitable opportunities in accordance with their strengths and ambitions.

> *I was in IEC and then one day they said you can go to high school because you already turned 17. Then I applied for high school and then they don't accept me… because I am already 17. (Focus Group, 16 – 18 years)*
>
> *It's same problem, like me and her. The high school didn't accept me because your age is 18 or something. But I didn't study Year 11 and 10. I was just learning Year 9. I came here. But I didn't study Year 11, 12 or 10. They said go to TAFE and get a college something. TAFE is for age like 40. Like older than me. But I didn't like it, and they didn't accept me and that is so bad. (Focus Group, 16 – 18 years)*

These statements are similarly captured in Figure 10; here, the participant portrays their transitory educational experiences which draws a link between the IEC, high school, and her perception that these institutions are "not doing stuff according to the people".

These accounts prompted discussion among other participants in the group who contested…

> *They should consider and think about it because you are supposed to be in school until 18 but she is only 17. Why are they not accepting her? It is a problem. If she goes to the TAFE it's not going to be the same for her and the stuff she want to [do] – and the goals she have, maybe she can't reach all of them in TAFE and stuff. So, they should think about it.*

Another teenage participant (Focus Group, 16 – 18 years) similarly expressed her frustration in being placed in a lower year group at school (Year 9), despite completing Year 11 in her home country and satisfactorily completing the advanced English test:

> *[The Head Teacher] took our exam, then she said you can't go to – you are not ready for Year 11. You can stay here [Year 9], or you can apply for TAFE…she said, 'no, you are not ready'. … But I did the advanced test in TAFE for English, and they said you're English is fine. She put me in Year 9 which was with kids. It's so bad. Like you were staying with kids. It was a bad experience at school. …She was trying so bad to keep me on that school. I tried in other schools. They even accept my thing, but she never sent the documents to other schools, so I was like I need to stay. Then my counsellor she talked with TAFE and then she said there is no way she can stop you from TAFE. Then I applied for TAFE and then I got here.*

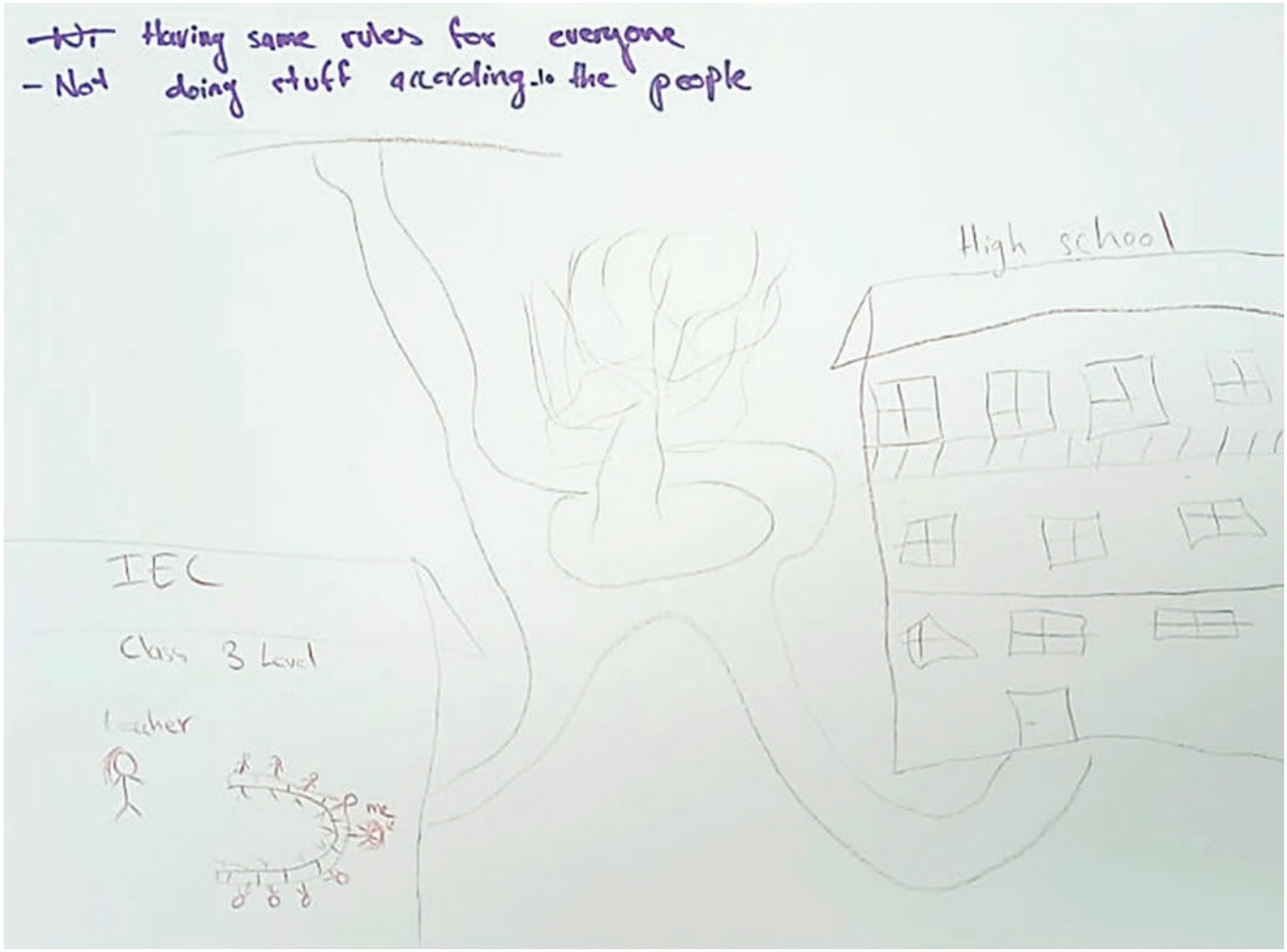



Figure 10: Education

Participants in their final year of high school placed a greater emphasis on further education noting 'university' as being "the biggest concern…right now" (Focus Group participant, 16 – 18 years). For Jacqueline, the stresses associated with university are closely tied to both societal expectations and personal aspirations:

