



# **Crisis in Afghanistan: STARTTS' Response to Support Traumatized Afghans**

**23 March 2022**

STARTTS Clinical Master Class



NSW Service for the Treatment  
and Rehabilitation of Torture  
and Trauma Survivors

(612) 9646 6700 | [www.startts.org.au](http://www.startts.org.au)



# Presentation outline

- Some background information about wars in Afghanistan, Afghan culture, ethnic groups and faith.
- Impacts of the crisis in Afghanistan: On individuals, family and Afghan community.
- STARTTS' response to the Afghanistan crisis via a holistic approach, integration of community development and clinical work.



Afghan Traditional Instrument, Tambor  
Image source: STARTTS



# Four decades of war in Afghanistan

Four decades of war and unrest in Afghanistan have had, and continue to have, a profound impact on all aspects of life in Afghanistan. Millions have fled the country, are internally displaced or have lost their lives. The devastation of Afghanistan has been very costly in both human and economic terms. Afghanistan faces a chronic, complex situation, major changes in the society – sectarianism, influence of external powers. Currently there is a humanitarian catastrophe with starvation and death. Subsequently, many Afghans have been exposed for a long period of time to severe traumatic experiences and multiple losses .

- **1978:** The Soviet-backed regime commenced systematic political repression targeting 'enemies of the revolution'
- **1979-1989:** Russian occupation
- **1989-1992:** Civil war
- **1992-1995:** Civil War
- **1996-2001:** Taliban occupies and destroys Kabul in 1996. Rules 85% of the country in 2001.
- **2001:** In October the US-led ' War on Terror'
- **2001-2021:** Terrorist attacks, suicide bombs, fighting between different fractions including the Taliban and the US-backed government.
- **2021:** In August the Taliban took over Kabul. This led to a humanitarian crisis and severe human rights violations.

# Afghanistan main ethnic groups and spoken languages

## Main ethnic groups

- Pashtun (42%):.
- Tajik (27%):
- Hazara (9%):
- Uzbek (9%),
- Aimak (4%),
- Turkman (3%),
- Baloch (2%), others(4%).

## Spoken languages

- Formal languages: Pashtu and Dari
- Uzbeki
- Turkmani
- Hazaragi
- Hindi and Urdu
- 30 different dialects are spoken in Afghanistan

# Main religions in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is predominately an Islamic country with 99% Muslims. Before the communist revolution (1978) it was a modest Islamic country; democratic, open and tolerant.

- Sunni Muslims 80%
- Shia Muslims 19%
- Others 1% (Hindu, Sikh, Jewish)
- There are also a small number of converted Christians





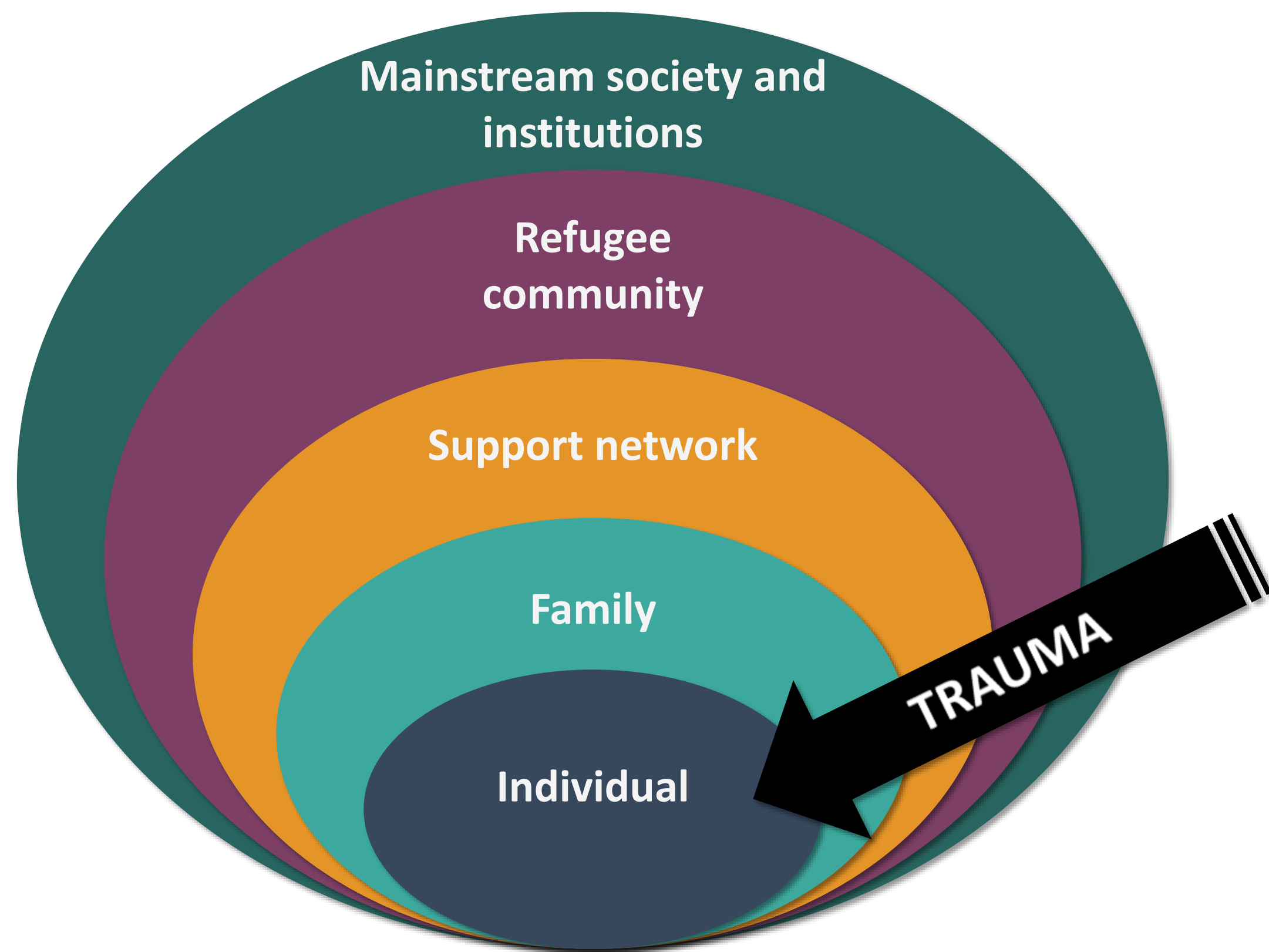
# Afghan culture and values

Afghans are a dignified and proud people. Despite the diversity of ethnic groups, they share many core values and are known for:

- Toughness ,bravely
- Strength and resilience
- Patriotism
- Hospitality and generosity
- Honesty and friendship



