

Working with the Karen Community

A Resource for Service Providers



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Acknowledgements: Mu Gah & the Wyndham area Karen Community

This report provides an overview of some of the cultural information relating to the diverse Karen community who live in Wyndham. This description may not apply to all people as individual experiences may vary. However, this resource can be used as a guide to some of the issues that may concern your clients.

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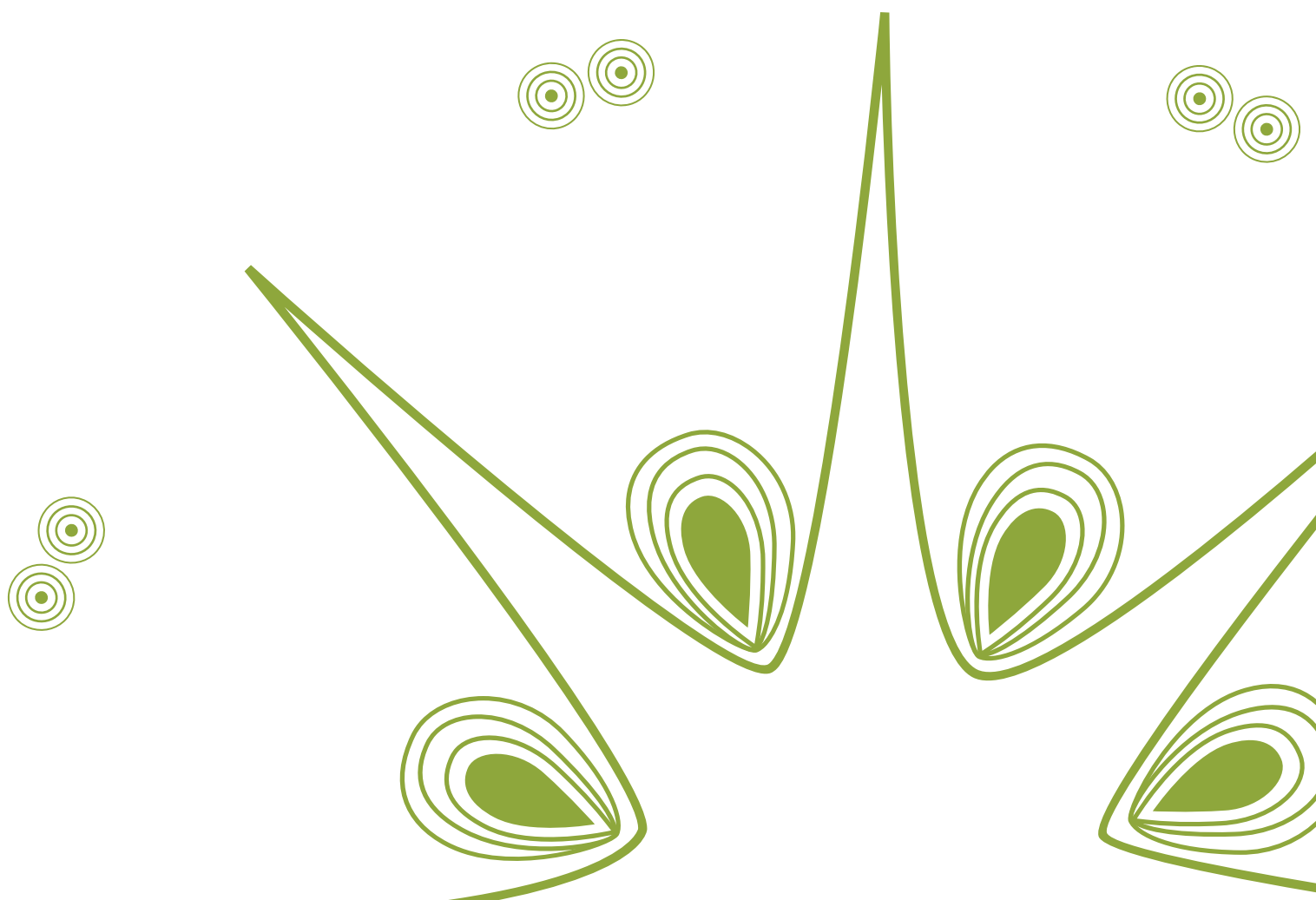
Executive Summary

The Karen people are an ethnic minority group who originate from Burma and whose community is continuing to grow in Victoria, particularly in the Wyndham and Hobsons Bay local government areas.

The Karen community arrived in Australia as refugees after decades of persecution in Burma, forcing many to flee to refugee camps situated on the Thai border. As a result of their refugee experience, Karen people experience many challenges when settling in Australia; however, there are a number of opportunities for Australian services to support and enhance the settlement experiences, building on strengths of the Karen community.

This report, developed as part of a three-year project between members of the Karen community, Gambler's Help Western, the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health and HealthWest Partnership, explores the strengths, opportunities and challenges for the Karen community settling in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne.

The aim of this report is to support service providers to engage with the community by increasing an understanding of who the Karen people are and their experiences of settlement in Australia. This report was developed with the support of a bi-lingual Karen engagement officer who conducted a variety of consultations with community members.



Strengths & Challenges

Consultations with community members identified a number of strengths and challenges within the Karen community. These include:

- **A central role of religion within the community that supports collectivist values.** Community members, however identified that the multiple religions within the community can cause fragmentation between groups aligned with particular religions.
- **A desire to be part of and contribute to the broader Australian community,** whilst maintaining important elements of the Karen culture. Many community members expressed a feeling of safety and freedom in living in Australia.
- **Community members have a range of ideas of how to help the community integrate,** and many look to longer established communities such as the Vietnamese and Chinese communities as examples of how to prosper in Australia.
- **Literacy and language skills remain challenging for many community members.** Education and literacy in Karen languages vary due to many community members experiencing disrupted education because of civil war.
- **Geographical separation, both within Victoria and across the world cause concern for many community members.** Community members felt that the geographical dispersion of the community in Wyndham meant that community bonds were stretched. Additionally, family members were often separated across the world, which contributed to feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- **Despite the challenges of fragmentation within the community, community members expressed a desire to work together and utilise each other's skills.** Community members saw opportunities to work in partnership with Australian services to enhance the existing strengths of the community.