> *For the society, I'll say right now I need to get into university to study social work and then get a degree to be able to help others because if I don't know anything, then how am I supposed to help other people? [It's the] same thing for myself – if there is no opportunity for me to use, then how am I gonna improve myself?*

Discussions on the topic of education amongst participants centred on the challenges they face in balancing their studies with financial concerns, work, and language barriers, in addition to, family expectations. The interconnectedness between these pressures was a central observation throughout the research. For Olivia,

> *… my biggest thing is for me, obviously, I feel like I have the qualification to go to university, the main issue is that for – when it comes to funding, and stuff, since my family is really new, they can't really afford university. For me, that's why – I think I have – my school work and my school grades, I would say are really good but then when people ask me, do you want to go to university, I can't directly say, 'oh, yes, I am going to university' because I know that's really difficult. Yeah, there are like scholarships, and stuff, but then when I see the people in my school, I don't even really want to compete with them because I feel like they are a bit more smarter than me because they have been in here (Australia) longer…*

Another participant further expressed how school was both a contributor of, and means to alleviate, financial stress:

> *I need to read [study] something that doesn't take too much time, just four or three years. After that I have to support my family. So I don't have chance to study more and more and more. … Who's going to pay for me in a college and a university. Who's going to pay? (Focus Group, 19 – 24 years).*

Despite many participants stating that they are currently, or were until recently, enrolled at a local IEC, the findings demonstrate a link between the cost of education and English as a second language as key barriers to the pursuit of educational and vocational opportunities. Like Olivia, other participants were similarly quoted as saying:

> *…I want to get into medicine and I don't know how to get into a good university with a good ATAR. Because for us English is not our main language, and it's hard studying and then getting a good ATAR. It's actually hard. Then I was going to take two [link] classes and then they were just so expensive, and I just gave up. (Focus Group participant, 16 – 18 years).*
>
> *English is my second language, it's not going to be easy, of course. I was struggling with some of my subjects, like Maths. Because I wanted to be in that high level in Maths, but I couldn't catch up. (Patricia)*

**EMPLOYMENT**

Education emerged during the research as both a significant enabler and barrier to employment. During the focus group discussion CARM girls and young women perceived that their future career goals and career development opportunities are quite limited in comparison to Australian citizens or those who have lived in Australia for long periods of time who they perceived "get the better chance or they have good lives" (Focus Group, 19 – 24 years):

> *As for us, when we came here, we are over it, and we don't get the chance to study. As the others said, we have to go to TAFE or we don't get the chance to study [what we want]. We have limitations for the fields…because I'm here for seven months, I cannot study [medicine]. Because if I have to study [medicine] I should have been studying for seven or eight years here. … because I cannot choose many fields there are limited ones. (Focus Group, 19 – 24 years)*

Further concerns or frustrations related to finding a job were also raised, expressly characterised by factors, such as, employers not recognising overseas work experience and restricted opportunities due to limited professional networks and social capital. As noted during the focus group discussion (19 – 24 years):

> *It's not that easy, as they say, to find a job in the Jobseeker, or any – unless you have a connection, you have someone who can be like, 'oh this is my friend, she can work like this' … it's not easy when you are alone and you have no one else to stand or help you.*

This was also similarly captured during the collaborative resource mapping exercise. As portrayed in Figure 11, the self-portrait conveys the various frustrations the participant internalises during her appointment with an employment agency where there is a perceived bureaucratised focus on individuals to merely 'earn points'. For the participant, this system is designed to meet mandatory mutual obligation requirements each month to maintain income support payments, as opposed to facilitating more open and encouraging sessions that help individuals get a job that aligns with their existing areas of expertise and passion, in a timely manner.


Figure 11: Employment agency

**FAMILY**

For many participants, financial stress was closely related to familial responsibilities and duty of care. For some participants, stressors come from wanting to help their family yet being aware of their limitations to contribute to finances at the present time:

> *Because I want to help my dad, you know, we are a bit – we are a big family like that, and we are somehow more people in my family, and the only person who's working in my family is my dad. We have a lot of expenses, we have to pay the bills or rent and many things, and he's the only one working, so I just want to help him with the expenses we are having… (Rhianna)*
>
> *… when I'm free, I don't have school, I need to work…to support my family (Daniela)*

Intersecting hardships, thus, compelled the girls and young women to assume financial and family caregiving responsibilities. For Olivia and Maya respectively, this meant prioritising their family over themselves and their own extracurricular hobbies or interests or taking on the role and responsibility as the sole household income earner:

> *Just for I support my family because nobody is working. My mother can't buy something for home, for bills. Just this for now. (Olivia)*
>
> *Personally, for me, since I'm in school, I don't really get the Centrelink benefits…my mum does get the Family Tax Benefit. I don't really ask for those because I feel like – I think my family needs it more than I do… (Maya)*

When asked why it is important for them to work, Maya, who was passionate about kickboxing, clarified that she needs the money "for family. First my family; after is for kickboxing."

**TIME AND TRAVEL**

One of the key themes unanimously raised by participants as impacting their life experiences and equity of opportunity was travel and transportation. The main factors contributing to ongoing stress for participants included, cost of travel (including Opal cards), long wait times, low availability and frequency of transport, and commuting distances from South West Sydney.