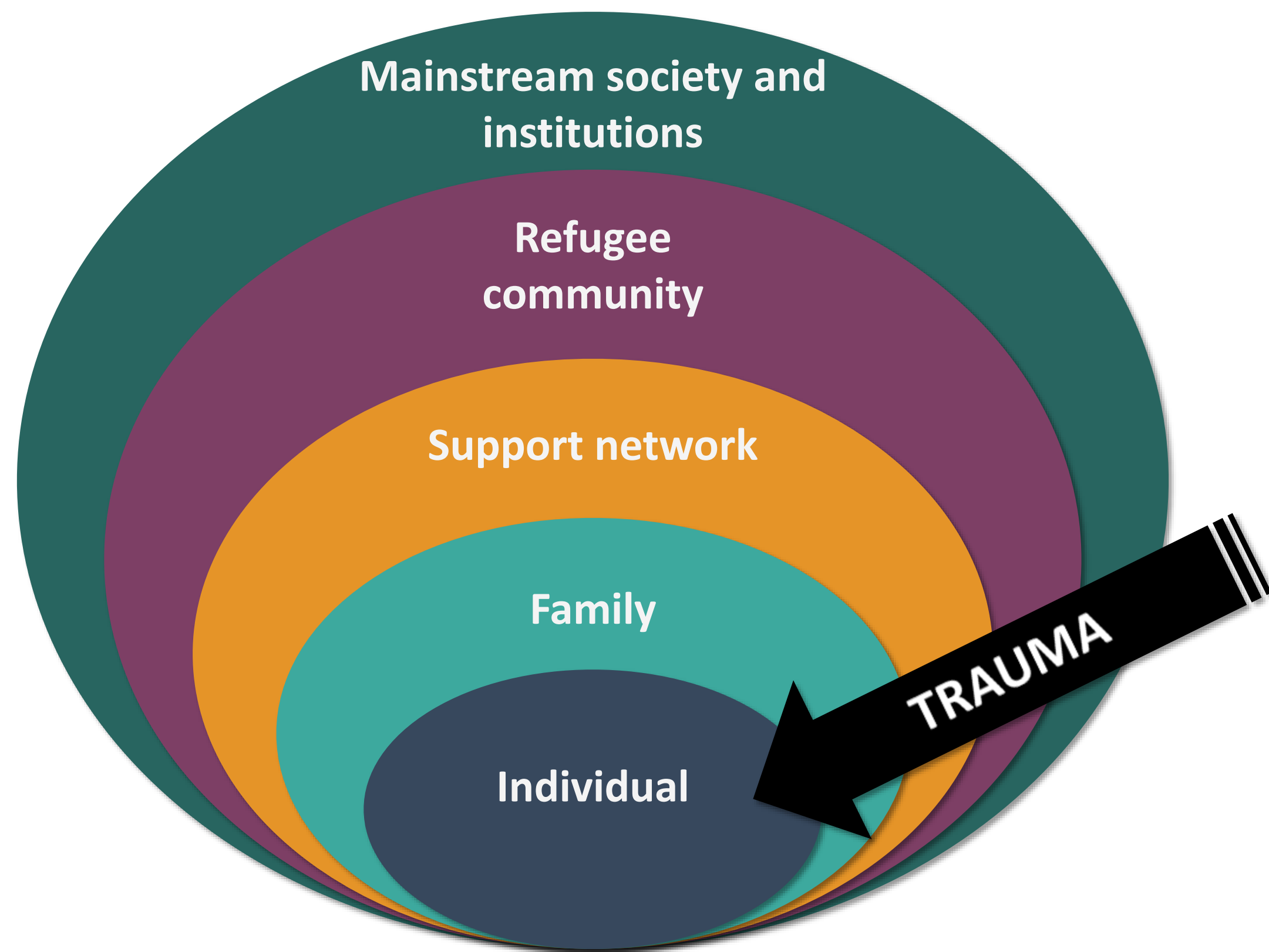
# Systemic impact on the Afghan community



## Individual

- Shock and disbelief
- Grief and loss/anticipated grief
- Retraumatization – trigger, PTSD symptoms
- Fury and resentment
- Survivors guilt
- Anxiety and depression
- Concern for family and friends
- Financial stress
- Settlement difficulties – asylum seekers/TPV holders
- Confusion and uncertainty
- Sleep problems

# Systemic impact on the Afghan community

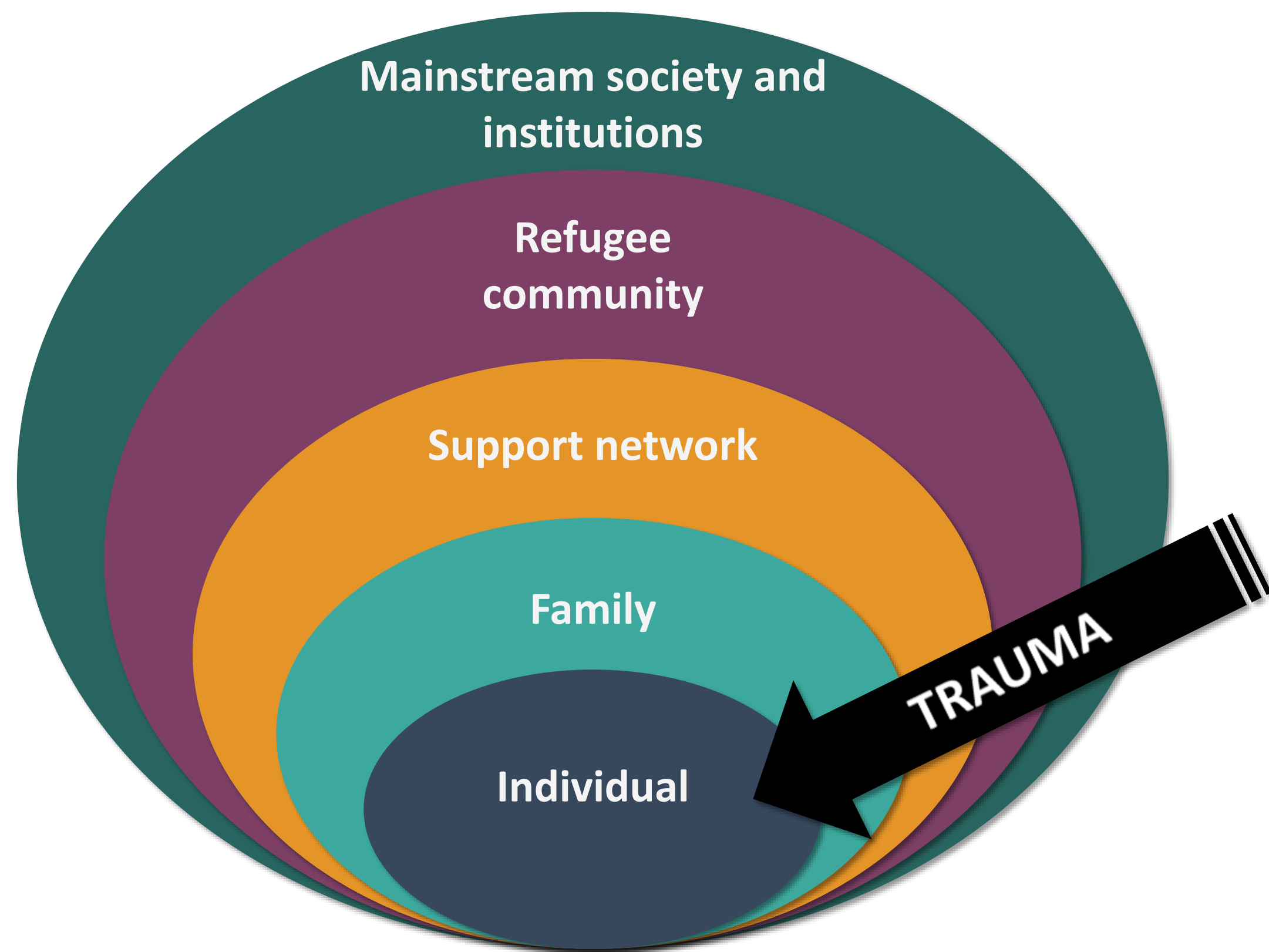


## Family

- Afghan families across the global
- Psychological stress
- Financial stress – unable to send money
- Impact of community divisions
- Family conflict - mixed marriages
- Impact on children/identity



