ORIGINAL ARTICLE

'Our Voices Aren't in Lockdown'—Refugee Young People, Challenges, and Innovation During COVID-19

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Abstract

Using data drawn from consultations and interviews with young people from young people of refugee background in Melbourne, Australia, we examine how young people negotiate their lives in the context of settlement, specifically during the current COVID-19 pandemic. We listened to stories about the challenges they faced, and the initiative and actions they took during the lockdown of nine towers in public housing estates of inner Melbourne during June and July of 2020. In this research, we have found that, despite many pre-existing disadvantages, young people of refugee background have responded to the crisis through public health promotion, volunteering, and innovation. The pandemic has highlighted the role that young people play in supporting their families and communities in the settlement/integration process and the added responsibilities young people have assumed in the context of COVID-19. In negotiating these, young people have drawn upon embodied and communal ways of coping. This paper starts with an exploration of refugee young people's narratives about their lives and experiences during the pandemic. We adopt intersectionality as a method and analytical tool to interpret these experiences and the roles in which young people have enacted during this time—as navigators, carers, providers, and innovators. We end by evaluating the policy gaps these reflect and highlight.

Keywords Refugee young people · COVID-19 · Settlement · Youth participation · Intersectionality

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Introduction

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic to Australian shores in 2020 has had a dramatic impact on Australian society, disproportionately impacting refugee young people in several contexts. It has been acknowledged that COVID-19 has heightened pre-existing disadvantage faced by young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds across many aspects of their lives: in education, employment, health and wellbeing, housing, and income support, and in disruptions to family and social structures (MYAN 2020a).

In this research, we have found that, despite many pre-existing disadvantages, young people of refugee background have responded to the crisis through public health promotion, volunteering, and innovation. The pandemic has highlighted the role that young people play in supporting their families and communities in the settlement/integration process and the added responsibilities young people have assumed in the context of COVID-19.

This paper starts with an exploration of refugee young people's narratives about their lives and experiences during the pandemic. We adopt intersectionality as a method and analytical tool to interpret these experiences and the roles in which young people have enacted during this time—as navigators, carers, providers, and innovators. We end by evaluating the policy gaps these reflect and highlight.

Demographics

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds represent a significant proportion of the youth population in Australia. Almost half of Australia's young people are first- or second-generation migrants, and one in four Australians aged 18 to 24 years are born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). Young people aged between 12 and 24 comprise approximately a quarter of arrivals through the Humanitarian Program and one-fifth through the Family Migration Program (MYAN 2020c).

Young people who arrive in Australia through the Humanitarian Program face several social and acculturative stressors including exposure to increased discrimination and family fragmentation (Shepherd et al. 2017). Young people experience settlement differently from adults and younger children. Their age, developmental stage, position within the family, and the role they play in supporting the settlement of family members all play a significant role in their experience of settlement (Centre for Multicultural Youth 2011). All young people face challenges during adolescence, but the challenges for young people with refugee backgrounds are more complex than their Australian-born, non-immigrant counterparts. The challenges of settlement are exacerbated by the transition into a new culture and society, new peer relationships, a new schooling system, and moving from intensive English Language Schools into mainstream schools (Centre for Multicultural Youth 2011).

Many young people have grown up in a cultural context where the wellbeing of the whole family and community is prioritized above individual aspirations. As such, they are often juggling a range of pressures and complex relationships—negotiating family, cultural, and peer obligations or expectations while simultaneously establishing their own identity in a new culture and society (MYAN 2020b).

Research by Shakya et al. (2014) in the Canadian context has indicated that refugee young people already take on significant responsibilities in the settlement of their family and have been described as 'settlement champions'. Young people are acutely aware of the settlement challenges facing their family, and they play active roles in addressing them. They adopt crucial roles and responsibilities and navigate particularly complex identities.

The responsibilities that refugee young people take on for their family can be broadly categorized into six types:

1. Navigating information, services, and resources
2. Serving as interpreters/translators (at home, outside, and while accessing services)
3. Providing economic support through paid jobs
4. Doing instrumental functions (e.g. finding housing, helping to move, getting food, taking care of family sponsorship applications, and other legal matters)
5. Mentoring/teaching younger siblings and parents/adults
6. Giving care and emotional support (including taking care of younger siblings and grandparents and offering emotional support to family and friends) (Shakya et al. 2014)

In addition to these responsibilities, the current COVID-19 situation presents a rapidly changing landscape with a new set of pressures. These include changes to young people's social lives, daily routines, and access to work and education (MYAN 2020b).