Some participants shared that public transport services, such as buses and trains, are "amazing…because many people who are new to the country can use these resources to their advantage" (resource mapping activity, 16-18 years; see also, Figure 12). On the other hand many participants expressed that "the transportation is very bad" due to the long, often convoluted, and expensive commutes: "Public buses/transport can be expensive if you lack financial help" (resource mapping activity, 16-18 years). Likewise, alternate transportation options, such as, Uber were also noted as being "so expensive" (Focus group, 19 -24 years). According to a participant:

> *It's still till now, sometimes I get a headache from the transport. Because I need to change and I need to wait, and sometimes, yeah, I don't make it on time. Even if I go an hour and a half before, I cannot drive all the time honestly. (Focus group, 19 -24 years)*

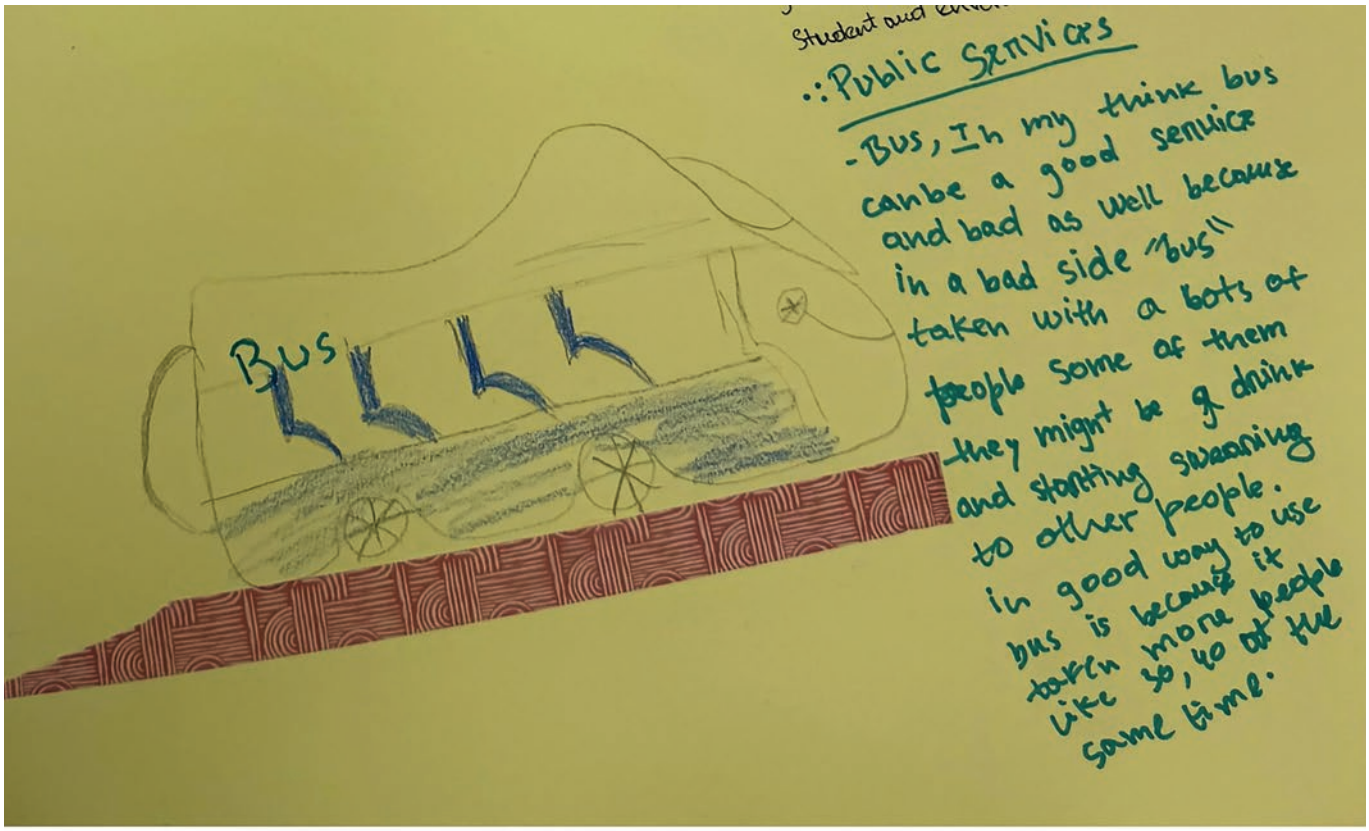
For Diana…

> *Most of the time, probably like, schooldays – all my time I am at school. For example, at 6:30am, I go to school, then at 6pm I come back, and it's almost the dark time I go out, dark time I come back. As for night time, I just come and have dinner, then I have to sleep to recover in the morning. … it's too far….*

Prolonged transport delays and long commute times often make participants unmotivated to attend classes at school, which thereby affects their learning and progress:

> *Sometimes I don't go [to TAFE] because if I go by bus it's one and a half hours. It's a waste of time. I try to get another one [bus] [but] I everyday reach late at TAFE (Focus Group, 16 – 18 years)*

Concerns over personal safety was also an issue frequently raised in relation to participants' use of public transport. As depicted in the collage (Figure 12), several participants noted feeling scared, particularly when travelling alone at night, due to the lack of control measures or security protections against disorderly conduct of, and drug and alcohol use by, commuters at stations. A dialogue between participants regarding their fears using public transportation was also similarly recorded during the focus group discussion (19 – 24 years):