# Systemic impact on the Afghan community

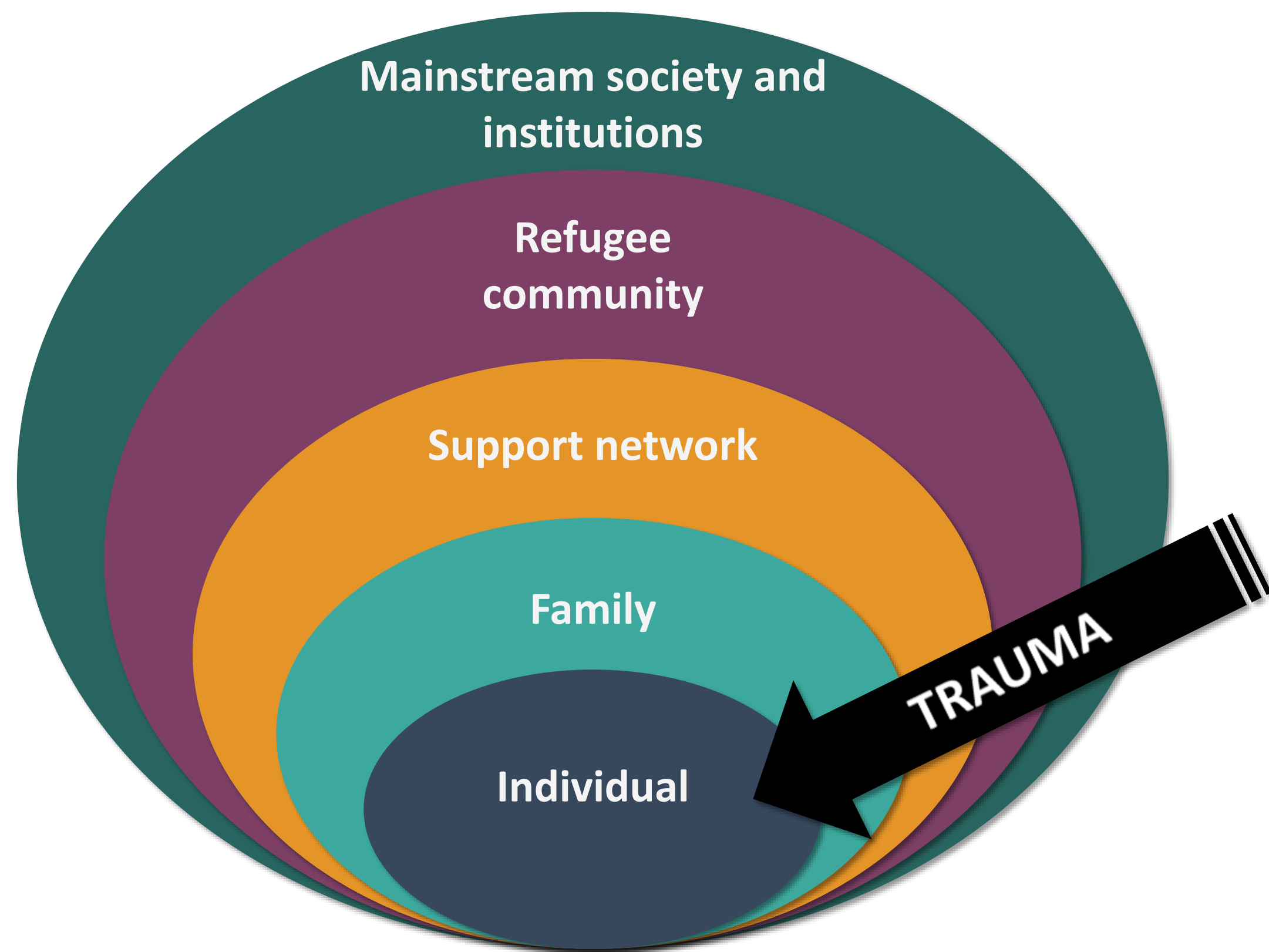


## Refugee community

- The replacement of the Afghan flag was considered as an attack on Afghan's pride, dignity and identity.
- Although the Afghan community in Australia is divided along ethnic/religious/linguistic/political lines, they are mostly united against the Taliban.
- Each of the main ethnic groups (Pashtuns, Tajiks and Hazaras) have different experiences in the context of this crisis
- Dealing with helplessness and hopelessness.
- Community disappointment about the scope of the Australian response to this crisis.



# Systemic impact on the Afghan community



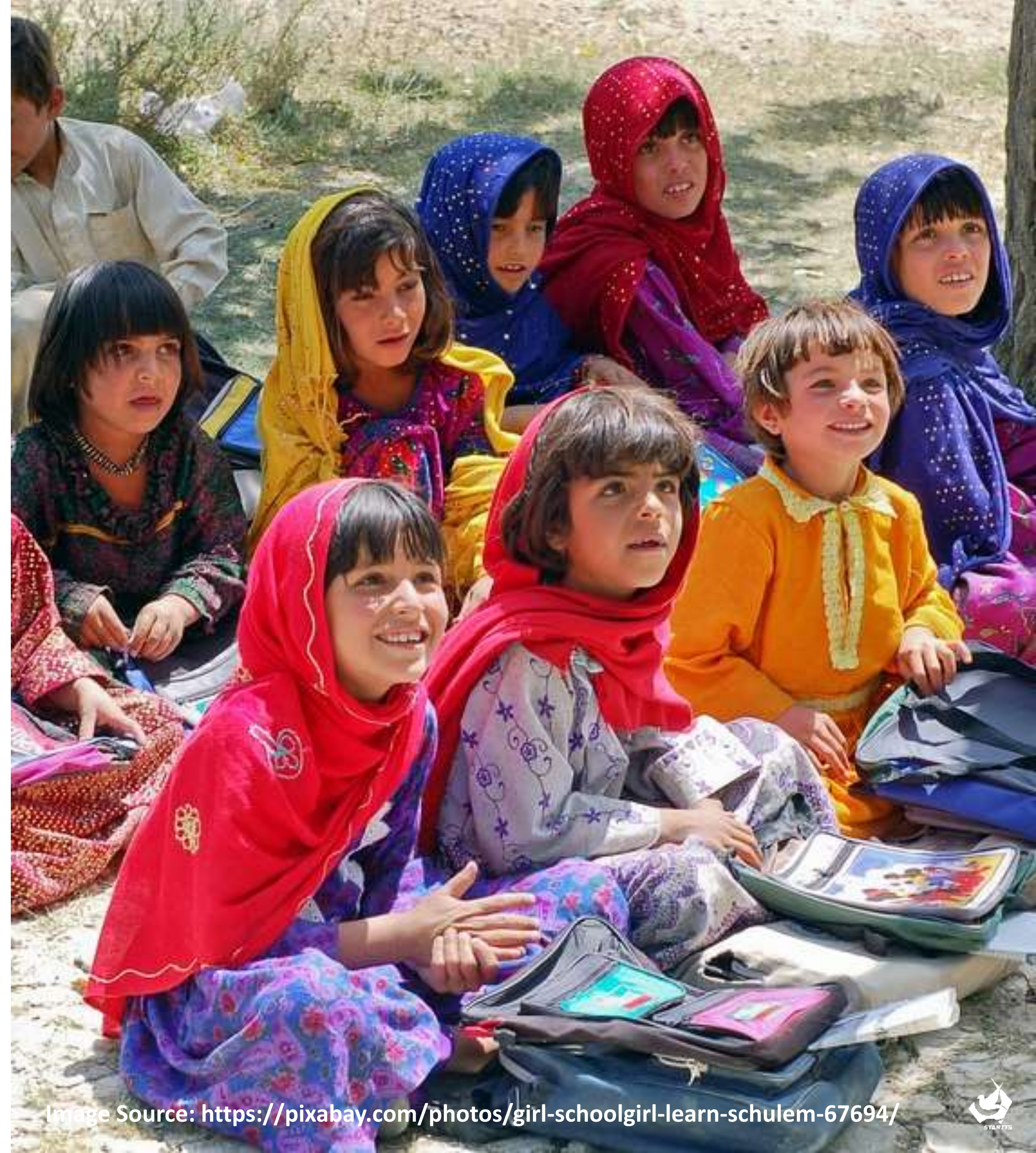
## Mainstream society and institutions

- While many Australians have sympathy towards Afghans, the current Covid situation means that priorities are different and they want the government to focus on issues in Australia.
- Impacts of Covid pandemic/ floods
- Crisis in Ukraine



# Fears

- Targeting killings by Taliban because of ethnicity and religious beliefs
- Loss of freedom under the Taliban
- Women are particularly at risk of human rights violations.
- Afghanistan will be divided into different countries along ethnic lines
- The Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered many traumatic memories, fears and concerns in the Afghan community
- Afghans are concerned that Afghanistan will be 'forgotten', again





# Feelings regarding the coalition

- Anger, resentment and disappointed because the US led invasion was pointless
- Feelings of betrayal
- Biden seized \$7 Billion of frozen funds which belongs to the Afghan people
- Feeling that history is repeating itself
- World turning a 'blind eye'
- Afghanistan soon will be a 'Forgotten' despite looming humanitarian catastrophe





