

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into the Contribution of Migration to Australian Society

18 April 2011.

Introduction

The focus of this Inquiry coincides with my doctoral study completed in 2006. This submission will address the following Terms of Reference:

Multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation, and
Settlement and participation

The study's two research questions were:

1. what enables migrant women's capacities to act in self determination?
2. how does contact with any publicly funded infrastructure impact on self determination during resettlement.

The interviews with 30 women from 5 non-Western world regions captured the major waves of migration occurring since the inception of multiculturalism policy, namely: Lebanon, Vietnam, Philippines, Former Soviet Union, and Horn of Africa. The semi structured in depth interviews were exploratory and gave detailed understanding of how services were used during resettlement.

This study has been published in two refereed journals (Bursian 2005, Bursian 2007) and a book aimed at professional and general readership will be available this year (Bursian 2011) *Migrant Women Act*, Common Ground: Illinois, Urbana Champaign. It may be that a paradoxical strength of this study about what migrant women can do is that it is dated; indeed, the conversations took place 10 years ago and cover a period when multicultural policies and the citizenship rights that flowed to all migrants, were still largely in place. So, in 2011, this book gives insights to those willing to reflect on these issues, about the effectiveness of multiculturalism and of public services.

The key findings were that the women's social inclusion and participation as contributing citizens depended on:

- government policy which granted migrants access to publicly funded infrastructure available to all Australian citizens without stigma;
- the existence of specific multicultural policies and ethno-specific funded programs and professionals.
- These two institutional arrangements enabled women to connect with others, both Australian born and fellow migrants, in friendships and in networks of mutual support. Social policy research has long documented that social connectedness beyond the home is the primary protective factor in building and maintaining family strength (Wilkinson & Marmott 2003; Wilkinson & Pickett 2009).

The women's stories illustrate the indispensability of government policies and non-stigmatised public services in facilitating migrant women's self determination and the social participation of their families. Personal resilience needs to be complemented by structural and collective measures and supports, lest the former would risk being eroded because of the ongoing nature of the obstacles encountered by individuals (Deveson, 2003). I will provide examples of these points.

Term of Reference:

Multiculturalism social inclusion and globalisation.

The Australian policy of multiculturalism was distinguished by the granting of full citizenship rights to permanently settling immigrants, backed by governments directly funding programs for resettlement and the maintenance of cultural identity. There has been no evidence that multiculturalism policies have been ineffective in assisting migrants to become participating Australian citizens, nor in promoting the social, economic and cultural interests of Australia as a nation state. Instead, there has been consistent research showing the contribution of immigration to economic growth, productivity and to the evolution of a vibrant, diverse society.

There are many international examples that assimilationist policies create resentment and increase racially inspired violence. Europe is a case in point as it has not had multicultural policies but rather a system of guest workers, who tend not to be granted automatic citizenship rights, no matter how long they stay.

Until 2005, Australia was distinguished internationally by the absence of ghettos, lack of racially-based mass violence and co-existence of social stability with high levels of cultural diversity. This changed from 1996, when the bi-partisan discourse of multiculturalism was gradually abandoned and the public airing of racist views allowed in the name of frank debate. In 2005, the nation saw, for the first time in living memory, a mass race-based riot on Sydney's southern beaches.

Multicultural Government policies

After 16 years of assisting child after child to escape from Vietnam a Vietnamese grandmother experienced the benefits of Australian citizenship:

When I came here, I had no way to make a living and when I came here, the Australian government and people were very good to me and even supported me with my necessities, so I felt I was in heaven. Then I received social security of \$300, which increased gradually. I felt very grateful to the government ... but I never thought they would be able to sponsor me, so I am very thankful that the government enabled me to be reunited with my children ... the government here respects human rights and is very caring.

The success of Vietnamese families' social inclusion relied quite centrally on the Australian government's immigration policies of the eighties and nineties, of accepting refugees and boat people and offering them a modicum of initial support. A government perceived as compassionate, implementing social policies of universal income support and access to housing, free health care, funding of ethnic elderly clubs and migrant resource centres played a central role in elderly migrants being able to reflect with satisfaction upon a lifetime of struggle. If the Vietnamese migrants interviewed in this study would have been part of the boat people of 2002-2003, such evaluations of their life's achievements would have been compromised, if not annihilated, and Australia would have been deprived of the cultural wealth embodied by the Vietnamese diasporas.