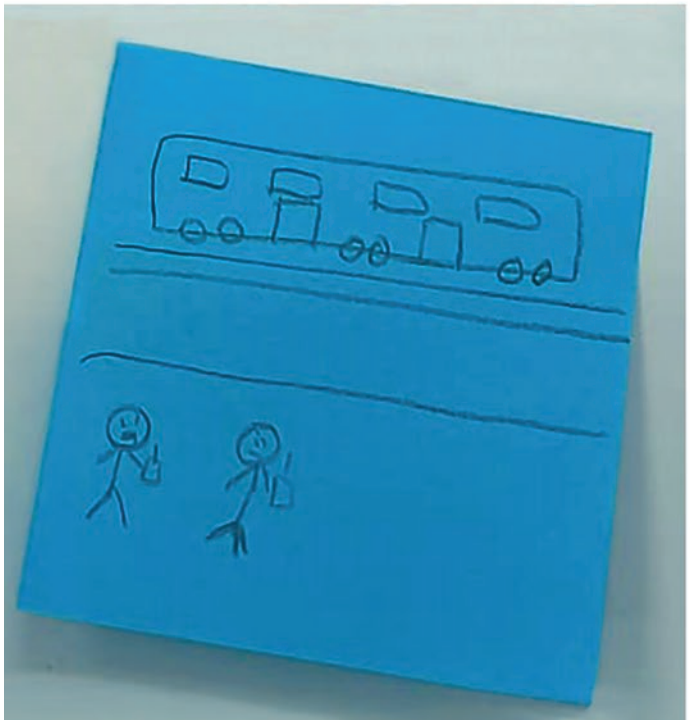




Figure 12: Transport

> *Speaker 1: Some people are drinking alcohol in the station. After my work finished, I was at the train station. It was very late for me. I was alone, and there was one man drinking alcohol and looking at me. I was so scared. No one in the train, just me and him.*
>
> *Speaker 2: Your safety [is] really important. Because anything could happen, you just don't know it.*
>
> *Speaker 3: That kind of crazy actually. The same happened to me before, but it was with a man that was screaming like crazy. My home is really far to everything, my school... it is bad. So, I need[ed] to change my school. Because I can't – every time, every day, coming like two hours before. I came out around 6:30am from home to get there [school] by 8:30am. Again, late.*

Relevant to the topic of travel and transportation was a discussion around driving. While some participants in this research like Nicola have successfully attained their learner driver licence ('L plates'), the associated requirements with practicing their driving and building their on-road confidence is restricted by distance and lack of supervision from full-licence holders, thereby constraining their ability to develop driving skills and aptitude, and meet the threshold hours for a provisional licence:

> *I have to have someone with me because I'm on my L's. But I don't have anyone. (Nicola)*

For those participants who do not have a driver's licence, trying to attain one were largely inhibited by factors such as the cost of driving lessons, as well as other members of their family not fully licensed to drive in Australia:

> *...for the driver licence classes if you don't have the money you just give up on the licence and you just don't do it anymore (Focus Group, 16 – 18 years)*
>
> *Like with my parents they don't have the full licence. Who going to teach me? My dad knows how to drive but he can't teach me how to drive because he's not allowed to. (Focus Group, 16 – 18 years)*

These sentiments were captured by a participant during the resource mapping exercise in the illustration (Figure 13), noting:

> *So I did draw this because I have problems getting my P, because I think one of the main issues with me or I think people my age, is learning how to drive. Because in here, Australia is big, we can't just go everywhere by train or bus, and the difficult problems between train and bus timings. They are never on time. Just like today, what happened today. If you don't have a car then it's so difficult for you to get a job or to go in a meeting or school or anywhere that you want. Also, so I draw this because I got my 'L' and if you're under 25 years old then you have to – you have a logbook, and that you have to wait for one year and complete 120 hours of driving. So, for people like me, I don't have anyone to help me with the driving lessons or sign my logbook for me. So, I have to complete 120 hours of driving, and it is very expensive, because each driving session for each hour, you have to pay $50 or $60.*

She adds:

> *Most of the times the driving instructors charge $50, they don't help you or they don't provide you the proper information about the driving. So, you have to get the instructor that is $70 or $60, to give you proper information. Otherwise, if you go with the $50, they just show you the route for the test. Then they don't tell you any other information, they don't tell you how you should drive on a normal day. They just tell you, okay, this is the route, you have to remember. (Focus Group, 19 -24 years)*

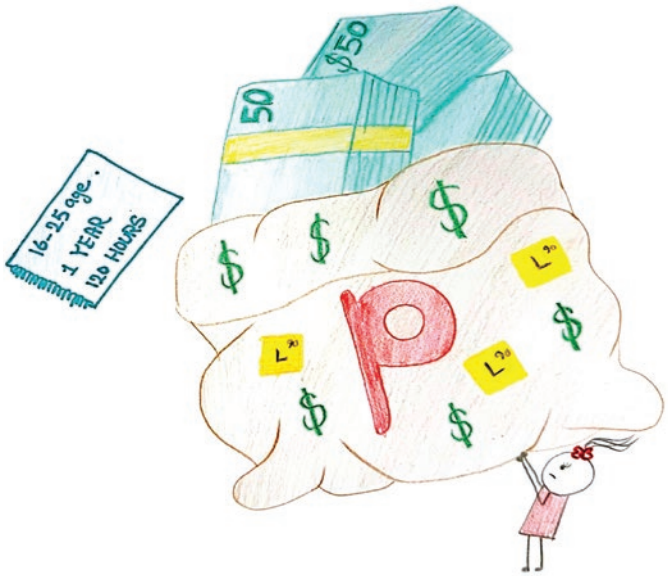



Figure 13: Driver's license

**SUPPORT SERVICES AND HEALTHCARE**

Participants identified a range of formal and informal support mechanisms – including counselling services, community organisations and settlement services, teachers, holiday programs, and local libraries – as playing a significant role in assisting and guiding them to access and navigate essential services.

The need for more accessible and culturally relevant support networks and systems was another strong theme that emerged across the data relevant to understanding CARM girls and young women's experiences. Complimentary to the findings discussed earlier in relation to community and notions of belonging, the data revealed that participants with existing relationships found it easier to navigate and access services (such as, receiving their driver's license). Most participants reported having little or no formal support that was culturally-sensitive, particularly in relation to education and employment. Many asserted, for example, that they wanted clearer guidance on the ways to apply for higher educational programs, find meaningful employment opportunities and build a career, or even understand available options. Others mentioned the value of activity-based programs or language support that could help build skills and confidence. The lack of visible, trusted services tailored to CARM girls and young women left some feeling uncertain about where to seek help or information.

Many participants noted existing support services such as Centrelink (Services Australia) and the healthcare system (Medicare) as being the most helpful. For Mikayla these services...