# All Afghan clients at STARTTS

Historically

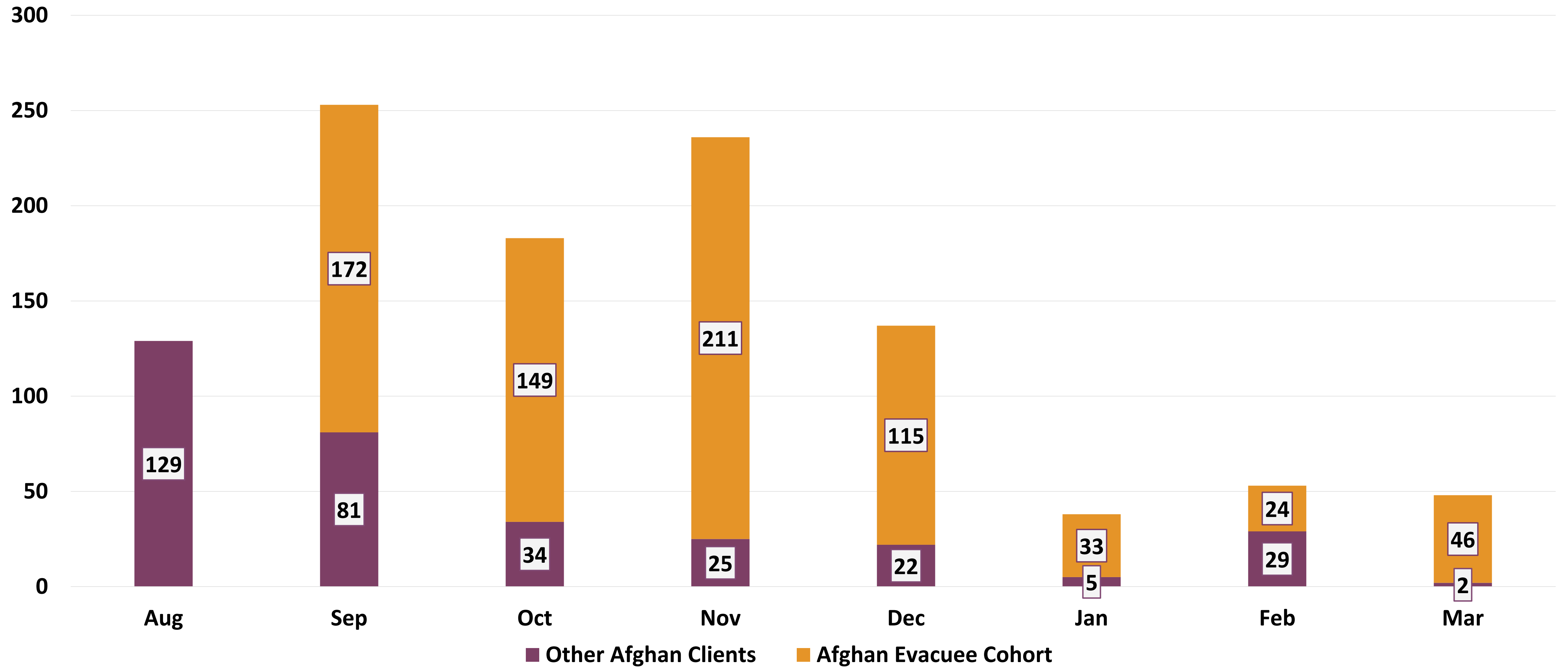
7,519

Current

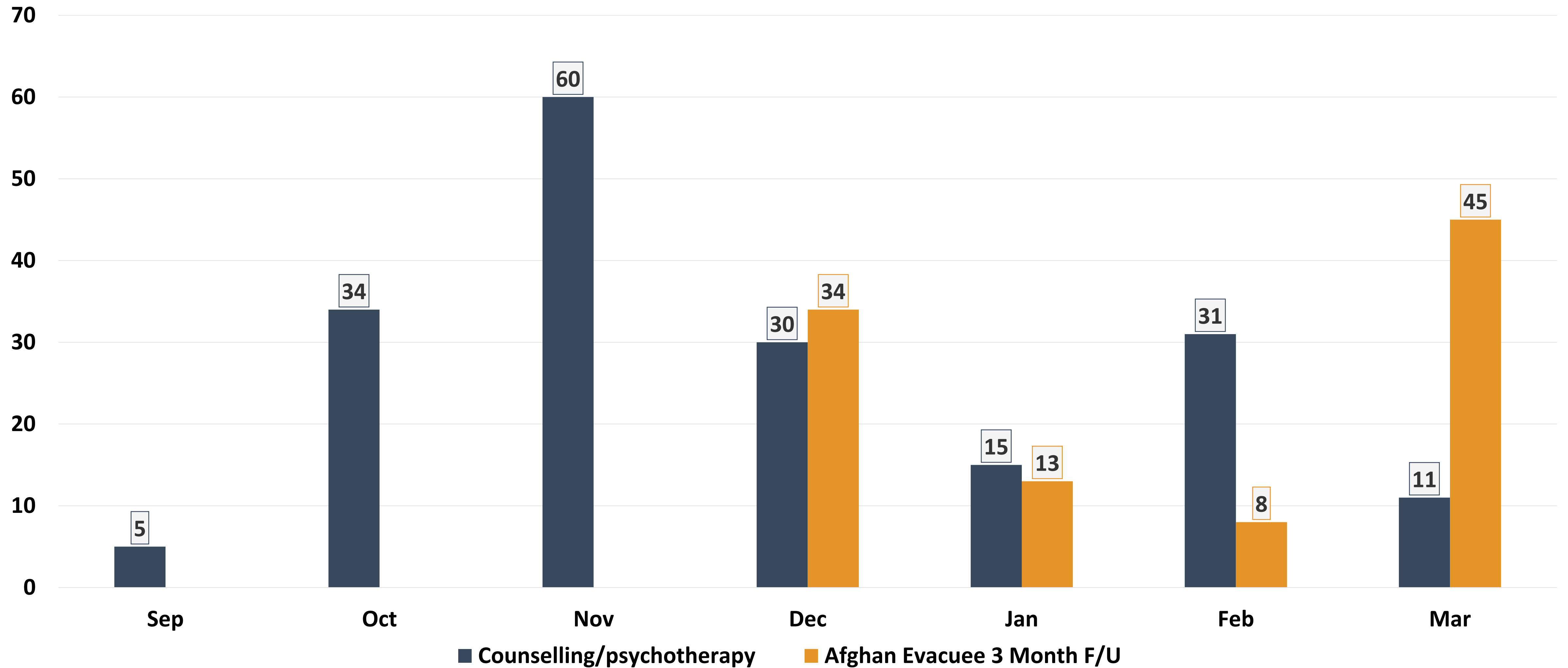
814



# Referrals to STARTTS

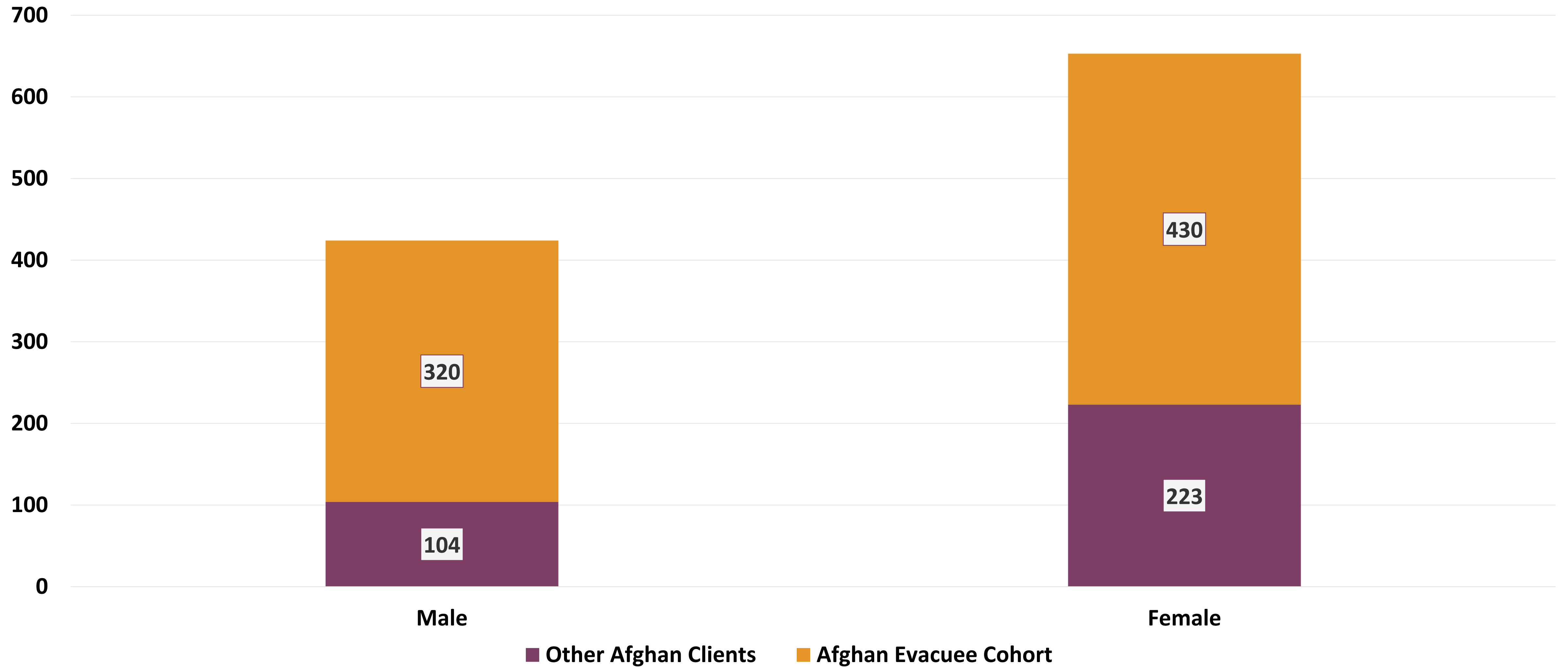


# Afghan evacuee referrals after assessment



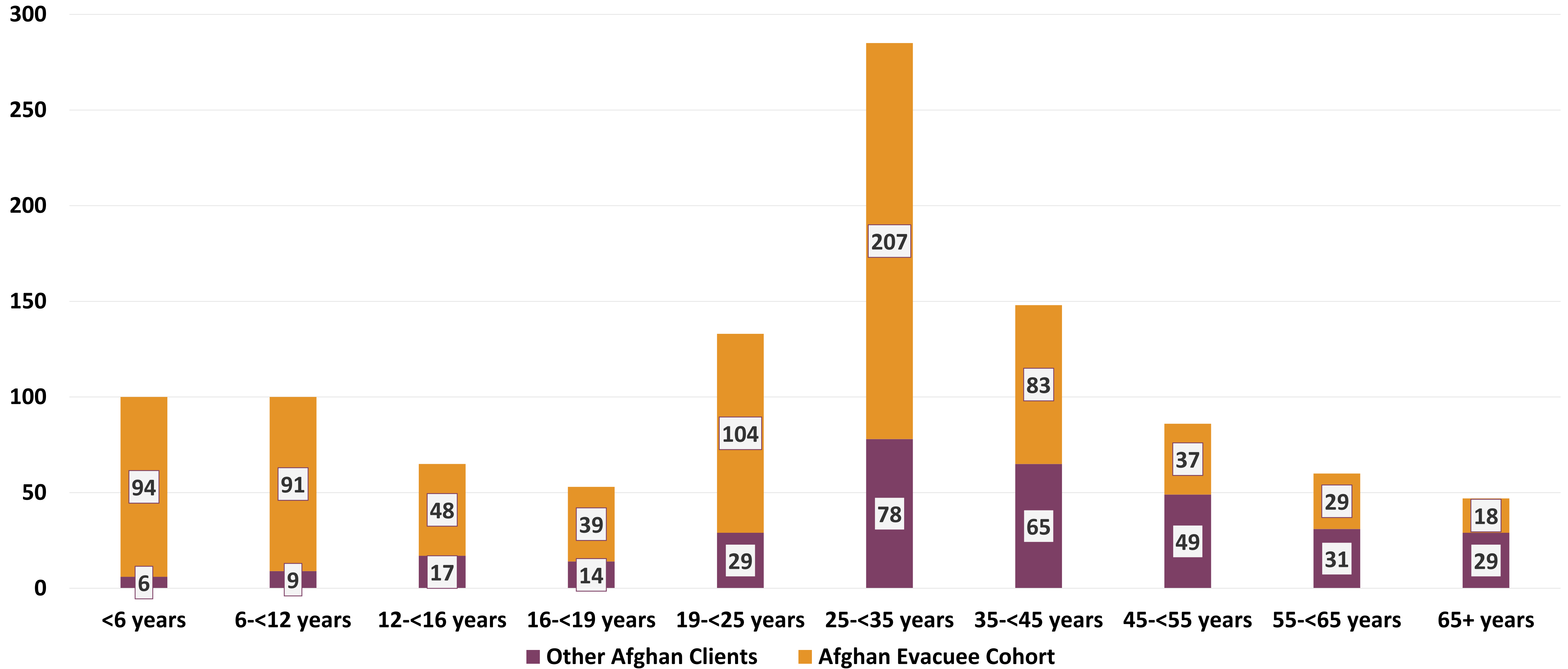


# Gender



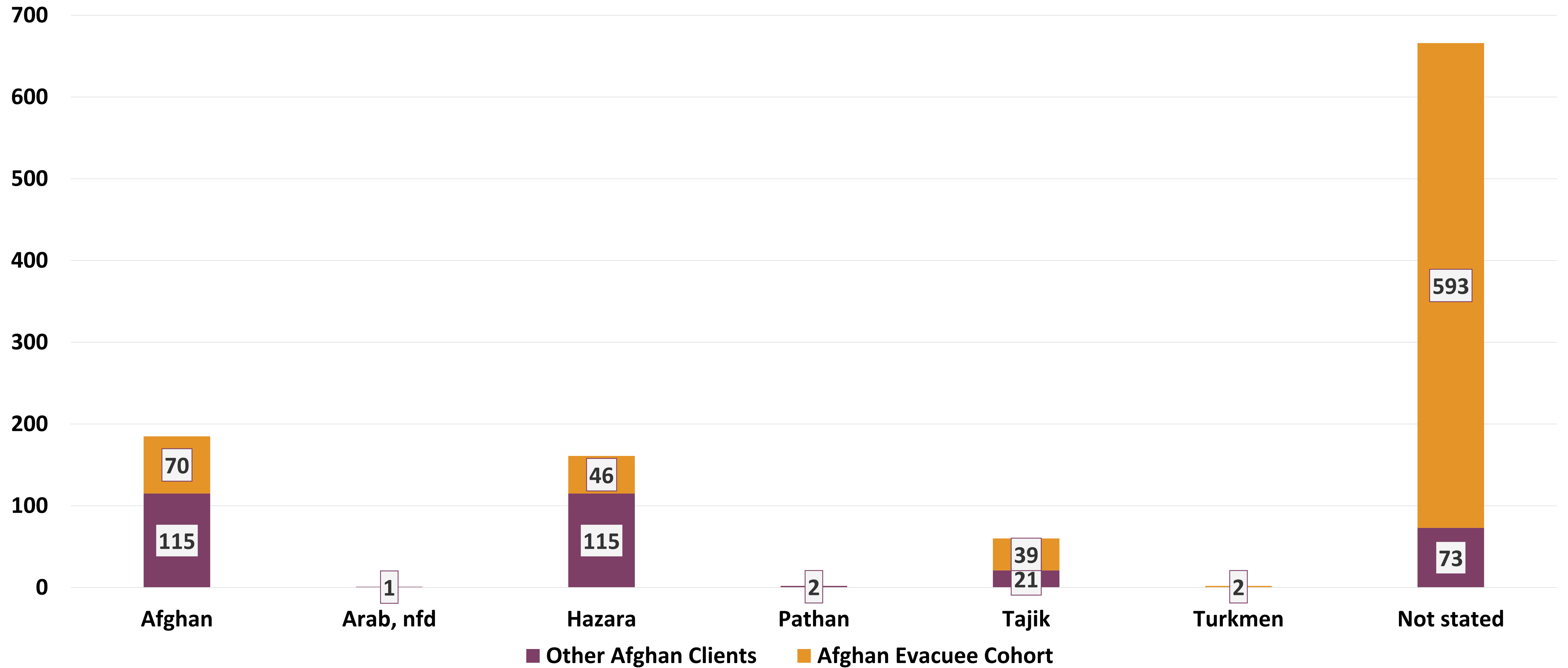


# Age group



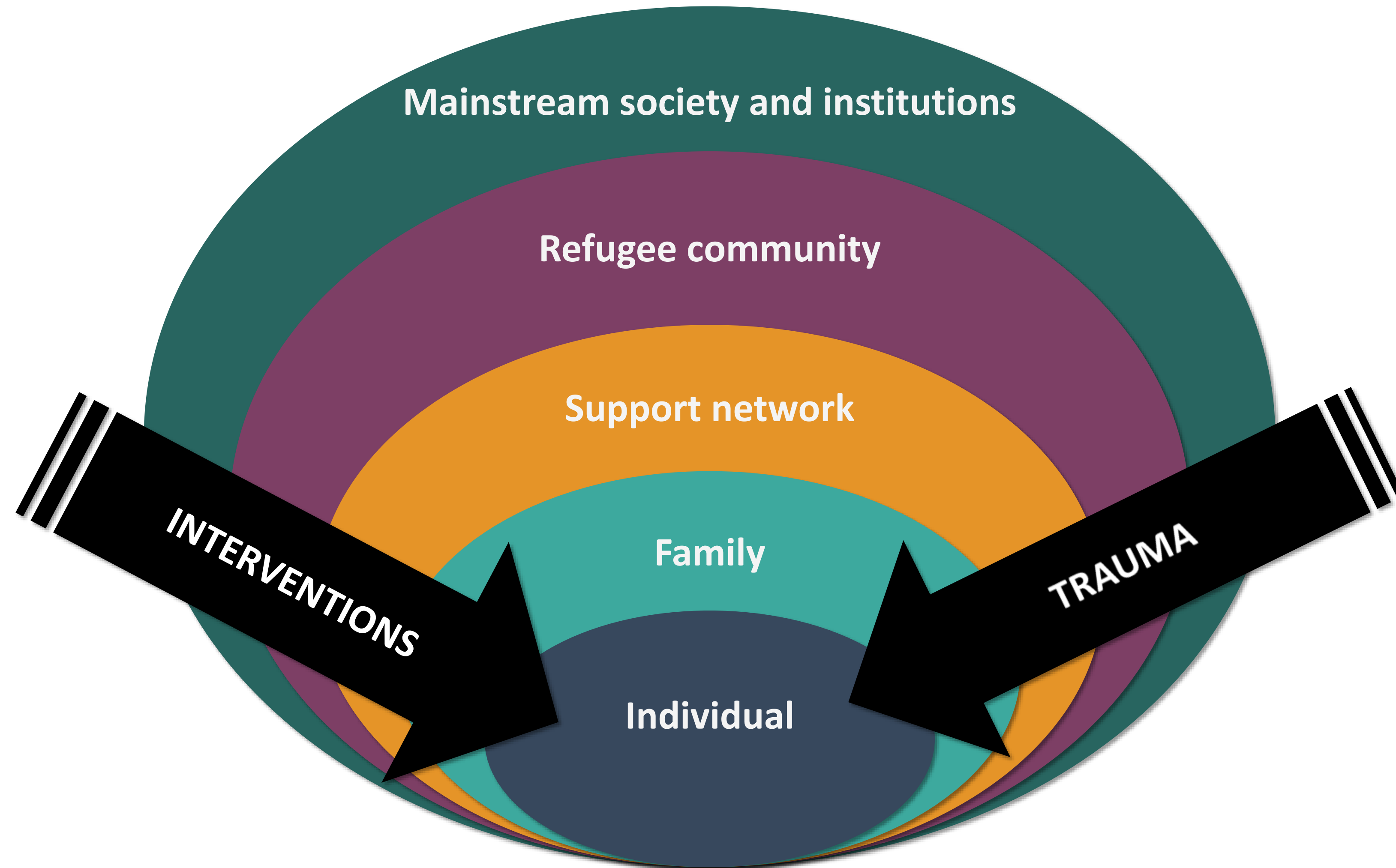