African women were able to develop a basic sense of wellbeing primarily because Federal immigration policy allowed for family reunion, particularly based on Refugee Visas. The virtual recreation of a Lebanese village in Melbourne's Western suburbs was possible during the eighties and nineties, a time of liberal family reunion policies. The Russians who arrived later and were unable to sponsor their parents or other family members, lived against a background of sadness, particularly given that grandparents have a central role to play in the upbringing of Russian children.

Public health system

The public health system was critical in preventing personality and family disintegration. An educated and talented Eritrean community worker had a fourteen week premature baby. The infant's amazing survival affirmed the mother's life of integrity and love for humanity. The world's best medical expertise and technology was available according to need and it was virtually free. Were such services available on a user-pays basis, the child's possible death would have cast a negative pall over her immediate and extended family and may have stifled the mother's current enthusiastic contribution to Australian civil society.

Similarly, a Filipino woman was enabled to survive psychologically and emotionally due to Victoria's free educational services for her hearing impaired son, the universal public health and Transport Accident Commission resources when another son acquired permanent brain injury in a car accident and during her husband's two strokes. She named the existence of universal services, without attached stigma and to which all people had rights, as the foundations for her sense of belonging and growing identification with and loyalty to Australia as her new home. She was profoundly grateful and marvels at the civility underpinning such government and taxpayer-funded infrastructure, which she names as the foundation for her sense of belonging and loyalty to Australia. The women in this study believed that Australian governments to be very compassionate.

Income support

All families from the Horn of Africa and Russia referred to income support as the primary facilitator of their settlement. It was the indispensable basis for them to be able to work furiously at (re-)building their lives. Instead of encouraging dependency, income support prevented them from being overwhelmed by life's contingencies. Recent arrivals usually engage in a frenetic pace of work, such as punishing schedules of non-stop study of English, casual work as cleaners, children adopting responsibilities earlier than their Australian peers, lack of sleep and no holidays. Karina:

K: Without income support we wouldn't have survived. Well, it was very hard because there was not one free minute. I learnt English till 2.00 in the morning; Sergei was 6 and went to school. My daughter spoke English already.

O: It must have been lonely

K: Did not have time to feel lonely. We immediately started working.

The provision of income benefits to migrants and refugees, prior to the introduction of the two-year waiting time for non-refugee or humanitarian entrants, prevented homelessness, malnutrition, possible suicide and mental illness, criminality or activity on the black market. Research by the Welfare Rights Unit and the ACOSS presentation to the Senate Inquiry into the two-year waiting period for newly arrived migrants (Australia, 1998) indicate that these are features of life for many skilled, sponsored and even eminent international professionals, for whom arrangements with sponsors or employers break down.

Legal systems

Some women in the study defended their human rights with quiet dignity, in a modest manner. When she had learnt about the Australian legal system, industrial rights and OH&S regulations, an unassuming Filipina addressed the verbal abuse of her immediate superior by pursuing official complaints processes. After three complaints to senior management, the harassment ceased.

Free English classes: Australian Migrant Education Program (AMEP)

The availability of free 510 hours of English through the AMEP was usually the first step into interaction with the Australian community. The benefits included learning English, being with fellow migrants, talking to committed supportive teachers, having their feelings of vulnerability validated and normalised, and for the engendering of hope and vision by hearing from others that the initial hardship is time-limited and that a satisfactory life will or can ensue. Here were formed friendships and community networks with fellow migrants as well as with the Australian staff and volunteers. This initial free service gave women an experience of the alien lifeworld as a *benevolent* one, countering fearful or distorted assumptions and interpretations, encouraging more forays into the wider community. Students were usually surprised at the generosity of the service and of the genuine interest of staff. Such networks were often springboards to further education and employment.