COVID-19 as Context

While there has been acknowledgment of the impact of COVID on young people generally, including a worsening of existing challenges in economic circumstances, an increased sense of social isolation, and a loss of significant rites of passage (Richards and Skujins 2020; VicHealth 2021), most research into the pandemic has focussed on biomedical aspects and less so the inequitable social conditions that cause some to experience the pandemic very differently to others. Despite the refrain of 'we're all in this together', COVID-19 does not impact everyone equally, prompting calls to account for the needs, vulnerabilities, and violations experienced by women, migrants, people with disabilities, and older people. The lack of gender analysis, including sex-disaggregated data, has been especially criticized (Wenham et al. 2020). Recent research in Australia has demonstrated that COVID-19 has disproportionally affected disadvantaged and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities (Grills and Butcher 2020)—including young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing disadvantage faced by young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds across all aspects of their lives—in education, employment, health and wellbeing, housing, and income support.

Grills and Butcher (2020:1) have noted that 'across the world, CALD communities and poorer people have experienced higher COVID-19 infection rates and poorer health outcomes due to lower social determinants of health including poverty, overcrowding, lower education, exclusion and poorer access to health lead to increased risk

of infection and spread' and that cultural, religious, and linguistic differences impact on how well a public health message is understood and acted on.

In June 2020 (during Melbourne's second wave), several Melbourne suburbs with large culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) populations were highlighted as Victorian COVID-19 hot spots. Although the Victorian Government did not release subgroup data, the COVID-19 hotspots were located in low socio-economic suburbs that are culturally and linguistically diverse and have large recent immigrant communities. This cause many migrant communities to claim that they had been unfairly singled out as the city entered a second wave of infections (Razik and Baker 2020). There were claims that the government had engaged in an 'ad hoc' approach to communicating COVID-19 messaging to culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Dalzell 2020) ignoring the proactive role migrant communities were undertaking in addressing the pandemic and instead 'blaming' multicultural family structures (Vrajlal 2020).

The following month, public housing towers in Flemington and North Melbourne were put under lockdown—residents were primarily from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and many were Muslims. Residents were to remain in their apartments, with information, services, supplies, and coronavirus tests to follow. The speed of the lockdown and the manner of its implementation shocked them and the broader community, perceived as heavy-handed, police-heavy, and information-light.

Many residents only became aware of the lockdown when 500 or so uniformed police surrounded the buildings and informed them.

In both cases, these communities felt they were 'blamed' for the spread of the virus. It is within this context that our research emerged.

Method: 'Inside Voices'—Capturing the Experiences and Perspectives of Refugee Young People

When refugee young people arrive in Australia, they set foot in a complex context, with its own unresolved colonial history, internal tensions, and contradictions (Ramos 2018). As Ramos describes, this is space that is already contaminated by racial power relations that exist within a long colonial history and imaginary and with racial/ethnic hierarchies firmly established. Once here, they too become part of this complicated story (Ramos 2018).

In undertaking research within this complex story, we chose to use intersectionality as a theoretical lens, methodology, and analytical perspective. As Brah and Phoenix (2004) explain, intersectionality as a research paradigm assumes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated into discrete or pure strands. As such, intersectionality does not allow essentializing of categories (i.e. treating all refugees as the same and assuming they share the same experiences). Rather than adding categories to another (like gender, sex, race, class), intersectionality strives to understand what is created and experienced at the intersection of two or more axes of oppression (Yuval-Davis 2006). Therefore, intersectionality acknowledges the multidimensional and relational nature of social locations and places lived experiences, social forces, and overlapping systems of discrimination and subordination at the centre of analysis (Zerai 2000). Therefore, research within this framework is often used as a means of giving voice to oppressed or invisible groups (McCall 2005).

In using an intersectional perspective as a research framework, we also aimed to respond to some of the critiques of research conducted with refugee groups, such as a sole focus on problems, overlooking protective factors, strengths and resilience (Vervliet et al. 2014; Betancourt and Khan 2008), and of the lack of voice given to refugee young people themselves (Derluyn and Broekaert 2008).

We were also mindful of the findings of Mupenzi's (2018) research who notes that while it has been common for researchers to highlight the importance of trauma in understanding young refugees' experience, this approach has its limitations, including minimizing the role of culture, oversimplifying experiences, and pathologizing normal stress responses. He urges us to shift focus and move away from the negative aspects related to being a refugee towards emphasizing positive aspects and resilience in the face of adversity. Similarly, Sleijpen et al. (2013): 2) note, that:

> while the legal label of being a refugee is lifesaving, the social label carries with it a risk of prejudice and stigma. The stereotypical perception of young refugees as adolescents at risk is not without consequences: it is difficult to spread one's wings when pigeonholed. It is of great social importance to see refugee youth not as passive victims without capacities but as survivors with social potential who can inspire with their ability to "bounce forward".

Intersectionality also offers a platform to radically rethink COVID-19 as it refuses a pre-determined hierarchy of vulnerable groups, it rejects a universal conception of their experiences, and, lastly, intersectionality shows that risks and impacts are shaped by a *web of intersecting factors*, including age, sex, gender, health status, geographic location, disability, migration status, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES). Finally, intersectionality examines how factors experienced at individual and group levels are shaped by processes and structures of power (e.g. capitalism, globalization, patriarchy, racism, nationalism, and xenophobia) to create an interplay of advantages and vulnerabilities.