Opportunities for Service Providers

As noted, community consultations identified opportunities for service providers to work with the Karen community to build on the existing community strengths and assets. These opportunities include:

- **Supporting community members who are interested in establishing businesses in Australia.** Community members identified ideas such as establishing Karen fashion stores and Karen restaurants. Support could come in the form of business mentoring and/or through grants.
- **Exploring options with community members to establish a community space** that is not aligned with any particular representative organisation or religion. This may help overcome some of the fragmentation issues identified by community members.
- **Continuing to support education in English** whilst being aware of and acknowledging the education levels in Karen languages. There are significant opportunities to work with community members to produce resources in Karen languages that support information about services and issues in the community but also keep the Karen languages alive in Australia.
- **Continuing to work with range of community and faith leaders** to ensure that community members are fully informed about the services available to them. Community and faith leaders were identified as critical points of information for community members and are often the first point of call in times of crisis.
- **Using a similar engagement model to that employed within this project.** This project has run for three years and engaged a skilled bilingual worker and diverse community advisory group that was given real ownership and responsibility for project outcomes. Without the work of the community advisory group in the development, production and distribution of the Karen Gambling Story DVD, the project would not have been as successful as it was.

Background

People from the Karen ethnic group of Burma began arriving in Australia in 2003, after experiencing a long history of persecution in their homeland. The population of Karen people in Victoria has continued to grow and there is a sizable population in the Hobsons Bay and Wyndham local government areas.

In 2010, Gambler's Help Western (GHW) - ISIS Primary Care, Multicultural Gambler's Help - The Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health (CEH) and HealthWest Partnership (HW) began work with the Karen community in response to a request from community members and the New Hope Foundation for support in addressing problem gambling within the community.

Partners engaged in work with the Karen community for a three year period from 2010 to 2013 and efforts were focused on educating the community about the harms associated with gambling and alternative social and recreational activities. This project began as a small program of community education sessions and then moved to a second phase where responsibility was handed to the community to develop a culturally relevant resource to promote help for people experiencing gambling issues.

In this final phase, project partners sought to bring together the learnings and experiences of the previous two years of work to support other agencies to work with the Karen community. This document is a practical resource for service providers who currently engage or would like to engage in work with the Karen community and other newly arrived culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. This resource aims to improve the way that Australian agencies work with the Karen community by increasing service provider understanding of the strengths, challenges and hopes of community members.

In order to best capture the stories of the Karen people living in the Wyndham area, a community member was employed by GHW, CEH and HW as a project worker. Recruiting a community member as a bilingual project officer supported the project to enable greater access to the community. The project worker was responsible for consulting with the community to gain a greater insight and understanding of community strengths and opportunities by discussing experiences of settlement in





Australia. Five community leaders and elders participated in two consultations. The project worker was also responsible for collecting stories from a small group of community members to further highlight the journey that the Karen people have undertaken to resettle in Australia. These stories are presented in this resource.

Maintaining a Community Voice

This resource acknowledges that the official name of the country that many Karen people originate from is Myanmar (United Nations, 2011). The Myanmar government changed the official name from Burma to Myanmar in 1988, however many opposition groups reject this name change (Karen Buddha Dhamma Dhutta Foundation (KBDDF), 2011). Additionally, throughout the consultations, community members referred to their home country as Burma. Given the persecution that many Karen and other ethnic minorities in Burma have experienced by the government, the authors of this report have chosen to respect the Karen people's use of the name 'Burma' and have used this throughout this report.

Additionally, this report uses a variety of quotes from community members. Consultations with community members, as well as written personal narratives, were undertaken in Karen language and translated by the bilingual project officer. On occasions, some of the quotes contain spelling and grammatical errors. The authors of this report have chosen to fix spelling errors where appropriate but have opted to leave grammatical errors in place so as not to change the meaning and intent of the quote, and to ensure the community voice stays intact.





1.0 History & Demographics

The Karen people are an ethnic minority group who originate from Burma, located in South-East Asia. Within Burma there are a number of ethnically diverse groups, the largest of which are the Burmese. The Karen ethnic group are ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse and distinctly different to the Burmese people. Other significant ethnicities and their estimated representation of the Burmese population are estimated below.

Burma -- 68 %	Chin -- 3.5 %
Shan -- 9 %	Mon -- 2 %
Karen -- 7 %	Kachin -- 1.5 %
Arakan -- 3.5 %	Kayah/ Karenni -- 0.75 %

(Source: Wikipedia, 2013)

Burma is currently divided into a number of states and regions, with many ethnicities being concentrated in particular areas. The Karen people are concentrated primarily in the Karen State and Tenasserim Region in the east of the country and close to the Thai border. There are also smaller populations of Karen people located in the central areas of Irrawaddy Delta and Pegu Division (KBDDF 2011). The map on page 9 provides an overview of Burma and its states and regions.

Consultation with five community leaders identified three main dialects used by the Karen community living in Wyndham as Pwo Karen, Sgaw Karen and Karenni. Additionally, community members agreed that major religions within the community are:

- Seventh Day Adventist
- Anglican
- Baptist
- Buddhist
- Roman Catholic
- Jehovah's Witness
- Animist

The Australian Karen Organisation (AKO) (2013) suggests that around 70 % of Karen are Buddhist, 20 % of Christian faith and 10 % identify as Animist.

The history of the Karen people is long and tumultuous. The Karen people in Burma have been fighting a sixty year civil war against the Burmese military regime for autonomy and cultural rights. More than 140,000 Karen refugees have fled to Thailand to escape this war and human rights abuses.

In 1863, the British destroyed the Burman Monarchy and occupied Burma. For Burma's ethnic minorities, colonisation by the British meant liberation from oppressive rule. For the Burman majority, destruction of the monarchy meant loss of national pride.

In the first half of the 20th century a Burmese Independence Movement emerged and after the conclusion of World War II, the British granted independence to Burma. It became clear that ethnic minority groups expected that in an independent Burma, all ethnic groups would be equal, as they had been under the British. This thinking was not shared by the ethnic Burmans. This resulted in massacres of Karen villages by Burman militias leading to the Karen starting their own 'revolution'. Between the years 1940-1980, conflict escalated resulting in the Burmese army forcibly removing and relocating Karen people.

In 1998, there was a national-wide democracy uprising in Burma. The military killed hundreds of democracy supporters and jailed thousands more. Thousands fled to the Thai - Burma border.

A more detailed history of the Karen people can be found in the Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation (KBDDF) publication, *The Karen People: Culture, Faith and History*. See '*More Information*'.

1.1 Settlement in Australia

Karen refugees began resettling in Australia in 2003 after power struggles within the ruling Burmese Army made it clear that the refugees in Thailand would not be able to safely return to their homes in Burma.