> *... help[ed] us with our rent, like they pay with us with our rent and since my mum doesn't really have like a job, she goes to TAFE and that's why they help us with rent and stuff and they also help us with public service, like when we first came here we didn't know anything about it, we didn't know what to really do and they gave us like Opal card, [Centrelink] showed us around, like where to buy stuff, how to use the bus.*

Another participant also added:

> *It's like coming in here, especially since I've lived in Malaysia, the hospital bills and the expenses can be very expensive, right? Then coming here, we have like the Medicare, the healthcare, which I have used most of its benefits. It has proven really, really helpful for me personally. (Focus Group, 16 – 18 years)*

While most participants believed that the "healthcare here is very good", participants also drew attention to "some weaknesses [with] the system itself" that consequently impact their experiences of equitably and efficiently accessing services (Focus Group, 19 – 24 years). The "need to focus on enhancing the healthcare system", as depicted in Figure 14, corroborates issues presented earlier in Figure 8 noting several gaps with the healthcare system, including, the limited availability of bi- or multilingual General Practitioners (GPs) in South West Sydney; long waiting times at hospitals; and a perceived lack of attentiveness from GPs during consultations. These perceived shortcomings were attributed by participants "not with the GPs [themselves], but with the medical centres", particularly in relation to expenses and bureaucracy (Focus Group, 19 – 24 years), illustrating the systemic and institutional barriers CARM girls and young women face. As noted by participants:

> *I think [the healthcare system] needs to be more controlled. ... if you go to the doctor (to the GP), if you need to fill a form, they ask you to charge you for just a form. Not all of them they do that. (Focus Group, 19 – 24 years)*
>
> *...there is no control for [the healthcare system]. Also, if you need to transfer your file from a medical centre to another, they're going to charge you. They don't accept card, especially – I'm not sure about the other places but here, Liverpool, maybe Fairfield they do that. It's just doesn't make sense, and they ask for it, like, it's their right. I think the medical – how they care about the human here, is very – I'm very grateful for that. But there are some weakness (Focus Group, 19 – 24 years)*
>
> *I would say go to the GP was not very helpful for me. I don't have like a major disease or anything, but every time I went to my GP I didn't get like a proper help or anything that I expected. For example, if I go and tell my doctor that I'm sick they will just give me a paracetamol which I can get it from the pharmacy myself. So, I don't say I got proper help. And also, I wanted to change my GP, but they're trying to like charge me $50.00 for just changing the GP. ... I'm not that happy with my GP doctor. (Jacqueline)*

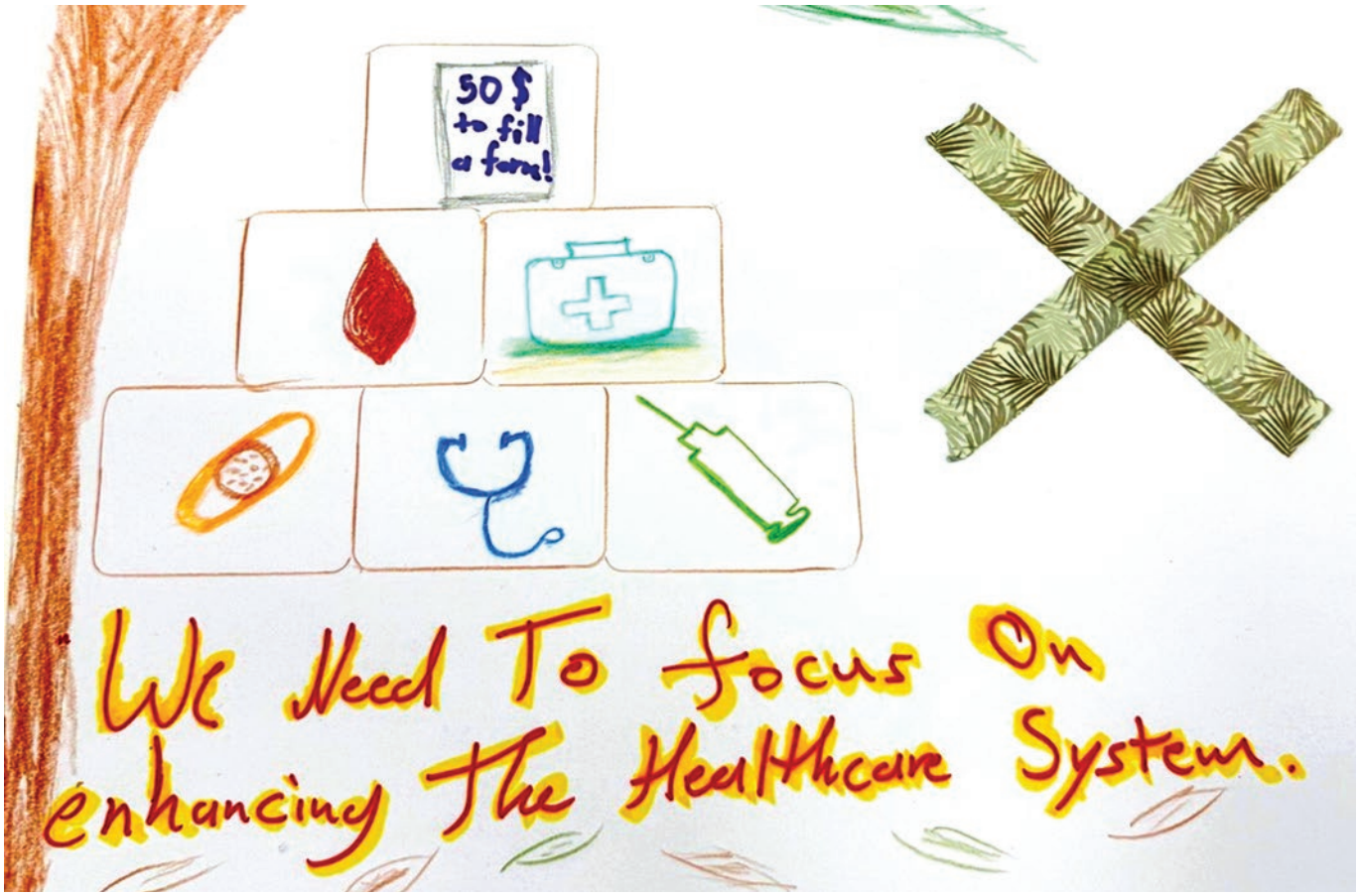



Figure 14: Healthcare system

**HOUSING**

Another key challenge for many participants related to housing pressures. The high cost of living was highlighted during the focus group discussion as directly contributing to the participants' life experiences in South West Sydney and financial stresses, with participants making specific note that "the rent for our houses, it's high" (Focus Group, 19 -24 years). One participant referred to the difficult and inequitable processes associated with lodging rental applications, particularly for individuals and families from CARM backgrounds who recently immigrated to Australia:

> *I think the main problem for people that come here from overseas is – for the housing part – it's when you apply for the houses they want experience. They give houses to those who have experience living in Australia for many years. It's funny because when you just came and you're looking for a house, how are you going to have experience? They just don't give it to anyone. Like I think most of us, it took a very long time for finding a house. (Focus Group, 16 – 18 years).*

As demonstrated above, several key stressors for participants were identified in the research. These stressors, when compounded, result in immense pressure on the participants, inevitably limiting time for creative pursuits and expression, rest, or holidays. For the CARM girls and young women in this research, the fast-paced life in Sydney is particularly challenging when trying to navigate unfamiliar systems with limited support networks, all whilst balancing their schooling and familial relationships and responsibilities:

> *Here everyone is busy. We go outside even it's dark in the morning, when we come home, again it's dark, at night we just eat and sleep. We don't get the chance or time to talk... (Focus group, 19 -24 years).*
>
> *Because it's a lot of pressure especially in last years of high school because like you need to prepare for universities, like your studies and you don't even have time because by the time like I get home it's already like nighttime and there's no time to do anything. (Cheryl)*

## Hopes, dreams, and aspirations

Throughout the research, participants also explored and defined the things they hoped to achieve as a young CARM person, as represented by Figure 15 which draws attention to the main themes raised amongst participants. While some youth noted that they have not yet thought about or conceptualised what their dreams and ambitions may consist of, particularly in the context of the challenges attributed to their transition to, and ongoing resettlement in, Australia, for the majority of participants the most prominent themes that emerged in this area were their studies, career ambitions, as well as, helping others. For several participants, these three central themes were largely interrelated with the overarching dream to be a role model or to work in a capacity or field in service to others. As both Ellie and Callan state, respectively:

> *My dream is in the future, to be – to become a doctor. A good doctor, yeah.*
>
> *And then I want to make my mum proud of me and my family as well. And then I want to do something like so all Australia can know about me like, yeah, something important. And everyone will be proud of me and then to be an example to young people.*

In discussing their dreams and aspirations, however, participants unanimously recognised the extensive present commitment needed to succeed in their studies; "I need to study more and more and more" (Daniela). Mikayla and Ellie, respectively, also stated:

> *My dreams are like... just to be successful in the future with like whatever I do, and to like focus on my studies in school.*
>
> *Study is very important for me because I have a lot of dreams too*

Most notably, there was an observed resilience and determination expressed by participants throughout the research who, despite referring to barriers or obstacles, were nonetheless resolute on pursuing and achieving their dreams and ambitions. When Patricia was asked, for example, what the alternative pathway may be if she doesn't get into medicine (at university), she responded:

> *I don't have any because I really want to become a doctor. Even if I don't get accepted into medicine, I'm going to try different ways to get into medicine.*