Intersectionality as a Method

Intersectionality as a research design and method remains very much under explored. According to Hillsburg (2013:3) 'one area of research that remains underexplored within intersectionality is the development of research designs and methods that capture effectively all the tenets of intersectionality theory to social research projects'. To Hillsburg (2013) intersectionality methodology is complicated because intersectionality as a theory illustrates that there are innumerable subject positions that can be studied, each marginal and marginalizing of others in a way that is continuously changing (Hillsburg 2013). Despite its complex nature however, with innumerable subject positions, intersectionality holds the promise of opening new intellectual spaces for knowledge and research production (Weber and Fore 2007) as well as the potential to lead both theoretical and methodological innovations (Simien 2007).

In our research, we were mindful of work undertaken by Burman (2003:293) who argued that to use intersectionality as a method, there is a need to confront how to 'engage with the encounter with an/other, without assimilating that other to received

structures and so robbing them of that difference or otherness'. Applebaum (2002:363) observes that many researchers, who seek to understand the 'Other' engage in 'a certain form of voyeurism and exploitation that further reinscribes privilege and marginalization' instead of beginning any research process with taking into account where they are located in the hierarchies that structure social order. It is in this light that we began the research process in thinking about what our intentions were in undertaking intersectionality research as well as what key assumptions we bring to the research.

Such research is not without its ethical complexities. Ethics approval was given from the university, but as a team, we pondered on how we could ethically speak about members of a group to which we do not belong to without reinforcing stereotypes and 'Othering' (Ramos 2018). We also considered the effects of power relations between the researcher and participants which are never unidirectional and equal.

The data collection for this research had its origins in the nationwide consultations undertaken by the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN)[1].

During the pandemic, MYAN ran consultations with young leaders from around Australia with refugee and migrant backgrounds, including current and past members of their Youth Ambassadors Network. These consultations covered the impact of COVID-19 on young people, their families, and communities.

In addition to ongoing conversations with young people, MYAN has initiated regular national meetings with over 300 workers in the youth and settlement sectors to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on young people's lives and on youth and settlement service delivery. This included a national youth led panel which explored 'the new normal':

https://aus01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook. com%2FMYANAustralia%2Fvideos%2F308633037167148%2F&data=02%7C01% 7CJen.Couch%40acu.edu.au%7C1119db1e89c24745e4e908d838021e7c% 7C429af009f196448fae7958c212a0f2ce%7C0%7C0%7C637320929058168853& sdata=Vgdn40TGJLqnvtRzp9W2vSkpdc%2Fky0Qy8wVeHqnsY%2Fs%3D& reserved=0

Link to videos by National Youth Panel on COVID-19: exploring the new normal; produced by Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network.

The issues that were raised by young people and the innovations they identified were the first stages in this study in that it provided contextualization and background knowledge. The study that emerged out of these consultations focuses on fifteen in-depth interviews that were undertaken online and in person between May and July 2020.

Most young people were recruited through youth workers working in the settlement sector and a smaller number through a 'snowballing' process with students of one of the researchers who is living on the high-rise housing estate and was instrumental in the response to the tower lockdown. An information sheet was developed and distributed to youth workers and students asking young people to contact us. Young people made contact at which point an initial meeting was conducted via zoom. At this meeting, we

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[1] Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN) is the national peak body representing the rights and interests of young people aged 12–24 from refugee and migrant backgrounds. MYAN works in partnership with young people, government, and non-government agencies at the state and territory and national levels to ensure that the particular rights and needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are recognized and addressed in policy and practice.

shared how we were planning to undertake this study and what we were aiming to achieve. We asked them to think about what we had talked about and then decide if they wanted to participate or not. All except one young person who was initially approached agreed. We recognize that there are important differences in experiences within and across cultural and demographic groups. Nevertheless, given the dearth of knowledge on refugee young people's experience of COVID, our study endeavoured to include participants from as many different cultural backgrounds and countries of origin as possible through the assistance of interpreters when necessary. Interviews were conducted with 9 males and 6 females from a range of ethnicities Hazara, Karen, Sudanese, Tibetan, Liberian, Congolese, and Ethiopian.

In our interviews, we wanted to maintain a focus on 'lived experience' methodology. Oliverr and Cataldo (2019):10) note that for this to happen, we needed to engage a 'radical shift' in traditional research methodology to one that is focused on systemic change driven by lived experience:

> Radical Shift suggests, among other things, that 'Keen Insight' is necessary to drive change that recognises and incorporates lived experience. Keen insight is about bringing new knowledge, digging deep enough to uncover what isn't known, or accessing perspectives that challenge what is. Herein lies the value of lived expertise in research. Alongside Keen Insight sits a call for 'Fearless Reflection', 'Radical Kindness' and 'Open Exchange', each with implications of casting off old notions and assumptions and opening ourselves up (those with lived experience included) to new ideas, new interpretations, new ways of working, and, possibly most importantly; new relationships and connections.