There are approximately 5,600 Burma-born people currently residing in Australia. In Victoria, the Karen people have settled in Shepparton, Bendigo and both the eastern and western suburbs of Melbourne. In the western region of Melbourne, the largest Karen community has settled in the City of Wyndham. Of the approximate 3,036 Karen language speaking people in Victoria, around 1,451 Karen people live in the Wyndham area. Just over 300 Karen people have settled in Hobsons Bay (Profile ID, 2013).



2.0 Consultation Themes

During consultation with Karen community members, as well as through personal narratives, a number of themes emerged that highlight the strengths, challenges and hopes of the Karen community in Wyndham. These themes include the importance of cultural maintenance, challenges and opportunities in adapting to Australian life and engagement with Australian services.

The discussion on these themes aims to provide service providers and practitioners with a greater understanding of the areas and the ways that local services can work with the Karen community.

2.1 Cultural Maintenance

Consultations identified the central role of traditional Karen culture within the local Karen community, and the desire for this culture to be maintained within this generation and future generations.

Central to cultural maintenance is the role of religion and faith. One community member stated that “We cannot maintain our culture if we do not have any faith”. As noted in Section 1.0, there are a number of religious faiths within the community. Faith and religion were mentioned in varying ways throughout the consultation. One respondent explained the role of faith and religion as underpinning everything within the Karen culture and the way that culture is expressed:

“It is more than just a matter of belief as it may determine which school they attend, who they marry, medical treatment they receive or services they attend.”

Consultations with the community leaders suggested that the Karen community is structured around religious values and beliefs. While some members of the community feel that religion and culture cannot be separated, others suggest the opposite; believing that religion and culture are isolated from each other. This illustrates that the Karen community is not a homogenous community, but one made up of a number of faiths and dialects, and different associated values.

Given the place of religion in the Karen culture, Karen people arriving in Australia are often keen to practice their religion. While this is usually straightforward for Karen people with Christian faiths, it was noted by the community that it can be more difficult for Karen Buddhists to find a place to practice.

The Wyndham Karen community is described as being structured in terms of religious and community organisation -affiliation. This was identified as one of the issues contributing to a fragmentation of the community. Community members reported that church-based organisations tend to only meet with their own groups, rather than the whole community. One community member felt that Karen people do not come together for particular cultural ceremonies because of the divisions across religions. The alignment of community members with different Karen organisations was also felt to contribute to fragmentation within the community. One person commented:

“We will bring young Karen people together from different groups... One Karen organisation organised [a] camp for young people but they did not include all young people from different Karen background as some Karen young people were not members.”

Community members saw this as a challenge for the community and sought to overcome this. When discussing potential actions for the community, one community member stated that:

“We cannot only help Pwo or Sgaw Karen—we need to help the whole community. We cannot discriminate against any religion or ethnic group.”

Another example of community members working to overcome fragmentation can be seen where new families migrate to Australia. More settled community members will often work with these community organisations to assist other newly arrived families and individuals (interpreters for example).

“All volunteers come together in one place, once a week in order to understand each other, to understand the needs of the community members and to be able to work together. We can also work with other organisations, for example, the Australian Karen Organisation”.

Overall, what was clear from discussions with community members was that after arriving in Australia, there was a feeling in the community of safety, both physical safety and safety to express culture. Varying community members commented:

“We feel safe as Australian people and government are very good for Karen refugees, for bring and looking after us in Australia”

“[Now] I do not need to worry about the police will arrest me when I go somewhere”

“I can go freely without fear in Australia”.



Community Stories – Wah Wah *

I came to Australia on 8 April 2010 with my husband, two sons and four daughters. There are eight people living in my house. I came to Australia without my brothers, sisters and mother as they all went to America. This is a big separation and is difficult for me as I feel very lonely and isolated in my life and I really miss my brothers, sisters and old mother.

I enjoy Australia because we have a lot of opportunities and access to education is very good for my children. We also have enough food and clothes in Australia. We feel safe as Australian people and think the government are very good to Karen refugees for welcoming us into Australia. I feel like a new person even though I have been here for nearly three years.

What I enjoy most in Australia is education because of all the opportunities for my sons and daughters. Education is a big challenge for my husband and me as we did not have the opportunity to go to school when we were children because of civil war. It sometimes upsets me that I do not have any basic education in my own language. It can be hard to study here as we need to start from the very beginning. I can only try to guide my sons and daughters with their studies.

Health is a challenging issue for me. I have been unwell for over 20 years but have been unable to get a diagnosis, even in Australia. Sometimes my illness comes on quickly and I suffer a lot. Sometimes I find it hard to remember small things like my address and I cannot go the hospital alone when I have an appointment.

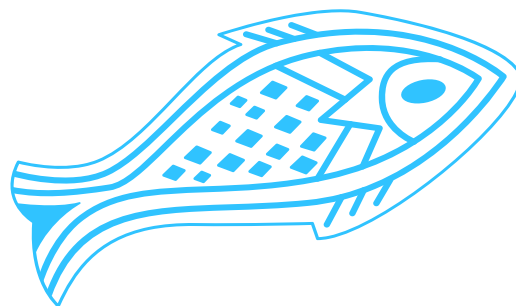
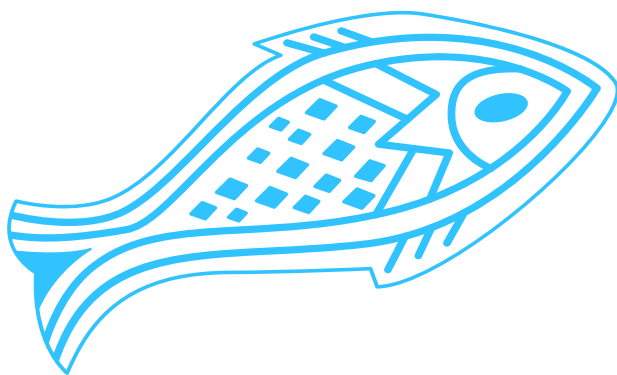
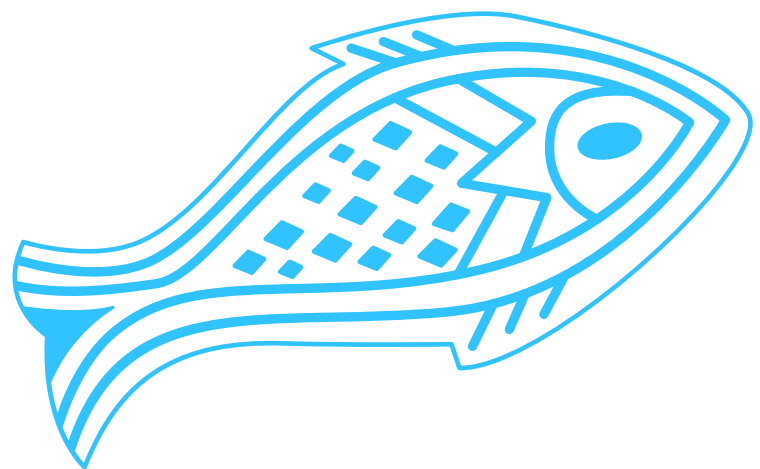
I feel like I cannot stand on my own feet because I am reliant on assistance from services and organisations. I really worry about my future as I cannot foresee what will happen to me. It would be helpful if someone provided me with some advice on what I can do for my life to be better. I hope that when an organisation finds out about my needs, they can help me with my issues.