Affordable tertiary education

Accessible tertiary educational institutions, such as Victoria's system of technical colleges (TAFE) and, less frequently, university, were one of the most positive 'hand-ups' for the women, regardless of their migration circumstances. The highly educated Africans and Russians were able to recapture some dignity by enrolling in tertiary education. A Vietnamese former lawyer was able to shift out of factory and cleaning by enrolling in the then free TAFE and then obtained university degrees. Having lost their professional status, some husbands' depression and abusive behaviour lifted when they

enrolled in the affordable university courses. These fees have increased significantly in recent years. In 2010, the cost of one semester of a TAFE subject is almost as much as a university subject, approximately \$ 1,400 – it was presented as the Victorian Government’s strategy for ‘*addressing the nation’s lack of skills*’ ...

The low cost, geographical availability and broad range of vocational offerings at TAFE enabled career changes for those blocked by the discriminatory practices of professional bodies. This signalled the resumption of dignity in line with familial cultural capital and also enabled families’ active citizenship, in various spheres enriching Melbourne’ social fabric. Affordability, again did not encourage complacency as the women worked at a furious pace, atypical of many Australian born students in my personal experience.

Only the spouse of an eminent scientist did not qualify for access to any citizenship based resources. According to visa conditions for eminent professionals, (assumed to be affluent), services were only available on a full fee basis. Even on an academic salary, these were unaffordable given the costs of housing and other living expenses. Hence she was unable to reach first base by learning English. A fiercely intelligent musician, she remained alienated from the broader society, in contrast to the other women in the study.

Term of Reference:

Settlement and participation

Intersecting community support services

The existence of a diversity of services at multiple sites at grass roots, neighbourhood, local government and regional levels operated as a web of synchronous stepping stones, which women could use according to need and at times for benefits which were not part of formal organisational goals. The Australian community services workforce is subject to frequent criticism, as well as scrutiny by Treasury officials keen to trim duplication. The women gave evidence of the benefits derived from their contacts with the universal Maternal and Child Health Nursing Service, community development workers, social workers in Family Support agencies, Neighbourhood Houses, ethno-specific workers, Migrant Resource Centres and employment counsellors at local labour market programs, all of these government-funded services. Contact for these particular women radically released them from dysfunctional patterns and enhanced their capacities to act for themselves.

An ethno-specific Lebanese community development worker ran women's groups at the local neighbourhood house, facilitating the reversal of several abusive domestic situations, with mothers' increased resilience resonating in their children's development. I heard similar narratives about the effectiveness of Maternal and Child Health nurses, local government employees, social workers, and other community services staff whose efforts are not often publicly endorsed.

Linda, a clinically depressed, suicidal Filipina gained access to treatment only when her mother, benefitting from the family reunion policy, broke the Asian taboo of saving face, by alerting the local Maternal and Child Health nurses. Ill again when her second child was born, the nurses referred her a free stay-in hospital for mothers and new babies with early settling difficulties. A team of social workers' authoritative interventions led to positive changes in the marital relationship. At a time when Local Government had its own family and counselling units, the couple had counselling for approximately three years, which was then a free service, prior to the mass privatisation of public services in Victoria during the mid-nineties. There is now a quota on free sessions in the much diminished welfare system. This woman is now a community development professional and is creating nurturing and supportive neighbourhoods for local children.

All the African and Vietnamese women relied for some time on public housing. The much maligned high-rise estates are the fulcrum of lively, supportive communities for these refugees, in spite of the dysfunctional effects of some other tenants' substance abuse and criminality and, indeed, the often poor amenities available in those estates. It is worth noting also that almost all the women in the study relied upon ethno-specific services of various kinds, including the wealthiest English speakers.

