



Submission to the Inquiry into Support for Children and Young People Exposed to Trauma Associated with Migration

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Submitted by: Ethnic Communities Council of WA Inc. (ECCWA)

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### Executive Summary

This submission, prepared by the Ethnic Communities Council of Western Australia (ECCWA), outlines our recommendations for addressing the urgent needs of children and young people exposed to trauma associated with migration due to humanitarian crises. As the peak body for ethnic communities in WA, ECCWA is deeply committed to promoting multiculturalism and ensuring the effective participation of ethnic communities in decision-making processes. Our key recommendations include the implementation of comprehensive teacher training programs, increased funding for community organizations, the development of cultural introduction programs, and the provision of PTSD counselling services. These measures are vital for facilitating the successful integration and participation of affected individuals in the community.

### Introduction

The purpose of this submission is to deepen the inquiry's understanding of the support needs of children and young people exposed to trauma associated with migration and to offer recommendations based on ECCWA's extensive experience and engagement with these communities. Addressing migration-related trauma is not only a matter of immediate concern but is also crucial for the long-term health and cohesion of Western Australia's diverse society.

### About ECCWA

The Ethnic Communities Council of Western Australia (ECCWA) is the peak body representing all ethnic communities in the state. Working closely with government, community agencies, and the broader community, ECCWA plays a pivotal role in ensuring that ethnic communities are effectively represented in decision-making processes. Our initiatives, such as cultural



awareness workshops and community dialogue forums, exemplify our commitment to fostering an inclusive and equitable society.

### Our Vision

ECCWA envisions a fair and just society where all individuals are encouraged to participate fully in community life, supported to reach their full potential, where diversity is valued, and people live in harmony. This vision aligns with the goals of the inquiry, reflecting our shared commitment to creating a supportive environment for all, regardless of their background.

### The Need for Support

Children and young people escaping humanitarian crises require comprehensive support at every level, including PTSD counselling, cultural introduction programs, education support, and additional funding for community organizations. Providing such support not only addresses immediate needs but also contributes to the long-term well-being and integration of these individuals into the community, thereby enriching our social fabric and promoting a more inclusive society.

### Personal Testimonies and Expert Opinions

This section includes personal accounts from refugees and expert opinions highlighting the challenges faced by refugee children and young people and the critical need for targeted support.

Dr. Sashya Gunasekera, a School Psychologist at Balga Senior High School, brings 18 years of experience with a focus on the psychological and social wellbeing of adolescents, particularly those from refugee backgrounds. Holding a Ph.D. from the University of Western Australia (UWA), she was honored with the 2018 UWA Cameron Prize for her research excellence. Dr. Gunasekera has significantly contributed to understanding the transitions of refugee adolescents through her research, with notable publications in the field. Her work, recognized with awards such as the 2015 School Psychologist's Research Award, emphasizes the importance of goal setting and reputational orientations in aiding refugee adolescents' adjustment to mainstream education. This condensed summary highlights her extensive expertise and commitment to improving mental health and educational outcomes for adolescents from refugee backgrounds.

*"I have worked as a School Psychologist at Balga SHS for the past 15 years. We are a very low SES school with a high population of students from refugee backgrounds. We have an Intensive English Centre (IEC) on site that attempts to provide students from refugee backgrounds with a safe place for scaffolded learning.*

*Our students from refugee backgrounds have been subjected to the horrors of war and/or oppression based on political affiliation, religion, ethnicity or cultural background. Their traumatic experiences include torture, sexual violence, witnessing violence, being forced to perform violent acts, being fearful of imminent death, detention, disappearance of relatives, being inducted into armies, dangerous journeys to safety and dangerous stays in refugee camps and in detention. They have also been exposed to cumulative major losses, including loss of home, family members, friends, country, culture and identity. These losses may have occurred through death or destruction and/or displacement. Most of our students from refugee backgrounds have been forced to leave their country in response to threats to their life and freedom and they have had little choice concerning the country of resettlement and little*



*psychological preparation time for the exile process, its implications and the nature of the host country. In many situations, these students are unable to contact family and friends and suffer the pain of not knowing if loved ones are alive or in danger.*

*As a result of experiences such as those outlined above, students from refugee backgrounds often struggle to transition from one country to another. Difficulties in acculturation due to trauma, if not responded to using a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive lens are likely to result in further trauma for these students. It is thus vital that teachers and schools are well supported in addressing the highly complex needs of students from refugee backgrounds. There is no denying that support is already available through various government, non-government and community organisations but still more can be done. For example, many teachers lack complex understanding of the set of issues that shape the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. In my experiences, teachers often express that they feel that they can't talk about refugee' experiences for fear of further traumatising students or they talked about students in culturally reductive ways. Professional learning materials are needed that address the socio-political causes of refugee movements, the international contexts in which these occur, human rights approaches, the traumas of fleeing and in transit life, the challenges of settling and the complexity of the linguistic, religious and ethnic dimensions of refugee experiences.*