Results

In interviews and consultations, young people shared with us the significant reconfiguration and intensification of their responsibilities to their family and communities during this time of COVID-19. Responsibilities included disseminating information, helping families navigate services, interpreting and translating, earning an income, caring for older and younger family members, providing educational support for siblings who are home schooling, and giving emotional and physical support to residents during the tower lockdown.

Thematic analysis of young people's narratives revealed four central roles that young people have adopted during the pandemic—navigators and cultural brokers, providers, caregivers, and innovators. This section explores these narratives.

Young People as Navigators and Cultural Brokers

Australia's social distancing measures in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented changes to the lives of individuals and their social activities. The effects of lockdown and social distancing impacted on refugees in more complex ways than in other communities. Refugees rely on a range of informal networks that are vital for

maintaining educational and social services, such as tuition in English and other subjects, health and social care support, legal support, support with mental and physical wellbeing, and social and cultural activities (Ramos 2018).

Within many refugee background communities, the elders usually make the important decisions. However, as Marlowe and Bogen (2015) note, refugee young people often adjust to their new country and culture at a quicker rate. Largely due to their school experiences, they are in constant contact and exchange information with members of the wider society.

> Through these continuous social encounters, young people learn the host language, and begin to understand, acculturate to, and possibly integrate with, local norms, social protocols, and cultural protocols. (Marlowe and Bogen 2015:4)

Older members of migrant and refugee families have less connection with the host community while young people tend to develop strong connections to resources and social networks beyond their ethnic community. As a result, young people become cultural brokers and family interpreters' through the translation of information for their families and their communities:

> The news was so depressing, I try not to watch it, but my grandmother always asked me to tell her what was happening. I was trying to keep up with what everyone was saying. Sometimes I got confused and she would be asking me to tell her – and then I had to tell the neighbours. When everything locked down, I really noticed how many people live in our house, because usually people are out. Out of 15 people, my English is the best. I really felt a lot of responsibility – everyone needed to make calls. If there were bills to sort and pay, I did it. If there was a teacher to ring or something to sort out, everyone asked me. Yeah, I really felt increased responsibility.

For refugee background communities, inadequate language proficiency is a clear barrier to receiving and accessing correct information (Marlowe and Bogen 2015) about the pandemic. This deficit in linguistic capital can lead to misunderstanding of messages regarding social distancing and lockdown. The deficit can also create difficulties understanding government assistance packages. Marlowe and Bogen argue that 'this "deficit" is closely related to and impacted by exogenous structural limitations which often assume that people are fluent in the host society language and therefore have access to information' (2015:7).

As young people adapt to cultural and linguistic contexts more quickly than their parents, they are called on to interpret and translate key messages for their family and community and serve as potential cultural brokers with the wider society:

> So, people who needed to see the doctor were told not to go to hospitals or clinics – instead, we were meant to use video calls. I had to help my mum and about three of her friends do all this because they had no idea how. It was embarrassing too.

During a pandemic, a community's ability to access and understand safety guidelines and official information is critical. Linguistic competency and social capital resources are crucial. Complex social and cultural factors affect how communities receive, understand, and act on information. During this pandemic, government did provide translated information using various mediums including radio and social media, but this was not offered soon enough and was often translated into formal language, unsuitable for many communities. Young people who used Facebook and WhatsApp became 'linguistic and digital bridges' for their families and communities (Marlowe and Bogen 2015) ensuring that crucial information was received and understood:

> A lot of the information was in English and if it was written in our language, it was formal. Not like we speak, so I had to explain when to get tested, where, why, how.

This process of acting as bridges is also dependant on young people's relationships of trust in communities, or their ability to build trust. A cornerstone of trust ensures that messages are delivered, understood, and acted on.

COVID-19 also resulted in a radical and unprecedented reliance on digital technology for information about the pandemic. Within migrant and refugee communities, young people tend to be the most digitally literate people in their households (Marlowe and Bogen 2015). With the nationwide closure of educational institutions, young people were essential in helping their transition to online education. Many young people became a key resource in ensuring that digital messages related to education were received:

> My parents had really no idea. They don't speak good English and have low education. There are six kids so, as I am the oldest, I had to help. We have two computers and not good internet. I hated zoom tutes at uni because at my house it was complete chaos and it felt like everyone else was going fine. Some days I had to be a tutor, some days I had to email the teachers and every day I had to help my brothers and sisters with their homework. I had to translate everything for my parents and give them all the information about everyone.

Since many refugees rely on informal relationships within their community for information, rumours and misinformation spread with ease. Young people noted:

> We're trying our best to provide translated information from reliable sources on our WhatsApp groups.

Given the global nature of the pandemic, young people also noted that this digital literacy was important in linking communities together—not just locally, but also as a way of communicating with friends and family overseas:

> The only positive thing is that we started face timing and zooming overseas. We did not do that before, as it made us feel further away and that's been really good. We also know people are safe and we can also give them proper information. Some of them do not know the basic things about the virus.