In the future, I hope that my sons and daughters will study hard in higher education and so they can become educated people. I hope that they will be good citizens and will get good employment so they can help broader communities in Australia.

* Name changed

In regard to safety to express culture, community members feel confident to express their culture through dressing in traditional clothes and costumes and enjoying traditional foods, music and dances. Maintaining the Karen culture in Australia is critical with one community member stating that he “does not want community language, literacy and culture to disappear”. A younger Karen community member identified new opportunities to maintain culture, putting forward an idea for a business:

“I want to create a Karen culture shop as Karen modern clothes, for example, wedding dresses will be sold in order to promote Karen culture through working together with the Karen music team.”



2.2 Adapting to Australian Life

2.2.1 Settlement

Overall, community members identified a desire to adapt and integrate into Australian life, while still maintaining important parts of the Karen culture. One community member summed up the feeling of others by stating:

“I want my people to have a connection with Australia and Burma... Karen young people who settle here [in Australia] are very lucky.”

Another commented on the freedoms and opportunities that life in Australia has to offer:

“People have freedom and can go overseas without barriers. Life is valuable with full opportunity, freedom and rights. People do not put you down even you are from lower class, poor family, refugees and migrants backgrounds”

As noted in Section 2.1, the majority of consulted community members felt safe and free in Australia. However, despite these freedoms and security of living in Australia, community members identified challenges in settlement—both in the maintenance of culture and in adapting to Australian life. In terms of maintaining culture, the movement from a collective culture, where connections with others are frequent and valued, to one where there is more focus on the individual, presented challenges for community members. This was amplified by the geographical distances between community members. One community member commented:

“We are from collective group and we live together in one place. In our village, we meet and chat together in the workplace but in Australia we do not have many Karen people at the workplace to meet and talk together when we take break. In Australia, people live far away from each other and people are busy with their own business. We have less gathering and people do not visit each other very often.”

Another community member talked about proximity in a more global sense, with family members being re-settled in other countries, resulting in a sense of isolation:

“I came to Australia without my brothers, sisters and mother as they all went to America. This is a big separation and suffering for me as I feel very lonely and isolated in my life and I really miss my brothers, sisters and old mother.”

Despite the challenges that a collectivist culture settling in an individualist culture presented, responses of the community suggested that these

collectivist values are a strength of the community. Many responses from community members focused on what community members can do for each other, and how everyone can work together for the collective benefit. This was demonstrated in ideas for businesses with a community development focus, creating jobs and keeping revenue in the community. It was suggested that the establishment of a restaurant could be something that a number of community members could be involved in, so as to utilise the wide range of skills available:

“We will collect the people to discuss what they can offer and what skills they already have to establish restaurant. Some people may have completed business course and some people may have completed apprenticeship courses such as cooking or accounting training. We can accept young people who study business course to do their practical work with us.”

Community members, however, recognised that partnerships needed to be established with local organisations to build capacity within the community:

“One people is from outside of the Karen community can help us and another is we do by ourselves... We might need assistance from City Council or New Hope [Foundation] to guide us.”

Community members looked to the Italian, Vietnamese and Chinese communities as examples of once newly arrived groups that were seen to be flourishing in their adopted country, while still being able to maintain their culture and overcome issues of community dispersal. One community member looked to the use of businesses in the Italian community as meeting places for community members to counter the dispersal of the community:

“Other community such as Italian, they have their own restaurants and they come and meet together. Karen people have Karen grocery shop but people just get in and go out for shopping rather than meeting.”

Community members commented on the Vietnamese and Chinese communities by saying:

“I want Karen people to work together in the community. I want Karen people create Karen restaurant as Vietnamese people have their own restaurants in Footscray.”

“Other ethnic groups have their own community Centre. For example, Chinese goes to their community hall.”



More broadly, the theme of many of the community members' comments on settling in Australia was a dream and desire for themselves and their children to be part of Australian society and make positive contributions not only for their own community but for the wider Australian community. The comments below illustrate these themes:

"I hope my [children] will be good citizens and will get good employment as well as will help broader communities in Australia"

"I hope my sons and daughters will be educated people and good citizens... I hope that they will be useful people for Australian country as well as for their community."

"We live in a country that has full of education, wealth and good administration. I want to see good future leaders in our community."

"The first generation plants the seed, the second generation gets the shade, and the third generation gets the fruit."

2.2.2 Language & Education

Significant challenges noted by community members in settlement related to language and education levels. Karen community leaders identified language as an integral part of the Karen culture and a desire to keep Karen languages alive in the community. However, the impact of the journey of many Karen people, and the struggles that they have experienced in Burma, create literacy barriers. Civil war created disruptions in the education of many Karen people, resulting in sometimes limited education levels. One community member commented the literacy levels of the Karen language:

"It is hard as Karen people do not love to read and cannot read [and] I do not mean in English. Karen people do not read and cannot read even their own language."

This was reiterated by another community member who shared her story of her education in Burma and the challenges this now presents in Australia:

"For me, it is very hard to study here as we need to start from the beginning and we did not have the opportunity to study when we were younger because of civil war."