My argument is illustrated particularly saliently through the story of a community development professional, Esther. The reverberations of South Sudanese Esther's growth are of inestimable social, cultural and economic value with likely positive implications for the next few generations. South Sudanese refugee children and young people who have never been to a school at all exhibit unruly behaviours viewed with alarm by teachers and professionals who can apply clinical labels of dysfunction. Esther facilitated mutual understanding and communication between her community and schools, educating parents about educational expectations in Australia. The liaison and community education roles of ethno-specific professionals like Esther are most effective in enabling the integration of communities and avoiding such stark problems as the predominance of some groups of youth from CALD backgrounds in the correctional system. She has established South

Sudanese playgroups in local venues, systematically defusing fears that women's participation in public spaces will lead to family breakdown. Her community leadership as a role model has opened the way for many other South Sudanese girls and women to study and connect with the broader community. Government investment into the one place Esther occupied in the AMEP, has translated into a positive cost-benefit ratio far beyond the usual standards of accounting.

Labour market programs

Linda reconnected with her natural resourcefulness and initiated her own re-entry into the labour market; using the Local Council directory, she found out about the Australian training and labour market programs, which have now been privatised. She obtained her first job through the support of JobShare, and the second by attending the freely available SkillShare, providing one-on-one support on a needs basis. This help enabled her to fill a prestigious locum position. The boost to her self-esteem propelled her into a permanent career pathway. Being useful to the country which provided the services that were there for her has been key to Linda feeling at home in Australia. At the end of the interview, when asked what sense she made of her life, she commented on having wasted a lot of time while she was depressed for nine years. This really lifted when she accessed labour market programs enabling her to work in the public arena. Notably, she was in contact with the local community, had women friends and an active social life. Participation in the workplace was releasing, because she experienced Australians listening to her, dispelling the private fears of being part of a despised minority. This successful engagement in the public sphere was essential for her successfully developing a position and identity within the context of a diasporic life.

Impact of poor or non-existent professionals services

The absence of useful or quality supports left some women in pointless treadmills or actually blocked the attainment of what they needed; a lack of skills amongst professionals to address the barriers faced by migrants was the key factor.

The privatised JobNetwork system had pleasant staff but kept referring a Filipino nurse to factory positions because 'she had no local experience'. The evidence suggests a very minimalist level of service, with no information about the available bridging courses for overseas nurses, no effort in investigating options for a nurse with full English fluency, no advice about other study options nor about interview techniques with Australian employers who expect assertive self promotion, compared to the self-effacing norm of civilised Asian people. She saw an advertisement for a course in Aged Care Support at the local TAFE by accident and was then able to change careers.

Settlement and Participation: Community connectedness

The first pre-requisite for participation was to use unstigmatised general and ethno-specific public services and the second factor required for living a life with a modicum of wholeness and fulfilment was to be connected with a community. The women from the countries of the Horn of Africa and many Lebanese and Vietnamese attributed their feelings of being settled happily to having their extended families here with them. The Russians, here without grandparents or other close relatives, lived with a continued sense of grief and of not being whole.

Connections with one's ethnic community

It is well documented that ethnic groups are powerful in enabling their (new) members to reconnect with their pre-migration identities and there is no need to expand further here. All recently arrived Russians referred to the importance of being surrounded by fellow Russians in warding off deep depression.

Connecting with the Australian community

Women spoke about the 'springboard' back into a sense of integrity as whole personalities provided through Australian neighbours, teachers, service providers or volunteers who became personally involved and became friends.

Success in study was usually excruciatingly difficult for women whose English was less than fluent. Here, the personal, voluntary engagement by Australian teachers and student counsellors or volunteers with the daily agonies of the students, were the indispensable stepping stones, without which the women would have 'drowned'. Such kindnesses served to reverberate throughout the lives of women as being accepted by a new community of different but caring people.

Participating Australian citizens: Regaining one's sense of mission

Several of the very energetic women became key persons in their communities to whom people could go for help. Women whose lives had previously centred on the service of others were able to surmount the difficulties of settlement by resuming their lifelong personal projects as women dedicated to causes beyond their own families. The crux of suffering for several related to being cut off from opportunities where they might resume pursuits which were intrinsically meaningful and above the pursuit of economic or material comfort. As Deen (1995:74), again, suggests:

We don't have "privacy" as the Westerners know it ... It is not a precious commodity with us ... Some will jump to the conclusion that the individual becomes less important in our tradition. Not so! But the individual cannot survive without the group.