The use of social media platforms to communicate with family and friend overseas forms part of the aggregate set of resources used by young people to maintain and manage group membership, solidarity, and belonging, involving a complex interaction between a sense of connection and reciprocal moral duty to friends and family overseas (Wilson 2015).

Therefore, by acting as translators and cultural brokers, young people become crucial to the community's wellbeing and ability to cope and recover from the associated adverse circumstances (Marlowe and Bogen 2015), playing a critical role in public health management.

Young People as Providers

Young people are being hit the hardest by job loss because of COVID-19 and will suffer the long-term labour market consequences of economic downturn. It is also anticipated that refugees and migrants will experience these effects disproportionately (Centre for Multicultural Youth 2020). However, as the centre has noted, young refugees have faced persistent barriers that contribute to long-term unemployment, underemployment, or insecure employment.

Young refugees are highly aware of the labour market barriers facing their family and often step in to contribute to the family costs. The job losses and reduction in hours during COVID-19 have significantly affected young people, sometimes impacting on housing security and the ability to support family members overseas:

> It was very difficult when coronavirus started, because I lost my job. When my mum had the twins, she told me I had to help with money because she couldn't work. There is a lot of pressure now to pay our rent, but also to send money overseas. Coronavirus is everywhere and we are so worried for our relatives. My sister kept her jobs but had to drop out of uni – if I get another job, I will have to as well.

Young people who have maintained their jobs during COVID-19 have reported concerns about their health, safety, and rights at work. These concerns reveal how vulnerable they are to potential exploitation given that many are desperate to maintain an income:

> I work in a supermarket so I'm kind of on the front line, I worry about catching it and passing it on to my grandparents who live with us.

Young people will also be disproportionately negatively impacted by the looming economic slowdown as a result of COVID-19. Past financial downturns have shown

that young people take far longer than other age groups to recover in terms of employment, particularly those without a degree (Productivity Commission 2020). The events that shape someone's transition to employment have a long-term impact on their future working life, referred to as 'scarring'. There is a likelihood of employment and future earnings being reduced for up to 10 years or more (Seccombe 2020) with long-term implications for health and wellbeing. The implications are not lost on most young people:

> I think when we come out of this, it's going to be so much harder. Even before COVID I found it so much easier to get a job than my parents. Imagine now. I need to study hard; I need to go to uni. But I also need to get a job, because I honestly do not know how we can all manage if I do not work.

Young People as Caregivers

The pandemic has required refugee young people to take on caring roles such as teaching younger siblings, giving care and support to grandparents, and offering emotional support to family and friends.

The restrictions of lockdown and the anxiety related to the risks associated with COVID-19 have been central to refugee young people's difficulties. The increase in their caring load has prevented them from turning to their established coping strategies such as spending time with friends, going to school or engaging in a hobby.

Many young people provided care as well as emotional support to family members, with many talking about having to look after children in the family and their aging grandparents/ relatives. Some spoke about having to console and emotionally support their parents when their parents were feeling down because of economic and other difficulties:

> I kept telling mum it was going to be ok. I kept saying, there are many things that will kill the Congolese people before coronavirus.

Social isolation and increased familial tensions due to home confinement also presented mental health challenges for the whole family. Young people noted that lockdown caused re-traumatization. Faced with uncertainty and living in a confined space reminded them of 'facing detection and persecution back home':

> What we are facing now during this crisis is reminding me of the revolution I witnessed in my country, the state of panic, the constant horrific news, and the speed of which new rules and measures are being put in orders is quite triggering and scary.

Young people spoke about the amplified difficulties in managing the practicalities of supporting their families during the lockdown. Examples included not being allowed into shops and lack of access to transport. Other difficulties included the following:

> Whenever I leave the house to do shopping for the family, I feel like people are staring at me. One lady said, "you shouldn't be wandering around at this time".
> I got a fine. I was taking money out from the ATM for my mum, so she could do shopping. The police asked me why my mum could not buy her groceries online. I told him, it's not the way we do things.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also underscored society's reliance on women carrying out a higher proportion of unpaid care work than men. In some ways, this is unsurprising given gender norms in most families. Care roles mentioned by young women included:

- **Care of children**: In Australia, educational institutions were closed in every state. Many childcare centres also closed and the traditional informal childcare options, such as care by grandparents, were not available because of physical distancing measures.
- **Care of adults**: With health and social services scaled back, individuals with disabilities or chronic health conditions who depended on these services for their wellbeing needed support from family and friends.
- **Care of seniors**: Seniors who adhered to physical distancing measures or were ill needed assistance from family.
- **Care of sick individuals**: Individuals with less severe disease symptoms were not admitted to or released from hospital early and needed care at home as they recover.

This is not to argue that young men have not taken on caring responsibilities. Indeed, they have—particularly where a father is absent—but young people reported that these responsibilities were outside the house, rather than within the home.