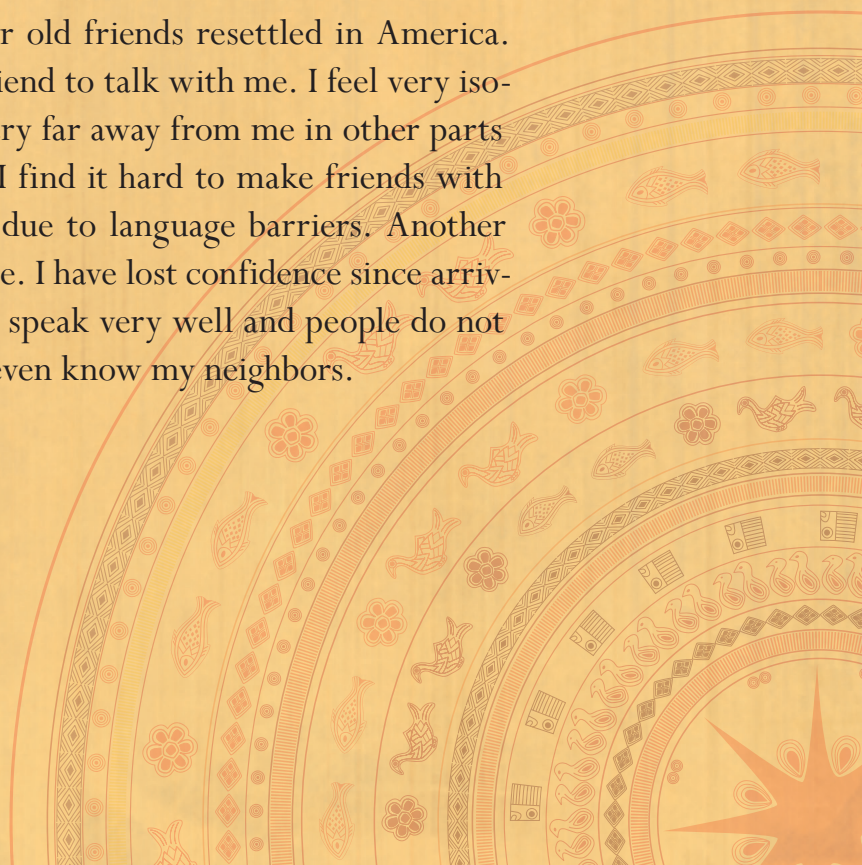
Community Stories – *Thay Paw* *

I have been in Australia for 3 years and I came with my parents, three brothers, one sister and two cousins. I enjoy Australia because I have enough good food. I do not need to worry that the police will arrest me when I go somewhere. I can continue my further education. Quality of life is very high when comparing with quality of life in refugee camps. People have freedom in Australia and can go overseas without barriers. Life is valuable and full of opportunity, freedom and rights. People do not put you down even if you are from a lower class, poor family, refugees or migrants backgrounds.

In the future, I want to be happy and I want to be an animation editor. I want to create a DVD that tells the story of the suffering of Karen people in Burma and the difficulty of newly arrived-Karen people in refugee camps, Thailand. I also want to tell the story of the challenges facing Karen people who resettle in other countries. I want to help people who are unhappy, unhealthy and depressed.

I need privacy and confidentiality in my life. I do not want other Karen people to talk about my personal life. I do not want other people to put me down. I do not want other people know about my health issues except my case worker. Another dream for the future is that I want to speak English fluently. I do not want other people to look down on me due to my poor English. I want them to understand my needs.

I faced many challenges when I arrived in Australia. I do not have any old (long term) friends in Melbourne. I left some old friends behind in a refugee camp and some other old friends resettled in America. During school holiday I have no friend to talk with me. I feel very isolated in my life. My friends live very far away from me in other parts of Australia and other countries. I find it hard to make friends with people from broader community due to language barriers. Another challenging issue for me is language. I have lost confidence since arriving in Australian because I cannot speak very well and people do not understand me very well. I don't even know my neighbors.



Community Stories – *Thay Paw* * (continued)

I want to rent a big house with a bedroom per person, but my family cannot afford to pay the rent as we do not receive sufficient payment from Centrelink. We also need to pay for the bills, rent and food. So the payment that we receive from Centrelink cannot fulfill those needs. Sometimes I heard that people who rely on Centrelink get more money than the people who have the jobs and those people who rely on Centrelink are using drugs and alcohol and are very lazy. I need to go to school to be eligible for Centrelink payment. Studying is harder than working if I compare it with my student placement.

My circumstances sometimes leave me feeling very depressed. My family takes me to hospital when I am not feeling well. Sometimes my family is busy to take me to hospital but I am unsure who to talk to, to get assistance.

* Name changed



Another community member shared his story of his challenges with literacy in his own language:

“Sometimes I feel very unhappy as I am illiterate person without basic education that creates barriers in my life.”

Community members felt that the challenges of literacy was partly due to a lack of resources in Australia printed in Karen community languages. One community member suggested that this was beginning to change as she saw a sign printed in a Karen language at a local McDonald’s restaurant, but overall, there was a dearth of Karen publications. Printed resources in Karen languages were especially important as many people in the community find communication in English challenging. Multiple community members commented on their own or their communities’ challenges with English, however one community member summed the challenges with comments on his hopes for the future:

“Another dream I have for the future is I want to speak English fluently even my accent is not good enough. I do not want people to look down on me due to my poor English... I lost my confidence since I arrived in Australia because I cannot speak very well and people do not understand me well.”

Skills in the use of computers were also identified as a critical need for the community.

Many hoped that, although their own education was limited, that their children would embrace the educational opportunities that Australia provides. Some parents, however, felt that their children did not fully take these opportunities and remained concerned about their children’s education:

“I worry about my sons and daughters as they do not study hard even they have good opportunity in Australia... What we can do is only guide our sons and daughters.”

Parenting challenges are explored in more detail in Section 2.2.3.



Community Stories – *Saw Wah* *

I have been in Australia for 5 years and have become an Australian citizen. My family and I were able to come to Australia because God helped and guided us. I believed that education, shelter, social support and religion will be better for my family if we resettled in Australia.

I am very happy to be in Australia as I can go anywhere without fear of persecution.

Sometimes I feel very unhappy as I am an illiterate person without basic education. This creates barriers in my life.

* Name changed



2.2.3 Intergenerational Conflict

The cultural gap between the older and younger Karen people was a recurring topic of conversation during consultations. A ‘clash’ between older and younger generations was said to cause friction for individuals and within families and the community.

Young Karen people are often caught up in a culture clash between traditional Karen values and beliefs and western culture and way of life. Karen young people talked about the difficulties associated with expected responsibilities and traditions conflicting with their desires to integrate into Australian culture, for example, by hanging out with friends or having sleep overs and parties.