# Ethnicity





# STARTTS' holistic approaches





# Common themes

## Issues and common themes identified during assessment/screening:

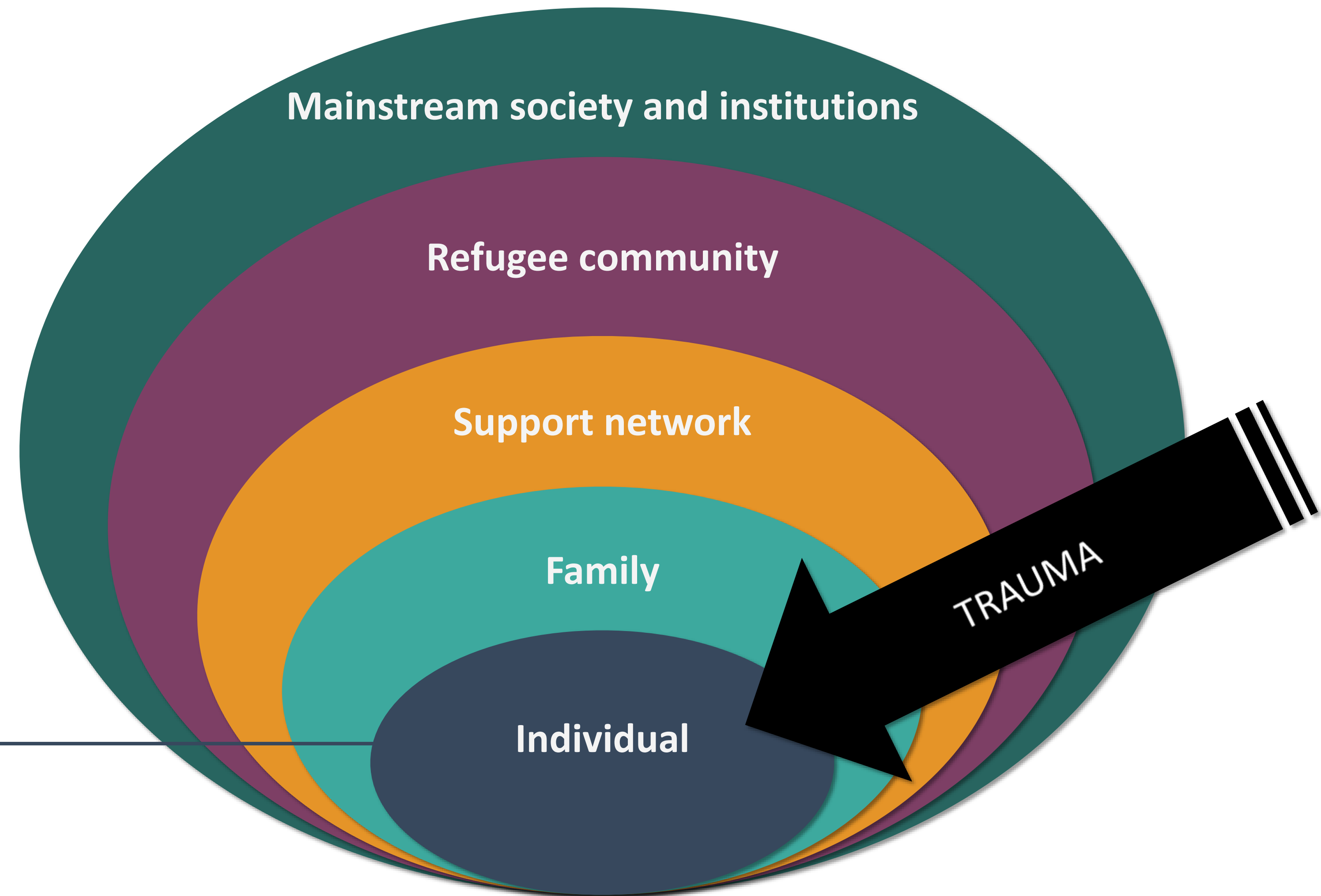
- Separated families/ family members left behind in Afghanistan
- Safety for family members in Afghanistan
- Current health and psychological issues, identified and reported
- Traumatic stories disclosed of escaping Kabul and other parts during this period
- Nightmares of the experiences and escape
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Unsure of their future – temporary visa only
- Legal/immigration questions
- Moving from short term to long term accommodation
- Issues for children and teens
- Elderly evacuees, cultural bereavement and transition period