The politically active and educated Horn of Africa women were able to resume their normal means of self expression as intellectual and moral leaders in local communities. All of the women who had participated in the affordable university or TAFE systems, enacted their citizenship by transforming negative Australian cultural spaces, such as on public transport, by befriending their detractors and in the process decreasing racist assumptions. The geographically isolated, equally educated and politically committed Teresa, spent many years in depression prior to finding fellow Filipina activists. She named her involvement in this advocacy group as her chief source of fulfilment, despite ongoing family tragedies. She now plays a key role in the local public school and other neighbourhood activities.

Participation & Employment opportunities

Highly educated Eritrean women acted immediately to regain their professional lives. Gaining entry into primary labour market jobs spared women the waste of time and debilitating loss of confidence most migrants endure as they seek to claw their way into mainstream of society. Obtaining a position in Local Government within a few months after her arrival, gave an African woman the opportunity to travel interstate to a national local government conference. In contrast to the deference developed by most migrant women through prolonged experiences of marginalisation, this role enabled her to resume her normal functioning at the level of self-actualisation through dedication to the betterment of society. Self-expression as a social advocate constituted for many a lifelong source of meaning and energy for rising above adversity and beyond mere survival.

Some women were actively transforming workplace cultures. In her first job in a large corporation a Filipina was subject to racist taunts and bullying. She rationalised that people are victims of media distortions and as the only Asian person in a large workforce, she needed to take responsibility for the process of breaking down stereotypes. She implemented a range of strategies including not keeping grudges and projecting a persona of integrity, even in the face of unjust treatment. She ended up having 'a really good time there'. She expresses awareness of the self-reinforcing dynamism of racism and of relationship-building and urges other Filipinas to open up to Australians. Many of the women who felt positively settled were drawing on their cultural backgrounds to build community capacity, a new goal for Australian governments, but a way of being for people from the world regions represented in the study.

The Russian women practised the least engaged citizenship. The most contented citizens have been able to surround themselves with their extended families. This issue with Russians may constitute a valuable piece of research.

Conclusion

At the time of the interviews, during 1999-2000, there were 32 MRCs nationally, providing information, a cost-free migration agent service, community education, community development programs and support groups for women, young people and the elderly and professional casework support. The MRCs were managed by locally elected CALD community and professional representatives. The total funding for such integration support was only \$31 million (Department of Immigration & Indigenous Affairs, 2001). In 2006, these services were tendered out on a fully commercial basis, with funding withdrawn for core organisational functions. Large “mainstream” welfare agencies, such as national church-based charitable organisations, often capture this funding due to their financial critical mass but lack the relevant expertise, experience and social context.

In 2011, many of these affordable and geographically accessible supports have been reduced or de-funded; as a result of ongoing budget cuts eligibility criteria for access to many services by migrants have been considerably narrowed. After 5 years’ residence, they cannot use the services of a Migrant Resource Centre, the Australian community having seemingly accepted that “*we cannot afford it anymore*”. The cost of detentions centres in 2002-2003 had jumped exponentially to \$800 million (DIMIA 2003), with unknown evidence about the national benefits of such enormous expenses. The narratives of the women’s lives and achievements show me that *there is no alternative* to having an adequate welfare system in place with the requisite responses to the variety and specificity of people’s needs and rights.

Nevertheless, Australia is not generally perceived as an “El Dorado”; indeed, as part of their creative self-determination, a minority of the women were practising trans-national citizenship. Although few of the Russian women spoke about this, such practice will, in the future, include more Russians, who, once they have established themselves financially, are known to sojourn periodically back home where they often develop commercial ventures with links to the Australian market. Mulki Al-Sharmani (2006) discusses Somali women who, having become citizens of Western countries, construct their lives by regular sojourns in their countries of origin or elsewhere to take the opportunities for work, family and community life which suits them most. She argues that such strategies are used to resist and renegotiate a range of oppressions, including escaping racist and

subordinate positions assigned to them in labour markets, to renegotiate aspects of their culture which compromises their sense of competent agency and to avail themselves of opportunities for greater dignity and future security.

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