“Sometimes I want to go to my friend’s birthday party but my parents do not allow me to go... [They say] ‘do not go out, rather ask your friends to visit you.’”

Parents talked about their struggles with disciplining, understanding and ‘keeping up’ with Karen young people. One Karen parent described parenting as ‘a challenge’ during the consultations. Some community members found the idea of ‘children’s rights’ a new concept and felt that this concept impacted on their ability to parent their children. One community member commented on the way that laws in Australia took power and influence away from the community in regard to enforcing behavior in children and young people:

“In Burma, the whole community gives pressure to the children who break the rules... The community does not have authority in Australia.”

This again reflects the collectivism values that underpin the values that many in the Karen community hold. Some community members were concerned about the laws and opportunities that promoted individualism over community, particularly in relation to children:

“People are more independent here”

“You can be independent if you are over 18 years”

“In refugee camp parents and children get their rations together but here over 18 children get separate payment benefit from government. Some children do not want to contribute to their payment for food and bills as they think it is parents’ responsibilities.”



Community Stories – *Baw Baw* *

I arrived in Australia on 3 February 2010 with my family. I have been here for three years. There are eight people living in my house.

I enjoy the access I have to systems such as social security, health, education and transportation. I can go freely without fear in Australia.

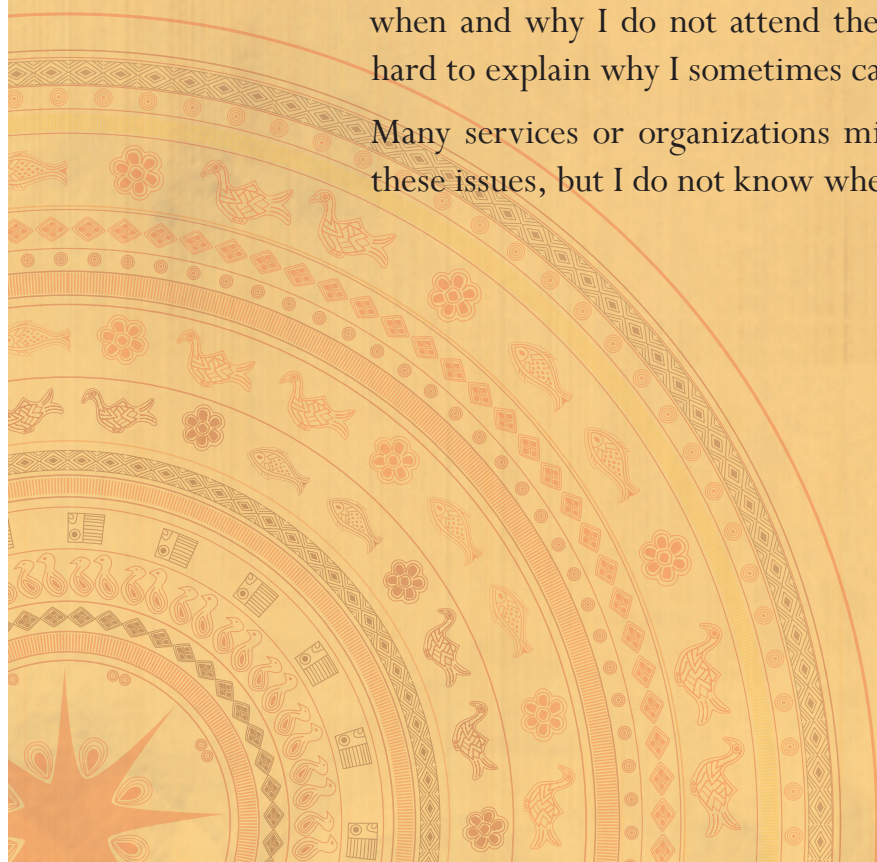
For the future, I hope that my sons and daughters will be educated people and good citizens. I hope that they will improve their lives and be able to stand on their own feet. I hope that they will be useful people for Australia as well as for their community.

The most challenging issue for me is language. Sometimes some people swear at me if I make a minor mistake while I am driving on the road. Sometimes it is hard to know how much I need to pay for my bills. I remember that people asked me to claim for my children's education tax return but I did not understand how much money I received. The tax office ended up charging me, claiming that I received more than I should. I had to pay a lot of money back to the tax office as they charged me with interest.

I am studying but sometimes I need to go for appointments organized by the hospital, Centrelink or a job agency during school time. The teachers question me as to why I make appointments during school time. I try to explain that I don't decide on the appointment times. Sometimes I provide medical certificate to class teacher but they report it to the Manager and I receive a letter stating that I do not attend school. I need to meet with the Manager and the Manager asked me when and why I do not attend the class. Language barriers make it hard to explain why I sometimes cannot attend class.

Many services or organizations might be available to help me with these issues, but I do not know where, how and when to ask for help.

* Name changed



A reliance on Centrelink payments, however, was a source of frustration for younger people who wanted to earn their own money and not be tied to the conditions of payments. One young male explained:

“I want to rent a big house that one person can live/sleep in a bed room but we cannot afford to pay rent as we do not receive sufficient payment from Centrelink”

Although conflict existed between Karen parents and young people, particularly those young people who had not experienced life in Burma, there was a desire to maintain relationships between older and young generations. When asked what the community could do for young people, one young person commented:

“We will bring Karen young people from different groups together to organise a camp for them... We can organise competitions for young people and adult people... We can invite older people for providing advices as some young people scare to ask for advice from elders.”

2.3 Engagement with Services

Those consulted identified that in being a newly arrived community, there can be a limited knowledge and understanding of services available in the Wyndham area. This limitation can sometimes be compounded by potential barriers to accessing services and knowledge of key local services, for example, language barriers and cultural sensitivity barriers. One community member did not realize that there was a swimming program provided specifically for the Karen community at the swimming pool he frequented on a regular basis. He attributed this lack of knowledge to poor information provision about key local services.

It was raised in a presentation by Karen women, to service providers, facilitated by Women’s Health West, that when Karen people encounter problems or stressful life events, they will often seek help from a trusted religious or political leader, friend or family member before consulting with service providers. Sometimes community members will not know which service to approach and may only utilise appropriate services through the advice or direction of a Karen community leader. Elders and leaders are viewed in high esteem and are deemed to be trust worthy and highly respected.