Many young women have carried disproportionate caring responsibilities that may be an additional stressor as they navigate their own priorities, be they educational or other. It is also likely that male family members are given higher priority for digital access when there are not enough devices or data to meet the needs of all family members studying at home. Therefore, many young women are experiencing additional disadvantage in the context of new demands/requirements of COVID-19.

> We have only one computer in the house. My brother is in year 11 and he uses that. I am in first year uni. I am trying to watch lectures on my phone, but it's hard. I can go into uni and use the computers there, but there is a lot for me to do at home. I must help my mum with so many things. I think I will have to withdraw this year.

Young people's care also went beyond their immediate family and communities, offering peer-to-peer support which can be effective in helping reduce anxiety and depression exacerbated by such a public health crisis. An example was the video series produced through MYAN in which young refugees posted about their daily lives under lockdown:

MYAN 'Day in a Life' youth-led video series
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLaPqUPXXDqGWilo4FvU7eBE7H0K4zrY-3

Link to 'A day in the life' youth-led video series produced by Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network

Young People as Innovators—Tower Lockdowns

The above discussion demonstrates that young refugees have capacities that have enabled them to actively participate as carers, providers, and information providers during COVID-19 for their families and communities. It also highlights the strengths of young refugees, including cross-cultural knowledge, multilingual skills, adaptability, a strong sense of family and community, and a desire to enjoy and uphold the rights and responsibilities of Australia's democratic processes.

However, as Westoby and Ingamells argue: 'young people themselves bring resources, but the expert gaze often misses them' (2007). Never was this more apparent than in the July lockdown in Melbourne of 3000 social housing residents in nine towers. These towers, spread across two inner city suburbs, are home to many newly arrived and refugee communities. There had been very little consultation with migrant communities prior to the outbreak—it was virtually non-existent—and young people were often filling in the information gaps (Napier-Ramen 2020).

Residents of the towers were given 5-min notice via text that their communities would be shut for a minimum of 5 days. Over 500 police were immediately deployed. The presence of large numbers of armed police caused fear, stress, anxiety, and confusion:

> Not knowing what is happening, what each day will bring, lots of police and helicopters at night… it is scary. Not again.
> Yes, it reminds me of before we came to Australia. It causes me a lot of headaches.

Another consequence of the hasty measure was immediate distrust in public health messaging. In a community which has a history of 'over-policing', especially regarding young people, the policing of the emergency lockdown took place in a negative context. There have been long-running and well-documented community concerns, including legal action, about discriminatory policing, documented racial profiling, policing operations targeting ethnicities, and multiple incidents of severe human rights abuses over many years (Napier-Ramen 2020). Many have argued that the choice to deploy large numbers of police officers as the government's frontline response removed agency, self-determination, and control from residents, local community networks, and health responders (Davey 2020). This was considered especially alienating considering the extensive expertise in health and social work among the residents, including aged-care workers, nurses, and youth workers (Davey 2020).

Within 1 h, a youth work student formed an online group. People began mobilizing to organize food and healthcare. Some focused on creating and distributing multilingual information. A group of young people aged 17 to 25 began door-knocking apartments, asking residents what they needed and noting down any emergency supplies.

Donations, often personal and from the young people themselves, funded the first food and medicine drops. Young people emerged as carers as they comforted people who were distressed and confused:

> Actually, when the lockdown came, I was at my brother's, not on the estate. I thought that I should just stay there. But, how could I? My family and community were there. I knew how frightened people would be. When I got back there were so many police, it looked like something terrible had happened. We decided to go door to door in one tower block where we knew a lot of people. As we got to doors, we could hear crying. There were so many corridors, where that is all we could hear.

As the days of the lockdown wore on, concerning reports emerged of residents not receiving food or receiving food that was out of date or that was culturally inappropriate because it contained pork (Boseley 2020). Some packaged food had no heating instructions. Reports also came to light that no testing of the coronavirus was being conducted and that there was a lack of translated information (Davey 2020). Young people emerged once again as leaders—a group of young people from the Australian Muslim Social Services Agency (AMSSA) Youth Connect based themselves at the base of the towers. They liaised with young people they knew via the nearby mosque and helped them explain to their parents what services were available so that families would open their doors to receive donated goods. They distributed food and supplies and communicated information.

The gaps in information and lack of trust became remarkably apparent when, at midnight on the third night of lockdown, young people were asked to accompany public health workers in going door to door to convince people to be tested.

Young people also began documenting what was happening on the estate, using Instagram and Facebook to capture how they were experiencing lockdown inside and outside the towers. Hashtags such as #weseeyou documented not just the lives of the residents locked in the apartments, but also of the young people from the community who were providing aid, support, and information. These acts showed how young people were providing care and sharing information.

This kind of innovative engagement inspired and motivated other young people into action, leading one commentator to claim that it was young people who saved the towers from a wider catastrophe. As noted by Napier-Ramen (2020), the videos, posts, and tweets posted by young people from the estate in the first 24 h of lockdown drew attention to the multitude of logistic failures in implementing the shutdown.