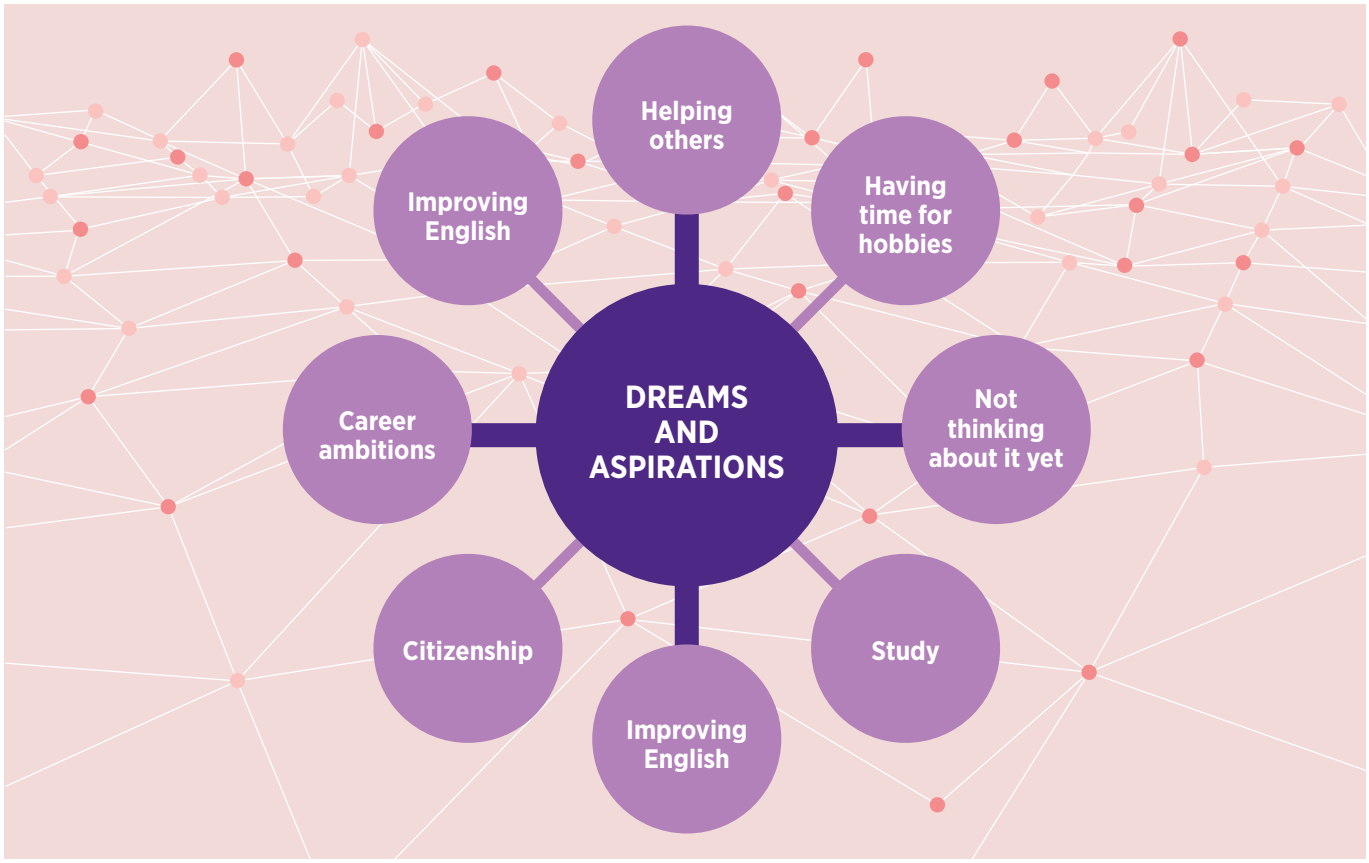



Figure 15: 'Dreams and aspirations' mind map *(dark purple lines represent the themes coded with the highest frequency)*


Figure 16: Plan B? Career aspirations

This sentiment was similarly noted by Hope. As depicted in the screenshot taken from her digital story (Figure 16), Hope narrates her exchanges with others when she expressed a desire to study law:

> *Some asked: "What's your plan B". They told me I couldn't study law because of the language barrier. Maybe some of them meant good, but those words still haunt me. I almost [gave] up... maybe it is hard, but it is my dream, what I want to do.*

Patricia also shared during the research that she had harboured ambitions to become a doctor since childhood. She recognised that while "I have that interest [human body and its functions] ...the path is not easy at all", at the same time, she also noted the limiting and perhaps conflicting advice she received from individuals in her support network when discussing her ambitions:

> *When I told my teachers about it [becoming a cardio surgeon] – my science teachers, they were like, if you want to become a surgeon, then good, you have to – you shouldn't think about marriage, getting married or have kids, you shouldn't.*

Whether participants explicitly considered a particular pathway or not, a common impetus to help others – whether other CARM youth in Australia or youth in their country of origin or Australian society more broadly – was observed as a key theme amongst several participants showing their enthusiasm for a wider sense of civic belonging and engagement:

> *I want to help people, people like me, because I'm still in touch with my friend and they are telling me that they're still working. They're teaching but they don't have dream like I have, or they don't see clearly what's happening for them, and school is banned, uni is banned [in my home country].*
>
> *I feel like whatever I want to do, I want to help out people and like give to others.*

# Conclusion

**While numerous programs, policies, and community initiatives aim to address the challenges faced by CALD individuals, gaps in data and literature limit a comprehensive understanding of the systemic inequalities and barriers facing CARM girls and young women.**

Using qualitative creative methods through a phenomenological research design, this research aimed to explore the diverse experiences of CARM girls and young women in South West Sydney. As the research specifically aimed to obtain an in-depth exploration, rather than a representative analysis, the phenomenological framework produced in-depth, nuanced insights into lived experience, that also attended to emotions, embodiment, and meaning-making. The research centred participants' voices to illuminate how intersections of gender, race, class, age, cultural background and migration status shape everyday life, particularly in relation to education, employment, health, housing, belonging, and civic engagement. Figure 17 conveys how the resource mapping exercise facilitated a space for participants to actively think about their position and participation in Australian society vis-à-vis various services and institutions. The findings highlight the importance of enabling both collective and individual voice through creative storytelling processes that foster consciousness-raising and peer support – a significant contribution to the fields of migration and youth studies.

The research contributes to existing knowledge to reveal that while CARM girls and women demonstrate significant resilience, motivation, and aspiration, their experiences are also marked by persistent inequities that constrain their opportunities and sense of agency. Systemic discrimination, language and cultural barriers, lack of recognition of qualifications, and intersectional disadvantage shape their experiences and limit their opportunities for participation and leadership. As a result, the CARM girls and young women who participated in this research continue to face persistent barriers to equitable access to education, health, housing, employment in South West Sydney.