It was identified as important for service providers to explain that what they are doing can benefit the family and that the service provider is not there to judge. It was also noted that it is important to explain confidentiality as it is an important issue for Karen people. Concerns about privacy were highlighted as a potential barrier to accessing services. This was illustrated in one community member's story:

"I need privacy and confidentiality in my life. I do not want other Karen people to talk about my privacy and confidentiality. I do not want other people to put me down. I do not want other people know about my health problem except my case worker."

The presence of a trusted friend or leader (in addition to the interpreter) can often help community members feel more comfortable and work more effectively with the service provider. For service providers it is integral to develop a strong relationship with the Karen person first and foremost in order to gain their trust and as a result provide an environment for honest and frank discussion.

2.4 Strengths, Challenges & Opportunities

Consultations with the community highlighted a tightly connected community with high hopes for their future. Some community representatives expressed their desire to set up businesses and community initiatives while others dreamed of achieving more personal goals.

"We can accept young people who study business course to do the practical work for us. Some communities open their own restaurants and create jobs in their own community"

"It will be great for all adults and young people to work together"

"We will collect the people to discuss what they can offer and what skills they already have to establish [a] restaurant"

"I want to tell the story about the difficulty of newly arrived Karen people"

In such a connected community, these hopes can be achieved with even the smallest amount of guidance. During consultation, community representatives displayed passion and initiative for change, expressing that they wanted to engage with both their own and other cultures and communities to achieve their hopes and goals. Challenges and resources were also discussed and identified as both barriers and facilitators during consultations. Language, skills and financial resources

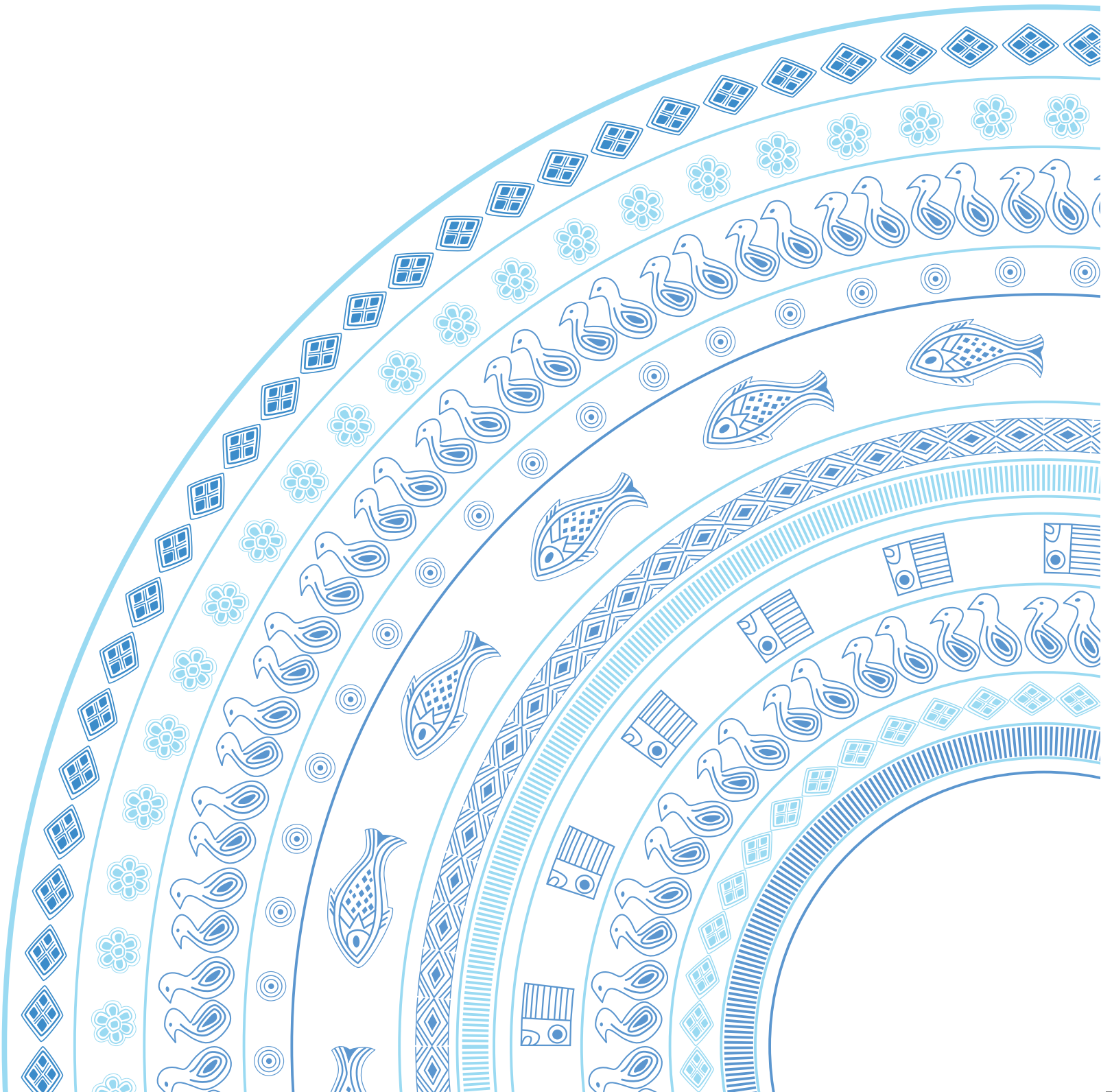
were amongst the biggest factors holding the community back.

“The most challenging issue is language”

“We will need human and financial resources”

“We need volunteers who have skills in English speaking and computer[s]”

Opportunities for development of and within the Karen community are boundless and examples of what works for a newly arrived community can be taken from the initiatives of other communities (as identified throughout this resource).