# STARTTS' systemic interventions

## Individuals

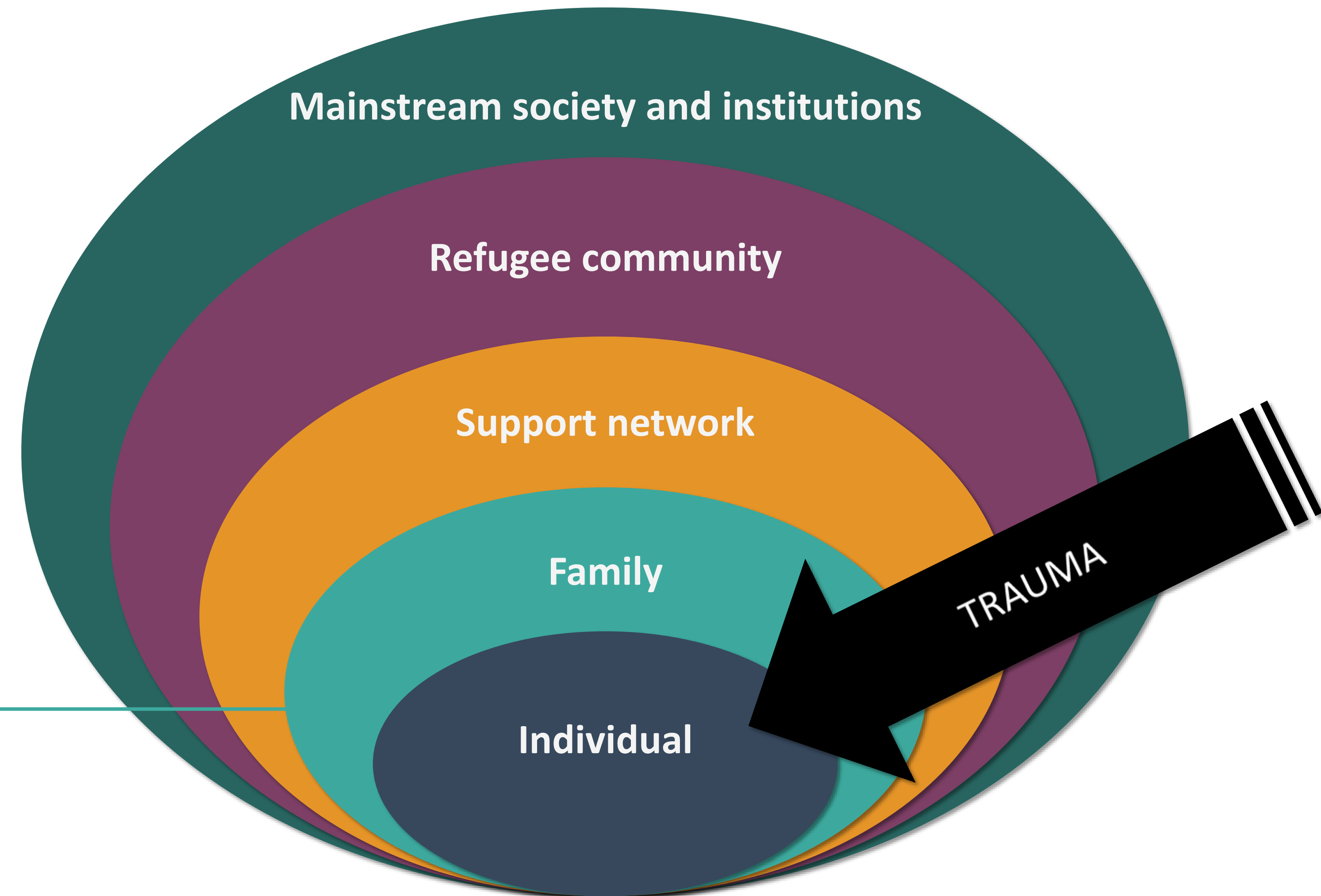
- Given priority to Afghan clients
- Assessment of Afghan clients related to Afghanistan crisis
- Psychosocial assessment of the Afghan evacuees 1-3 sessions
- Follow up in 3 months
- Referral and crisis intervention if needed



# STARTTS' interventions for families

## Family

- Assessment of families
- Counselling for individual family members
- Families in Cultural Transition (FICT)
- Debriefing, self care- for parents
- Provided psychoeducation resources for parents(Podcast in Dari)
- Referral and link-up to family support services

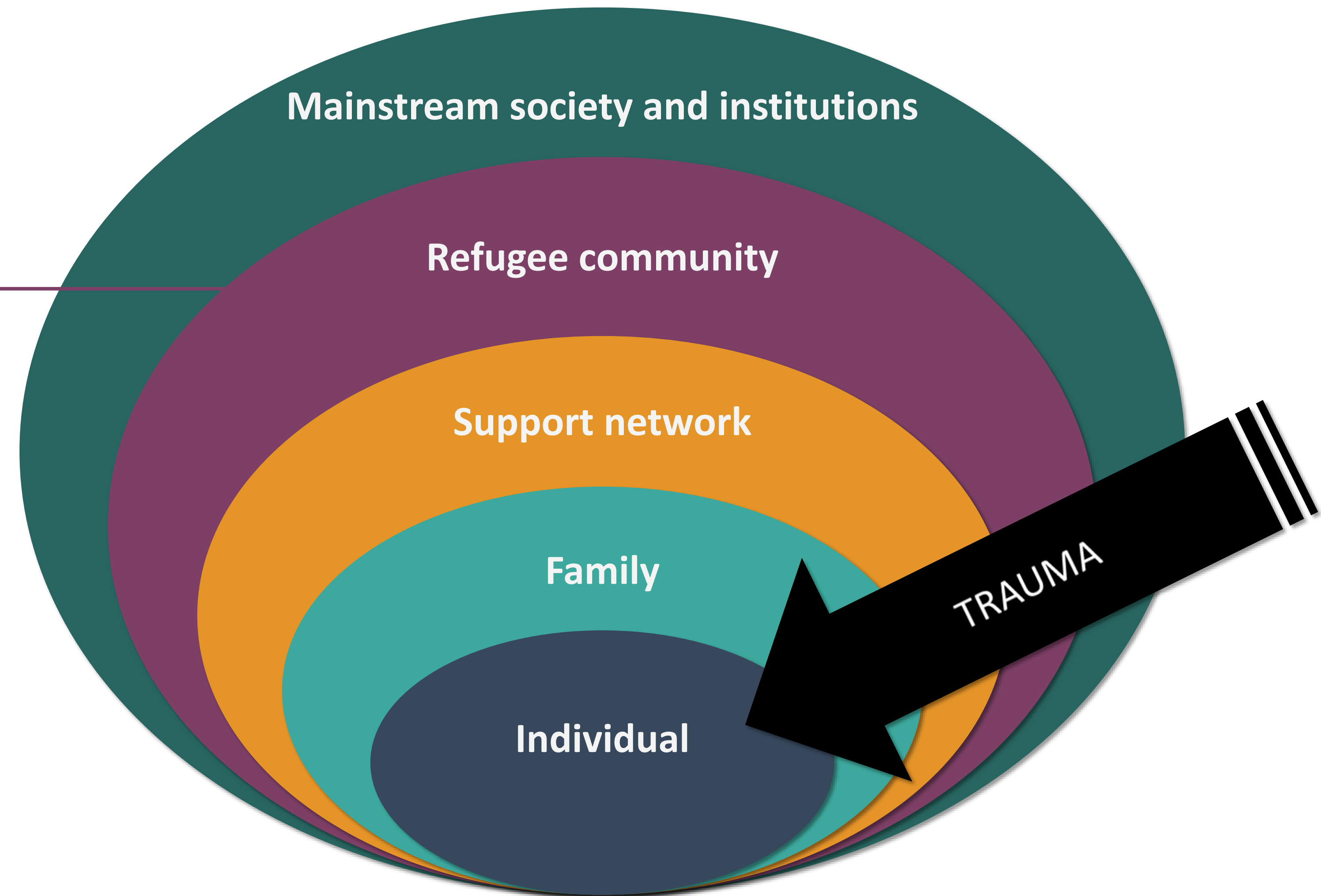




# STARTTS' systemic interventions

## Refugee community

- STARTTS has a strong foundation of working with the Afghan community
- Community consultations and partnerships
- Providing advice on organisational, media and other issues
- Assisting in processes such as strategic planning, lobbying and advocacy
- Providing links to influential people in politics, media and academia
- Trainings for community leaders



# Afghan community organisations in NSW

- Afghan Australian Noor Association
- Ariana Australian Association
- Afghan Community Support Association of NSW
- Afghan Fajar Association Incorporated (AFAIC)
- Afghan Women on the Move
- Australian Afghan Hassanian Youth Association (AAHYA)
- Australian Afghan Khorasan Association
- Bakhter Cultural Association