Discussion

This article has explored how refugee young people in Australia have initiated a range of responses to ensure that they and their communities receive the support they need throughout the pandemic in a range of areas of their lives: communication, mental

health, emergency relief, racism and discrimination, employment, and income support. These areas are summarized in the table below:

Communication: creating audio-visual resources/clips to share COVID-19-related information for their communities in their native language; translating and filling information gaps for families; establishing WhatsApp groups as key sources of information sharing between peers; working with organizations to help with translation; door knocking housing estates to ascertain needs of families during lock down; accompanying testing nurses on door knocking.

Mental health: creating and sharing online videos/clips to share with peers including information about self-care, messages about unity and strategies for looking after each other; setting up check-in groups via online video conferencing; establishing peer support through student unions—drop-in/check in sessions online for international students.

Emergency relief: creating online and action groups in order to respond to lockdown; fundraising and distributing food and medical supplies; providing mental health support to communities in lockdown.

Racism and discrimination: creating online videos to challenge stereotypes about (refugee/migrant) young people and sharing their experiences about COVID-19.

Employment and income support: sharing job opportunities with each other via online platforms; setting up crowdfunding pages to support those without government support; sharing information with each other about employment rights; students and student unions coming together to support international students, e.g. organizing grants; fundraising initiatives to support international students.

But as Shakya et al. (2014:147) ask: 'Can we build on the leadership role that refugee youth play in helping their families [and communities] resettle … without exacerbating their vulnerabilities and compounding their burden? … Under what conditions are these roles empowering versus overwhelming?'

Studies of youth resilience in the context of disasters and extreme events have noted that young people cope better when they have close relationships, psychological capacities, and community-based supports (Masten et al. 2019).

In this research, young people discussed strategies they used to help with their navigation of the roles they undertook. Several of these strategies reflect the findings of Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) in their study of unaccompanied young people. They found that young people employed six different coping strategies, namely (1) maintaining continuity in a changed context, (2) adjusting by learning and changing, (3) adopting a positive outlook, (4) suppressing emotions and seeking distraction, (5) acting independently, and (6) distrusting. In this research, young people demonstrated similar coping strategies—in particular, maintaining continuity, learning, and changing and adopting a positive outlook. Young people also had more embodied and communal strategies for dealing with mental health issues arising from the pandemic (Wilson 2015), which were grounded in relationships with their families and communities:

I am really happy I am Burmese. We have been through a lot. We know how to survive, that's for sure. And we have lots of experience living in crowded spaces!
I miss going to the mosque. I feel that would be so useful now, but when we all pray together, it relaxes me. I know I am not alone. Islam is like a compass for me. It is guiding me through.

> One thing I have learnt is that nothing lasts forever. It's nowhere near as stressful as what we went through. Here we know the government is looking after us. They tell us to stay home, look after each other – we know how to do that.

In this study, it appears that when young people hold on to elements of their culture, their sense of uncertainty bought about the pandemic was lessened. Young people particularly valued contact with other members of their community and other young people from refugee backgrounds.

> I have found some of the stuff that youth workers and other youth are putting online for refugee youth to be really helpful. It's good to know others are feeling the same as me, none of us know what is happening.
> Even though at times I was annoyed when my mum asked me to help people in my community, it also makes me feel so good. I'm part of something, we are survivors. We know how to cope when everything is uncertain.
> I have never been more thankful than I am now to be part of my large Sudanese family and community. They ground me.

Although many of the young people in this study are often living in constrained and disempowering circumstances, they show a remarkable agency in giving sense to their experience and creating connections. This agency is often connected to their belonging as part of a larger cultural community, which, as Masten and Motti-Stefanidi (2020:97) note, infuses every level of coping with a pandemic:

> Human lives and development are deeply embedded in layers of cultural context that influence caregiving, socialization, education, nutrition, identity, family traditions, religious or spiritual practices, values, beliefs, and many other aspects of life. Cultural systems, including religion as well as ethnic traditions, provide many of the guidelines for raising children and traditions or rituals for dealing with adversities.

Affects, memories, and past experiences which many of us would find negative and perhaps damaging are in fact utilized in productive ways by young people in the context of COVID 19, but also more broadly in their settlement (Wilson 2015). Wilson states that 'the recognition of past knowledges, pre-existing cultural competencies and identities can augment young people's social being, increase their 'powers of action' and help them better understand events in our world'. In the process of resettlement, young people need to be adaptable—to learn, to adjust, and to develop existing systems or, in some cases, to create new systems (Folke et al. 2010). In the process of adapting to a new country, young people draw on their close relationships with family and community, systems of belief that provide hope about the future and give life meaning and purpose and rituals that ease difficult transitions (Masten and Motti-Stefanidi 2020).

So, while the difficulties that young refugees have faced cannot be ignored, it is important to acknowledge the capacity young people have. Raghallaigh and Gilligan

(2010) urge that a strengths-based perspective needs to be continuously utilized in research and settlement and in doing so will serve to acknowledge the multiple capacities and resources of young refugees.