3.0 Case Study: Gambling in the Karen Community

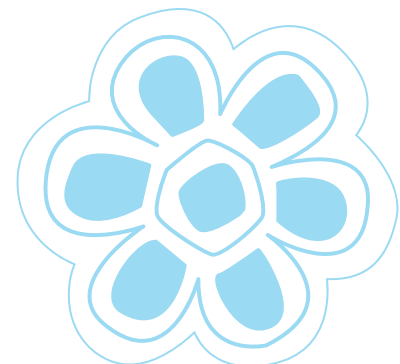
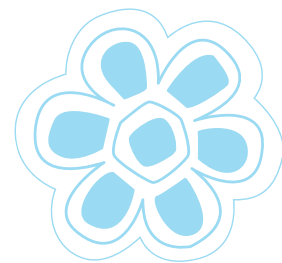
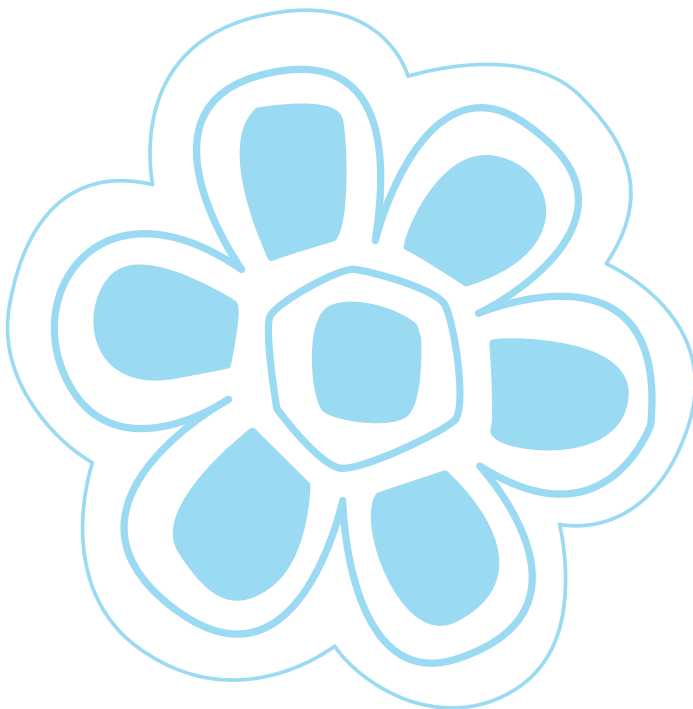
As detailed above, work undertaken with the Karen community held a focus on gambling and the prevention of gambling related issues.

Through consultations with the Karen community, it became apparent that some Karen people would not have participated or engaged in gambling activities in their homeland of Burma. Upon migrating to Australia, Karen people are often introduced to gambling early and may come to see gambling as a way to quickly make money. This in turn can create problems in the home and community. With the Karen community often being more geographically spread out in Wyndham and a limited service knowledge, Karen people who gamble may find it more difficult to seek help, as they may not know where to go or who to talk to.

During the aforementioned presentation by Karen women, it was mentioned a number of times that gambling is a large post-settlement issue in the community. The women talked about gambling resulting in tension amongst family members as well as financial hardship.

When seeking help, Karen people tend to first approach family, elders or community leaders.

“When they encounter a problem, community members will often seek help from a trusted religious or political leader, friend or family member.”



3.1 A Service Providers Perspective

In 2010, anecdotal evidence suggested that the Karen community in Wyndham was vulnerable to gambling related harm. It had become apparent that increasing numbers of Karen men and women were visiting gaming venues and playing pokie machines, in some cases, with significant negative impact on families.

These anecdotal reports were supported by research which suggests that people from refugee backgrounds are more likely to experience problem gambling, due to issues such as migration experience and trauma, settlement difficulties, financial hardships, little knowledge of gambling support services and acceptance of gambling as part of Australian life.

In response to this, partnerships were formed which aimed to reduce the vulnerability of the Karen community in Wyndham to the impacts of problem gambling. Several community consultations, focus groups, education sessions, advisory group meetings and community events were held in an attempt to minimise the occurrence of gambling related harm within the Karen community living in the area.

Through initial advisory group meetings it was difficult gaining participation and input from advisory group members. This proved to be the greatest challenge. This barrier was overcome with the appointment of an experienced bi-lingual project worker and the appointment of a subsequent advisory group committee.

This second committee was actively involved in the production and distribution of an in-language DVD. The committee members were very proactive throughout the entire process, from how the script should read, to choice of characters, background music, special effects, etc. Initially the distribution of the DVD was intended for the Karen community residing in Wyndham, however the DVD reached both national and international distribution through the outstanding efforts of the advisory committee. This proved to be a major triumph and success for the project.

Throughout the organisation process of the Karen Soccer Tournament, members of the advisory group committee were adamant that the tournament serve as a friendly match between the many different Karen soccer teams already in existence, including the newly formed responsible gambling team. Committee members were opposed to



the soccer tournament serving as an opportunity for community members to place monetary bets on the outcome of the tournament. Despite unfavourable weather conditions, the tournament was well attended and turned out to be a great success.

Through responsible gambling education sessions, community members were able to: distinguish between responsible gambling and problem gambling, identify different types of gambling, identify some of the reasons why people gamble, recognise some of the signs of problem gambling, recognise the impact of problem gambling, become versed in their chances or odds of winning, dispel some myths around Pokie machines, identify some harm minimisation strategies, be advised as to how Problem Gambling Counsellors and Problem Gambling Financial Counsellors can assist and become more aware of the support services that are available for people experiencing gambling related harm.

Advisory group members became more skilled, competent and confident in addressing gambling related harm within members of their own community group and talking to them about the Gambler's Help treatment and support services that were available for both them and for those they care about. This resulted in members of the Karen community contacting and seeking treatment and support from Gambler's Help Western (GHW) for gambling related harm. Members of the community still sought the help of community elders and church leaders, as well as local support services such as the New Hope Foundation (NHF), however were also starting to enlist the help of mainstream gambling services such as GHW.

More Information

This resource was compiled using information collated from community consultations, community member stories, and other relevant sources, as detailed below.

More information about the Karen people can be found in the document, *The Karen People: culture faith and history*, produced by the Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation. This document details customs, celebrations and experiences of Karen People.

Women's Health West facilitated a workshop lead by Karen Women in August 2013, 'Working for us, with us'. The workshop covered various aspects of Karen life and culture. Information presented in this workshop was used to develop this report.

An interesting read by Jen Couch, Digna Adonis, Duncan MacLaren, (Australian Catholic University, [2011]) *What Makes a Welcome? Exploring Karen Refugee Settlement in Bendigo* goes into detail about the settlement experiences of Karen refugees.

Learning about partnership and CALD community engagement from the Karen Project is an evaluation of the project and partnerships between the Centre for Culture Ethnicity and Health, Gamblers Help Western (ISIS Primary Care) and HealthWest Partnership. It contains useful insights into the strengths and challenges of working in partnership and with a newly arrived community. The evaluation can be accessed by contacting the Centre for Culture Ethnicity and Health.

Learnings from the Karen Partnership Project: A case study is designed to share the key aspects of making a partnership with a culturally and linguistically diverse community successful. The case study details a model, tools and tips. The case study can be accessed by contacting the Centre for Culture Ethnicity and Health.



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