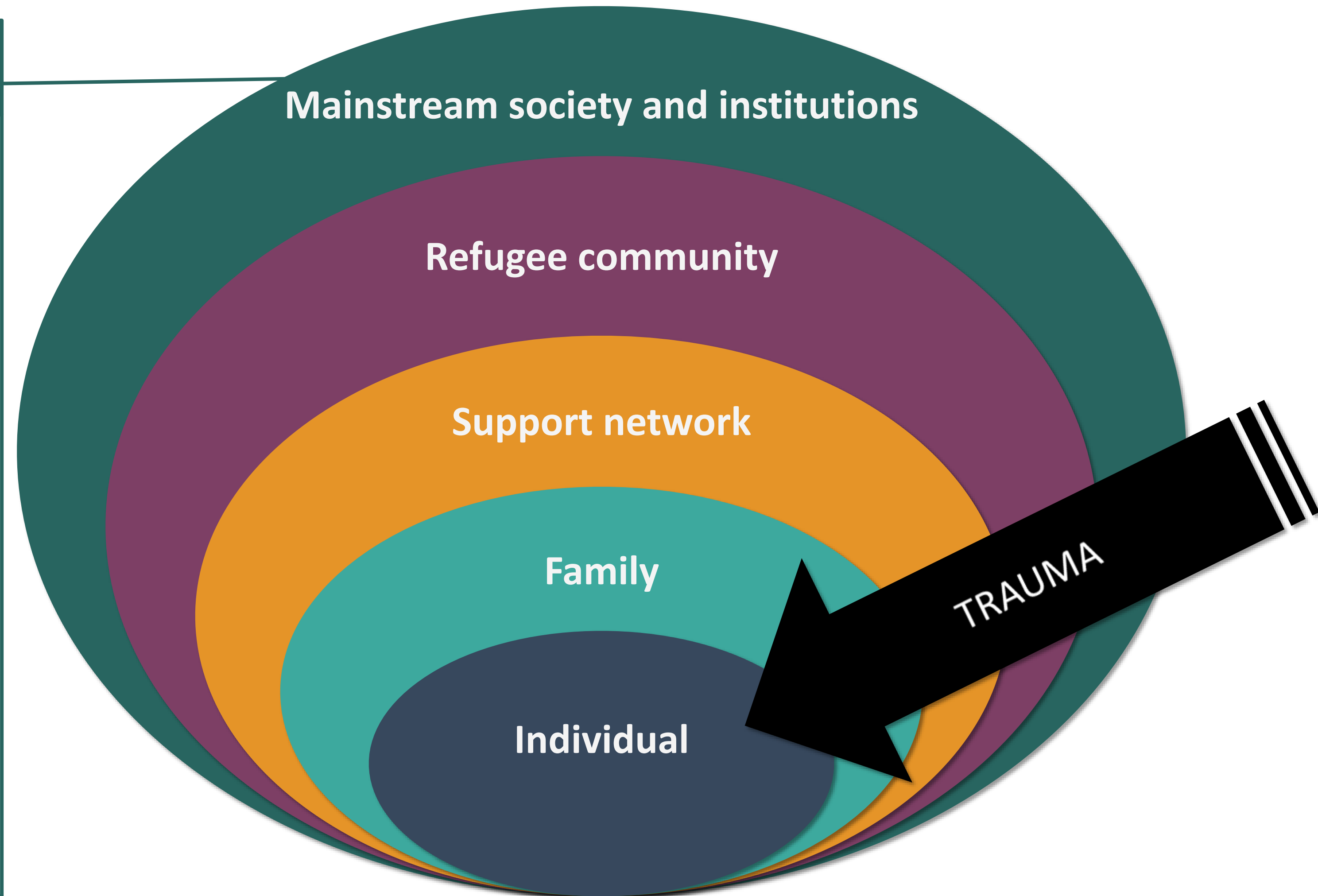
- Hazara Women of Australia Inc.
- Kateb Hazara Association Inc. Sydney
- Massoud Foundation Australia
- Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan (SAWA) Australia NSW Inc.
- Saba Group
- Sadat Welfare and Sports Association
- Human Care Welfare
- Sajjadia Islamic Centre



# STARTTS' systemic interventions

## Mainstream Society and institutions

- Working in partnership with service providers
- Working with schools/ educators/ teachers
- Working with Afghan GPs
- Providing trainings, debriefing sessions for the Red Cross
- Developing resources, e.g. Podcasts for teachers & parents, video clips
- Working with lawyers providing support and debriefing
- Providing training and debriefing for EAP staff
- Providing training and debriefing for Amnesty International staff







# In conclusion

The current crisis in Afghanistan has had significant impact on Afghan refugees residing in Australia.

Through a holistic biopsychosocial approach, STARTTS has provided support for Afghans in this difficult time at the individual, family, community and broader Australian society levels.

We are hoping that Afghanistan will not be forgotten again and traumatised Afghans receive support that they deserve.

Afghans are an incredibly resilient, proud and dignified people who are not willing to give up, even in the worst circumstances.

We trust this time will pass too, and we will see smiles again on the faces of beautiful Afghan girls.



Presented on behalf of STARTTS by

## Nooria Mehraby

Senior Clinician/ Trainer

With contributions from and thanks to STARTTS' Afghan colleagues:  
Fatana Rahimi, Khadija Saidi, Farida Rajab, Asma Naurozi, Rohullah  
Rahimi, Dr Ali Ahmadi, Arif Nabizadah and Massoud Kamal



(02) 9646 6700



[www.startts.org.au](http://www.startts.org.au)



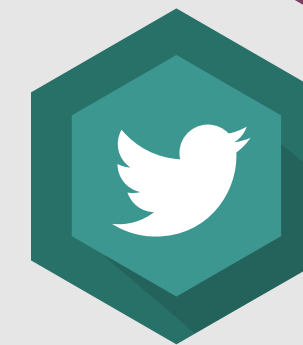
[stts-intakegeneral@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:stts-intakegeneral@health.nsw.gov.au)



[facebook.com/startts](https://facebook.com/startts)



[instagram.com/startts](https://instagram.com/startts)



[twitter.com/startts](https://twitter.com/startts)

# References

**Aroche, J, and Coello, M** (1994) Towards a Systematic Approach for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors: The Experience of STARTTS in Australia, STARTTS, Sydney

**Bowles, R & Mehraby, N** (2007a) Lost in Limbo: Cultural Dimensions in Psychotherapy and Supervision with a Temporary Protection Visa Holder from Afghanistan, in *Voices of Trauma; Treating Survivors Across Cultures*, edited by Boris, D & Wilson, JP, Springer Science New York USA

**Mehraby, N** (2014) Cross-Cultural Meaning of the Therapeutic Relationship, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 21, No. 1, November 2014, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2014) Loss, Identity and Culture in the Context of Refugee Trauma, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 20, No. 2, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2012) Lost in Translation: Idioms of Distress, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 18, No.3, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2013) Adapting Cognitive Behaviour Therapy with Non-Western Clients, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 19, No.4, Melbourne Australia



# References

**Mehraby, N** (2009) Talking Therapies, *Journal of Counsellors and Psychotherapies Association of NSW Inc*, Issue three

**Mehraby, N** (2009) Possessed or Crazy: Mental Illness across Culture?, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 15, No. 2, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2008a) Working with Diversity, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 14, No. 2, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2008b) A Survivor Story: Healing the Body, Healing the Soul, *The Psychological Medicine Newsletter*, August 2008 Sydney Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2007e) The Psychosocial Impact of the 'War on Terror' on Muslim Refugees Resettling in Western Countries: Isolation vs Integration, *Refugee Transitions*, Spring Issue, STARTTS Sydney

**Mehraby, N** (2007f) When a Loved One is Death, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 13, No. 3, May, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2005a) Suicide its Pathway, Perception and Prevention amongst Muslims, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 9, No. 2, February, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2005b) Body Language in Different Cultures, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 10, No. 24, August, Melbourne Australia

# References

**Mehraby, N** (2004a), The Concept of Self in Different Cultures, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 10, No. 24, August, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2004b) Working with Afghan Asylum Seekers, *Transcultural Nursing Review*, April, Sydney

**Mehraby, N** (2003a) Psychotherapy with Islamic Clients Facing Loss and Grief, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 9, No. 2, February, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2003b) September 11 Re-traumatisation, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 10, No. 1, November, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2003 c) Initial Assessment of a Refugee Child: Coping with Loss, *The Child Psychoanalytic Gazette*, No.14, August, Sydney Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2002a) Counselling Afghanistan Torture and Trauma Survivors, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 8, No. 3. May, Melbourne Australia. Republished, *Loss and Grief National Newsletter*, September 2002, Melbourne Australia

**Mehraby, N** (2002b) Healing the Body, Healing the Soul, *Tales from a Suite Case the Afghan Experience*, edited by Will, Dal Bosco, Melbourne, Australia.



# References

**Mehraby, N** (2002c) Unaccompanied Child Refugees: A Group Experience, *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol 8, No.4, August, Melbourne Australia. Republished in *Refugee Transitions*. Republished in *The Child Psychoanalytic Gazette*, No.14, 2002-2003 Sydney Australia

## Other sources:

Scared, hungry and cold: child workers in Kabul – picture essay

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/feb/07/scared-hungry-and-cold-child-workers-in-kabul-picture-essay>

From Taliban bullets to Russian bombs: war chases Afghan refugee across Europe

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/08/from-taliban-bullets-to-russian-bombs-war-chases-afghan-refugee-across-europe>

Afghans urge Australian government not to forget their plight amid Ukraine crisis

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/afghans-urge-australian-government-not-to-forget-their-plight-amid-ukraine-crisis/fu1d29bnc>

Afghanistan six months on from the Taliban takeover – photo essay

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/04/afghanistan-six-months-on-from-the-taliban-takeover-photo-essay>