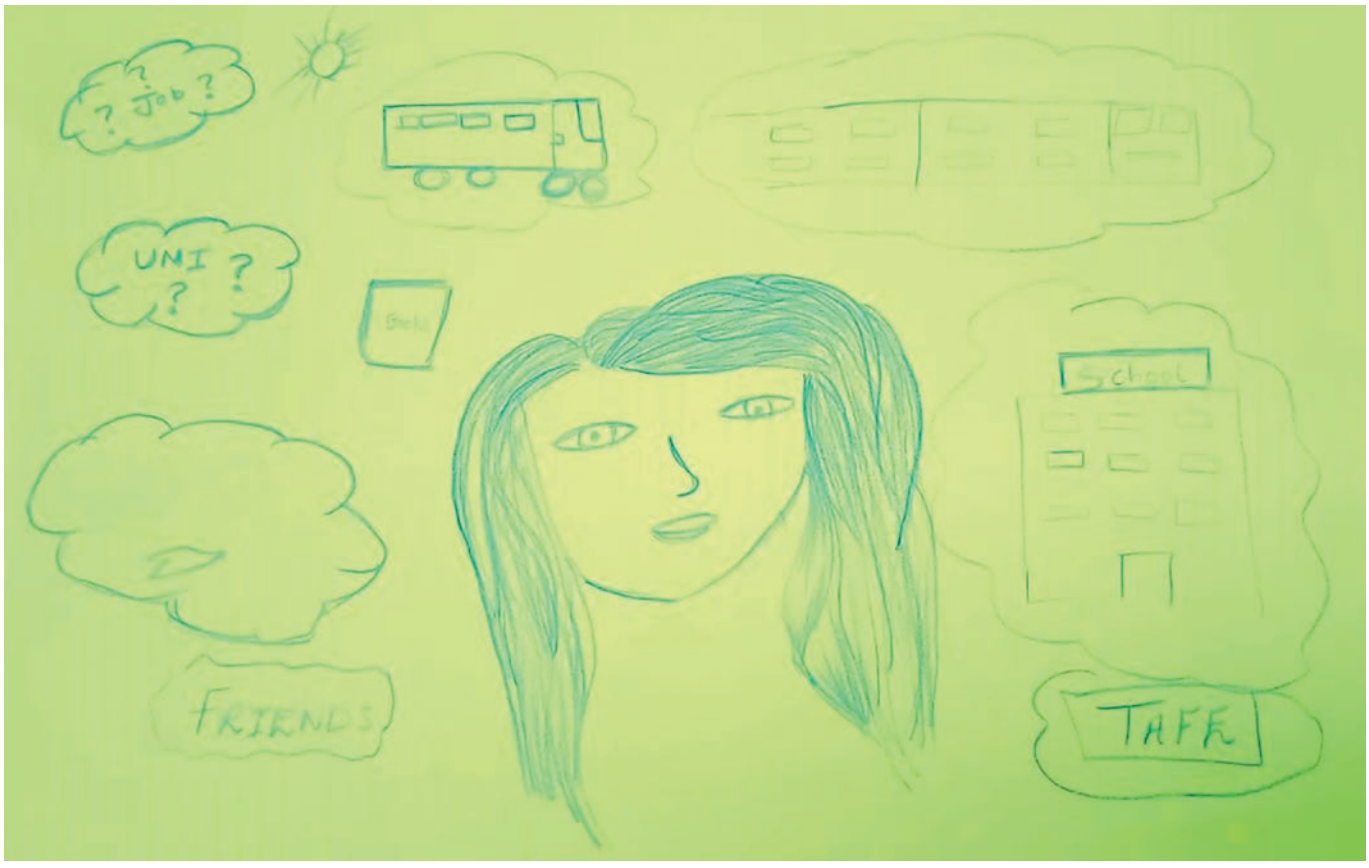



Figure 17: Services, programs and institutions

Education was both deeply valued and strongly associated with future security; it functioned as both an aspiration and a source of strain, with language barriers, institutional guidance gaps, and familial responsibilities compounding the pressures felt by participants. Challenges with transport, travel distance, and restricted mobility further intensified these stressors, especially for those without the ability to travel by car or sufficient support to attain a driver's licence. Financial stress emerged as a central pressure for participants, often linked to intergenerational responsibilities, the high cost of living, and limited employment pathways.

Participant narratives also show the ongoing effects of discrimination, racism, and cultural misrecognition – both subtle and overt – present in schooling, vocational advice, employment interactions, and public spaces. These experiences intersect with gendered norms within families and communities, shaping what participants can pursue, how they move through society, and how they perceive their own legitimacy in Australian institutions. Yet, despite these constraints, the young women in this research articulated strong future orientations. This included ambitions to pursue careers oriented to being in service to others, desires to support their families and communities, and aspirations to be advocates and role models for other CARM youth in Australia and abroad.

Participants' engagement in civic life was shaped by the limited support available to them. While opportunities exist through community consultation programs, volunteer initiatives, and culturally specific youth networks, practical access was often constrained by language barriers, restricted mobility, and lack of awareness or guidance. Gendered expectations further limited the ability of CARM girls and young women to meaningfully participate, resulting in sporadic or symbolic engagement rather than sustained influence. Despite these challenges, participants expressed a strong desire to contribute to decision-making processes, advocate for their communities, and take part in activities that could shape the social and political environment around them, underscoring both the potential and the unfulfilled possibilities of civic engagement within existing systems.

The research also demonstrated the profound importance of belonging and community and a wider sense of civic engagement. For many participants, migration involved ruptures in social networks and identity, resulting in complex negotiations of culture, place, and self. Feelings of isolation and difficulties because of the dislocation associated with migration were common, yet so too were expressions of pride, cultural continuity, and determination to maintain connections to heritage. Moreover, the creative methodologies used in this research played a significant role in fostering a sense of sisterhood, shared experience, and mutual validation among participants. These methods not only generated rich insights but also functioned as spaces of empowerment, enabling participants to articulate and recognise shared challenges, exchange support, and create new forms of collective meaning with one another.

The intersectional approach of this research clarifies that the barriers faced by CARM girls and young women in South West Sydney are not discrete or isolated but interconnected structures. For CARM girls and young women, gendered norms within families, racialised perceptions within institutions, and the administrative logics of welfare and employment services coalesce to shape possibilities for paid work, study, and civic engagement. This research illustrates that youth is lived at the nexus of intergenerational obligation and constrained autonomy, with mobility (both physical and social) frequently contingent on resources, networks, and time.

Methodologically, the research's phenomenological and creative design is theoretically compatible with this framing. It centres youth as epistemic agents and treats voice not as anecdote but as situated knowledge that discloses the textures of everyday institutional encounters and identity work – fear and hope, constraint and aspiration, isolation and sisterhood.

Taken together, the report reframes equity of opportunity as an interactional outcome, in that, it is strengthened when institutional structures, local services, and cultural safety align with the lived experiences of CARM girls and young women but also recedes where these structures and systems neglect marginalised or underrepresented voices. The research offers a theoretically grounded account of how structure and agency are jointly produced in South West Sydney, and why co-designed, culturally safe, and locally responsive interventions are essential to enabling education, employment, health, housing, and civic engagement for CARM girls and young women.

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