*School staff also need to be trained in what constitutes trauma-informed care when responding to the behaviour of students who have been traumatised so that they are able to provide a learning environment that promotes recovery and healing. As a result of mental health issues such as PTSD, Anxiety and Depression, students from refugee backgrounds are likely to experience severe difficulties with emotional regulation and teachers often comment that these students "go from zero to 100 in 2 seconds flat over small and minor things" and lack the ability to process an issue in a rational way that is not driven by emotions such as anger and fear. Undertaking training that pertains to the framework of trauma-informed care enables the interpretation of this kind of behaviour as a survival response rather than deviant behaviour that requires a disciplinary reaction. This shift in perspective has a great impact in creating a school culture that prioritises the key needs of safety and nourishment that students with backgrounds of complex trauma have. A process of healing and successful acculturation can only occur once these needs are met.*

*Another point that I would like to highlight in my experience as a School Psychologist is the impact of parent trauma on child attachment. Students from refugee backgrounds are at a high risk of experiencing adverse effects of disrupted attachment patterns due to the conditions that result in seeking refuge and resettlement. Refugee families typically incur many different and often prolonged types of stressors which may influence and challenge the ability of the parent or caregiver to maintain and establish a secure relationship with their children. A positive attachment bond, crucial to the child developing capabilities in emotional regulation, relationships, cognition, motor development and language, may be weakened in such instances and have a significant impact on the refugee child's development including school-based performance.*

*Typically, parents are refugees themselves and may also suffer from conditions such as PTSD, depression, anxiety and extreme stress. In addition, refugees are likely to experience events that deprive them of existing support structures, such as a supportive family or extended family network that is lost through death, separation and displacement. Further, disempowering experiences such as victimisation, abuse, and helplessness are common experiences in refugee camps. Protracted war and conflict, perilous flight, food insecurity,*



*poverty and adverse refugee camp conditions are likely to disrupt parent-child relationships. A parent with poor attachment capabilities is less able to pass on healthy attachment to the child and this can be exacerbated if the parent is experiencing preoccupying life experiences. Many refugee parents may not be attuned for example, to their children's emotional state and may have reduced capacity to develop a nurturing, sensitive and healthy attachment and provide the significant protective factors necessary for normal brain development. It is important to consider the risk of secondary trauma, or children being raised by traumatised refugee parents, and the consequences of possible poor attachment on the child's life and development. Finally post-settlement stressors may impact the safe, supportive environment and stable, caring relationships that children need. Parents preoccupied upon resettlement with the tasks of finding shelter, employment and meeting their basic needs, may inadvertently neglect the emotional needs of their children. We need more services that directly aim to provide education to refugee parents on parent-child attachment and use this lens to work with them within the framework of their own individual and cultural parenting style to create the most optimal conditions for healthy attachment with their children.*

*The refugee journey does not end on finding a place of refuge. The educational outcomes of refugee school children may be improved by providing holistic support to the whole family. By identifying the needs of each family unit and providing the necessary guidance, families may be empowered to assist their own children's schooling. It is my opinion that we need more services that employ a holistic model of support. Assistance provided by organisations such as the Association for Services to torture and Trauma Survivors (ASeTTS) Better Futures for New Arrivals (BFNA) program may be as simple as showing a mum how to take her children to the local library, or helping a dad find information on sitting his driver's licence. It could be showing parents how to set up daily routines around homework, meals and bedtime; or perhaps encouraging a family member to seek counselling for a debilitating mental health issue. At the same time, the child attends a weekly two-hour Club after school, which aims to improve their social skills and confidence, as well as their academic results. Such services are simplistic in essence but are derived from a holistic assessment of the needs of individual families and in doing so, in my experience, prove to be extremely powerful in creating contexts for successful acculturation for refugee families. A child's success at school is a complex interplay between a whole host of factors. I strongly believe that a holistic approach to assisting the whole family can provide refugee children the strongest chance of success at school."*

Maitham Al-alyawy, a refugee who arrived in Australia in 1994 fleeing the regime of Saddam Hussein, shares a profound narrative of resilience and adaptation. His journey from Iraq to Australia, marked by survival against oppression and years of war, highlights the complexities faced by refugees seeking a new beginning. Maitham's experiences underscore the challenges of integrating into a new culture with limited support, influencing his advocacy for community-based assistance. His insight into the ongoing struggles of refugees to connect with their new communities, drawn from his personal ordeal and leadership within these communities, advocates for the importance of employing workers from similar backgrounds to aid refugees in their resettlement and adaptation process.