Conclusion—Standing Still Is Not an Option

By starting from young people's narratives and interpreting them through an intersectional lens, we are obliged as researchers to accommodate the perspectives of 'the other' instead of only considering our standpoints (Shields 2008); this includes interrogating problems as well as agency and empowerment.

By shedding light on the realities of young people's lives, an intersectional perspective can inform policy and thus stimulate positive social change (Shields 2008), and, as this was also the aim of this paper, we will now draw out several implications for working with refugee young people in a public health context.

The roles taken on by young people, as carers, innovators, and providers in both the settlement context and as part of the COVID-19 response, have been initiated in the face of minimal support and have sometimes come at a cost to their wellbeing. Existing policy responses (or their inadequacy) have led to an increase in family and community responsibilities but without providing appropriate support or often even acknowledgment.

So how can this be addressed? As this article has aimed to highlight, young people of refugee background represent clear assets both to their communities and to public health initiatives. Young people are an under-utilized resource and one that could significantly improve how information is disseminated in refugee communities. Meaningful engagement is critical to strengthen the agency of young people so they can make the right, informed, and safe decisions for themselves, their community, and the wider society. However, as Couch (cited in Napier-Ramen 2020) observed, a lot of cultural consultation tends to draw on older community leaders, such as religious figures. An intersectional approach spotlights the diversity among refugee groups and highlights the settlement experience as shaped by multiple identities including national origin, class, age, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and even age. As such policies and programs must consider this diversity of experiences, rather than incorporating a single universal approach for all. Therefore, while it is important to talk to older, community members, it sidelines younger migrants who might be a more strategic target. A daring governmental policy would acknowledge, recognize, connect, and facilitate the power of young people. Such innovative policy would learn from existing knowledge and integrate it into practice to ensure mistakes are not repeated.

Here, we emphasize the need to implement the 'radical shift' we identified earlier in our article.

The action component of radical shift calls on us to 'flip the script' (Oliverr and Cataldo 2019), to rethink how we conceive and talk about, young refugees. For example, exploring this within the context of the pandemic might mean acknowledging that while the experience of settlement in this context can be difficult, it is also one that includes a vast range of opportunities for learning (about systems, people, practice) and skill development (resourcefulness, system navigation, negotiation) (Oliverr and Cataldo 2019).

As we continue to navigate through, and recover from, the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that government and community agencies acknowledge and recognize the work that young refugees have been doing. These agencies need to create spaces for young people to be strategic partners in response and recovery, recognize their efforts, and support them further. This includes the development of more sensitive and strategic policies, supporting young people's networks and creating enabling environments. Further, young people need to be given leadership roles, engaged as genuine partners, and offered improved career pathways, as articulated by a young person Shabnam Safa in her Facebook post during the tower lockdown:

When all this is over, I hope that the young people who were asked by media agencies to write for them to increase 'community voices' are offered permanent employment opportunities, so they can continue their important work.

The young people who translated essential information in tens of languages in a matter of a few hours (that has taken Gov 4 months and counting) are reimbursed for their services and offered support, so they can continue their important work.

The mostly volunteer-run, community-led organizations who took no time to organize, coordinate, and deliver culturally appropriate food and essentials to thousands of residents (making up for Gov's serious short-sightedness) are offered substantial grants and resources, so they can continue their important work.

These skills and experiences of community members are considered real expertise at future job interviews and compensated accordingly, so they can continue their important work.

Government and organizations receiving significant funds to work with 'multicultural' communities learn from this, take a hard look within, re-evaluate tokenistic community engagement practices, and start moving towards working in true partnership with communities (Facebook post, 7 July 2020 – permission given to use).

It is much easier to see the potential of young people to engage in planning and implementing projects and responses if we have first realized and understood that they have a resourceful nature and creative problem-solving skills in their toolbox (Oliverr and Cataldo 2019). This element has foundations in strength-based practice but goes a step or two further by challenging the way we understand young people's experiences and the implications of settlement as well as how we recognize the strengths of the individual. Oliverr and Cataldo (2019):12) have noted that 'there is a need to move beyond simply accessing the voice of those with lived experience to engaging in active partnerships. To do this, there is a requirement to… 'Back and Build' — back the engagement with resources and build everyone's capacity to make the most of it'. In this way, young people must be collaborators and thought leaders. We should not rely on simply 'hearing the voices', instead 'reaching well beyond voice, towards shared action' (Oliverr and Cataldo 2019:12).

The conditions that are conducive to a society's or community's resilient responses during crises are, among others, equality, inclusion, diversity, flexibility, collaboration, loose connections, abilities to learn, and opportunities to experiment (Comfort et al. 2010): the very qualities that young refugees have displayed as they have grappled with and adapted to the reality of COVID.

Declarations

Competing Interests   The authors declare no competing interests.

Research Involving Human Participants   Informed consent from human participants

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