

**MCHW Points of Departure Project: Forum
2009**

***Building Capacity to advocate for immigrant
and refugee women***

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***‘The Personal is Political: the social
significance of belonging for immigrant and
refugee women in Australia’****

**Wednesday 8 April 2009
Richmond Town Hall**

Overview:

 **Migrant and Refugee women**

 **The *personal is political***

 **The social significance of *belonging***

 **Suggestions for the way forward**

 **Summary and Conclusions**

Context:

✍️ My research is grounded in critical Black feminist perspectives which aim to reveal the multiple subjectivities - primarily of women of *visible* difference - with a view to *disrupting* notions of whiteness and Blackness, and

✍️ To move towards new ways of conceiving difference outside of oppositional positions – to find new ways of acknowledging difference for all our subjectivities.

✍ It is not about creating more hierarchies of oppression/victim, but recognising that we all have multiple selves

✍ By revealing visible migrant and refugee women's experiences, and some of the many ways in which our multiple subjectivities intersect in complex and often simultaneously contradictory ways will be highlighted and better understood.

Critically, this presentation will begin to explore the importance of understanding the significance of developing and maintaining a *sense of belonging* in Australia for visible migrant and refugee women.

My central question today then is:

How can you ***belong*** when you **standout**, especially when ***difference*** is *visible* and is embedded in a context of ***Otherness?***

Migrant and Refugee women

- ✍ The plight of migrant and refugee women in Australia is under-researched
- ✍ Who are we? Naming *visibility*
- ✍ Seen as homogenous fixed entities - we are not
- ✍ Our experiences highlight a multiplicity of identities which constantly shift and are negotiated...
- ✍ Amid the continual prevalence of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination within Australian society and at times, also within our own communities

The personal is political

✍️ The feminist mantra – *the personal is political* explores the notion that women's personal lives are constructed in such a way that makes them political – for migrant and refugee women their personal lives are always the subject of public and political scrutiny

✍️ Any distinction between the public and private has always been blurred...you just need to think about women's bodies in terms of reproduction, or dress for example – both are highly political.

✍ The multiplicity of migrant and refugee women's experiences tends to be under-researched both in terms of academic and policy circles, though new research is steadily emerging.

✍ Further, when migrant and refugee women are the focus, the tendency has been to focus on narrow, binary and fixed conceptions of difference - which creates hierarchies of difference.

✍ For migrant and refugee women (and indeed for all women and men), our identities are not fixed or easily separated – they are *polyvocal*

✍ Our identities are constantly shifting, dynamic, resisted, negotiated, contradictory and complex and as such they are continually shaped by social forces which inevitably makes them political

✍ This does not mean that all visible migrant and refugee women experience belonging in a one-dimensional way – like many other migrant and host communities, *visible* migrant and refugee women reflect a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences

✍ But we have more than one point of connection, as individuals and groups - we all have multiple selves, and yet discussions about belonging (especially from a migrant/refugee perspective) still tend to prioritise the view that we should focus on fitting into a set of commonalities, which often marginalise rather than recognise or celebrate differences and diversities

The social significance of belonging

- ✍ Belonging is an important human need
- ✍ It's a key way in which we can and do feel valued
- ✍ Many migrants and refugees, especially visible ones, find it difficult to fully belong
- ✍ Accordingly, for many, there is a huge distinction between living in Australia and *feeling* Australian
- ✍ Perceptions of what it is to be Australian typically remain focused on Anglocentric cultures where whiteness is implicit and unnamed.

✍️ Women seen as key agents of socialisation – ensuring and reflecting culture – but problematic in that culture is often viewed as static and for many women as reinforcing conservative roles, restricting our potential to belong

✍️ There is a tension between trying to hold onto cultures of origin for fear of losing an important sense of self and community in new country

✍️ Yet many migrants and refugees can, and do, deal simultaneously with cultures of origin and arrival

Harris and Williams (2003) – *‘belonging is conditional on adherence to ‘the Australian way’ (p216)...*

✍ However, it should be noted that concepts of belonging, also assumes that one has to belong in a specific way –According to the DIAC website - *‘Settlement’ is the process of adjustment you experience as you become established and independent in Australia. Not the host society...*

✍ To be accepted should be seen as a form of mutual exchange, not toleration of cultures as some aspects of multiculturalism infer.

✍ When our sense of belonging is questioned, it seriously de-stabilises our notions of Self and acts as a critical marker of difference – *difference as Other*...and exclusion

✍ The question of belonging then, is a highly complex one for all peoples, but it is particularly a constant and uneasy one for all migrants and refugees – who are conventionally configured as outsiders

✍ In Australia, (as elsewhere) this may be further complicated for migrants and refugees who are *visibly* different and for women

✍ In Australia, there are formal policies and practices – which in theory allow for the acceptance and equal treatment of women from all backgrounds - but this fails as women's multiple positions are usually overlooked

✍ In practice, at the formal or informal level, migrant and refugee women feel as if they do not belong - our gender, racial, ethnic and other subjectivities are not regarded as the norm – we are constantly seen as outsiders whose presence is always questioned and under scrutiny

Suggestions for the way forward

✍ We need to reveal and explore the range of subjectivities of migrant and refugee women in ways which acknowledge rather than essentialise differences

✍ We need to understand the mutual benefits of belonging as a constant form of dialogue & exchange

✍ We need to engage with new definitions of Australianness – one that really allows for multiplicity and moves away from binary notions

There are glimmers of hope – new projects emerging locally and nationally which for now have to tackle the immediate everyday issues of social exclusion of visible exclusion of migrants and refugees –

More needs to be done and more critically and fundamentally, a new *moral* imagination needs to be recast to reconfigure the ways in which the issue of Otherness, visible or otherwise does not constrain the enormous potential of all peoples and our multiple selves.

Identities are complex, and to be fully understood requires an understanding of multiplicity rather than essentialism. This involves a new vocabulary, which emphasises the dynamic nature of identity and its constant changing locations. This will allow for a more accurate analysis of the similarities and differences between all peoples and hopefully for a more enlightened vision for society and until then, more relevant and targeted programmes for those excluded but also those in the majority

Conclusions:

The brief here in this presentation was to begin an open and public dialogue with other researchers, policy-makers and activists, in which the significance of visible migrant and refugee women's *sense of belonging* in Australia can be examined, and to answer the central question outlined earlier today:

How can you ***belong*** when you **standout**, especially when ***difference*** is *visible* and embedded in a context of ***Otherness?***

This paper is part of an ongoing exploration of visible migrants and refugees in rural and regional Australia and will be investigated in detail in a forthcoming study. If you would like further details, please contact:

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