*"My name is Maitham Al-alyawy and I came to Australia in 1994 as a refugee after escaping the oppressive regime of the former Iraqi president Saddam Hussain. We were welcomed to Australia as one of the new groups of refugees coming from the Middle East after the Gulf war.*

*As a young refugee, the arrival to another country was a new chapter in my life that required a well put plan to know the prerequisite needed to have a new beginning in the new home/ country. For someone who had gone through near death situations multiple times due to years*





*of wars, being an active opposer to the Iraqi regime back then and later on being a detainee in a detention camp for three years it was impossible to have the capacity or the time to put any plans for a good future. Therefore, I (as well as almost all who came here with me) had a great hope and trust in the new home that there will be an adequate system that would be our guide to navigate this new world.*

*Unfortunately, there was a very limited support system and the people who were providing us with the support did not understand our background or what we have been through for years before we come to this country and how hard it is for us to adjust to the new culture and adapt the new life style. Therefore, we felt that they did not comprehend our need to be able to understand, connect and belong to this new home. The effect of the horrendous time we were through has always had a great impact on our parenting style and it is often hard to escape the urge to being an overprotective parent which, of course, is not always in the favour of the children.*

*Unfortunately, this scenario and after all these years of dealing with refugees from all around the world, seems to have had a little or no change and that the same practices are still in place as we still see many new comers particularly refugees still not being connected with people from their community or background as they should.*

*Having said that and from my own personal experience as a refugee as well as what I have encountered as a community leader, I believe that it is very important to have workers from the same community or background of each individual refugee to work with him/her who can be more aware of that person's background and what could assist him to settle in Australia."*

To enhance our understanding and support of refugee children and young people, this submission underscores the critical need for targeted interventions. It advocates for specialized teacher training focused on trauma-informed pedagogies and cultural competency, ensuring educators are well-equipped to meet the unique challenges these students face. A whole-school approach is recommended, involving all staff in fostering a supportive environment, alongside establishing stronger links between schools, refugee families, and communities to facilitate a holistic support system. The submission highlights the necessity of accessible mental health services within schools, emphasizing the importance of school psychologists and counsellors trained in trauma-informed care. Furthermore, it calls for ongoing research and policy development to institutionalize effective educational strategies, drawing on successful international examples. These recommendations aim to not only address the immediate needs of refugee students but also contribute to their long-term success and integration into the community.

## Recommendations

ECCWA advocates for a holistic approach to support refugee children and young people, centred around the core pillars of education, community engagement, mental health, and policy reform. We recommend the implementation of comprehensive teacher training programs that include trauma-informed educational practices, ensuring educators are equipped to create safe, supportive, and nurturing environments. Additionally, we emphasize the need for increased funding for community organizations and the development of cultural introduction programs to foster stronger school-community partnerships. These partnerships are vital for facilitating cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and the provision of targeted support services.



To address the mental health challenges faced by refugee students, ECCWA calls for the expansion of mental health and psychosocial support services within schools. This includes training for all school staff to recognize and respond effectively to signs of trauma and distress. Furthermore, we propose policy reforms to enhance educational inclusion, advocating for curriculum modifications that are culturally inclusive and responsive to the diverse backgrounds of students.

ECCWA also highlights the importance of research and evaluation to assess the effectiveness of support programs and identify best practices. Finally, we support the development of community-led initiatives that offer culturally and linguistically appropriate support, aiding in the adjustment and integration of refugee families. Through these multifaceted recommendations, ECCWA aims to create a more inclusive, supportive, and effective framework for the education and well-being of refugee children and young people in Western Australia.

## Conclusion

ECCWA strongly urges the committee to adopt these comprehensive recommendations, emphasizing the critical importance of enhancing support for children and young people who have been exposed to migration-related trauma. By implementing these measures, we can significantly improve their chances of successful integration and active participation in the community. Furthermore, these steps will not only address immediate needs but also lay the foundation for a more inclusive and supportive society that recognizes and values the contributions of all its members, irrespective of their background. It is through such dedicated efforts that we can ensure a future where every child and young person has the opportunity to thrive, contribute, and fulfil their potential. ECCWA remains committed to collaborating with all stakeholders to turn these recommendations into reality, for the betterment of our community and the generations to come.

## Appendices

Authors

### **Mrs Barbara van Reyk,**

Barbara has retired after 25 years in legal practice as a senior lawyer at the State Solicitors Office, specializing in criminal justice issues mainly in the sentencing of offenders. After retirement, she served two years on the Prisoners Review Board, and is now an advocate with Ethnic Communities Council of WA.

### **Rasha Al-Trihi**

Rasha studied and practised law in Iraq for a decade, before migrating to Australia. She established and ran community programs for the Arab community and provided advocacy for clients through the EAST program at Ethnic Communities Council of WA (ECCWA). She is currently the Coordinator of the Genesis program whose aim is to empower CaLD women to identify their strengths and be ready to face life challenges.