

Working Well

WORKING WOMEN'S HEALTH NEWSLETTER
JUNE 2003



in this issue
immigrant women celebrate
their lives, experiences,
and achievements

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This Newsletter focuses on celebration.

What does celebration mean for immigrant women? How does it improve or detract from our health and wellbeing?

Certainly, celebration is something we all do in some form or other—it makes us different from each other because we all have different celebrations, but it simultaneously brings us together. We attend each other's celebrations, share stories about them, and we enhance our understanding of each other through these exchanges.

No matter what time of the year we find ourselves, there is likely to be some kind of celebration taking place. Celebrations of faith and tradition take place all year round—Eid, Chinese New Year, Christmas, Saints' Days—these are all times for immigrant women to take stock, gather our loved ones around, cook special foods, dance, chat, laugh, and enjoy each other's company. Name days, birthdays, festivals, parades—all are special times to simply enjoy and renew.

These are the events and activities that immediately come to mind—but what else do we as immigrant women celebrate?

We celebrate our friendships and family connections—childbirth, when a new life is welcomed into the world; when we find ourselves falling in love; when as immigrant and refugee women, we are joyfully reunited with loved ones reluctantly left behind when we followed our own paths to a strange country.

We celebrate peace—when our countries and cities are harmonious, safe and free of threat, and when we find ways of living together with equality, dignity, and respect.

We celebrate when our marginalised communities have the opportunity to thrive—to speak our languages; to develop our art, theatre, music, and literature; to foster political debate; to recognise and develop our diversity within.

We celebrate our diversity—our capacity to sit across from each other in our differences, enjoying and welcoming (rather than fearing) our class, ethnic, sexuality, age, ability, faith, and cultural differences.

dr adele murdolo
executive director
working women's health

This Newsletter began as a response to global events which emphasised the divisions between people and the consequences of these divisions.

Everywhere we looked the word 'immigrant' or 'refugee' had a negative connotation, the news was always grim. This issue of *Working Well* decided to take the 'opposing' view and celebrate immigrant women's ability to communicate across differences.

We also wanted to present terms like 'immigrant' and 'refugee' in a positive way, emphasising the success, strength, contributions, and talents of immigrant and refugee women.

We chose the theme of celebration because celebrating is something that brings all women together. Celebrating (our) culture, identity, faith, ethnicity, tradition, sexuality, and achievement (to name a few things women celebrate), has a positive impact on our health and wellbeing.

You'll find the pieces that follow underscore the fact that celebration crosses major divides including—generation, culture, faith, sexuality, and geography.

There are stories here about food, identity, immigration, adapting, family, art, new beginnings, strength, (mutual) learning, connection, contemplation, visibility, activism, and health.

There are voices from immigrants and refugees and their children's voices. Stories that are in the present, some of distant past, others somewhere in between; they come from many different backgrounds—chinese, italian, croatian, vietnamese, greek, macedonian, somali, arabic, thai, persian, indian, eritrean, chilean, korean.

Hopefully what will strike you is that within this diversity is the capacity of women to share our differences, to learn from the things that make us and our cultures unique.

Differences can bring people together—to share, to make positive change.

It is in reality a strong connector—a fact that urgently needs to be remembered and acted upon now, more than ever before.

anna volpe
publications and promotions coordinator
working women's health



the views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of wwh

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celebrate...a new home,



celebrating a new home: experiences of an immigrant macedonian woman

You arrive in Australia with one suitcase, a heart full of dreams, anticipation, and a little fear. Anticipation for what the future will hold; dreams of beginning a new life—of adventure, hope, and success; fear of being without the links to family or community; of having to find these in a new foreign land, a land that you will make your own—one day...

You make a living. How hard it is. No language or friends, no understanding of this new world and its Western ways. 'Home is where the heart is', so they say, but it takes a long time for the heart to forget about the homeland.

Our Macedonian heritage teaches us the home is important for family, for establishing roots, to belonging, to feeling safe. So we buy a home. We have very little. I look back on our humble beginnings—one plate, one bowl, one fork and one spoon each for mother and father. Small replicas of these for baby.

We celebrate our new home in the traditional way. We invite a priest to 'osveti'(bless) our house. To rid it of any bad energies, to give us as we believe a clear path with the presence of God in our new home. We welcome friends, some from our homeland, some from the new country. Friends from our homeland remember the centuries old traditions and bring 'pogacha' (bread) as a house-warming gift. Friends from the new country bring small gifts of household items. We celebrate. Celebration of not just a new house, but of a new home. Celebration of belonging. Celebration of a new life. Celebration of the courage to venture into an unknown world and to make it your own.

**by menka karadovski
experiences of migration
as told by her mother cveta**

and new beginnings

I first stepped foot onto this
red, hot continent of ours in 1967.

I'd learnt about Australia and its way of life back home in Croatia. When I arrived I realised it was going to be very hard, but in my heart I felt peace, because I knew this would be a new beginning in my life. Back home in Croatia, life was very hard and completely different, but I felt I was prepared for God's challenges. When I arrived I was most fortunate to be taken from the Bonegilla camp and helped by the Croatian community in Melbourne to find a job and a place to live.

Through all these years I have come to realise that each new step is not as easy as it may first seem. I have met many different people through work, friends, church, and different communities. My love for my family and friends, has made my life one where I believe if you stay positive, with a good outlook, good health will follow.

My best memories come from my family and from working with the Australian Croatian Women's Association 'Katarina Zrinski'—I have been a member for so many years.

As an immigrant woman I am proud of myself and have no regrets for what I have become and what I have achieved, for myself and my community.

Thinking back on my life I know I was lucky to be helped and accepted into my new country, it gave me the opportunity for a better life, one which was not as hard as I thought. Croatians have long made a contribution to Australia's history and development; because of this I am proud to be Croatian/Australian.

**Ijerka boban, secretary,
australian croatian women's association
'katarina zrinski' melbourne**

Many Croatian people consider Easter to be the most sacred celebration of the year. Most of our celebrations have a strong connection to our faith and are celebrated according to our religious traditions. 'Easter' is anticipated and prepared for forty days prior to Easter Sunday. Women have a primary role in the preparation as mothers, nurturers, and educators.

Mothers and grandmothers teach their children about the journey of Jesus Christ leading up to Easter Sunday. A special custom prepared for this special day is the colouring and preparation of Easter eggs. Mothers and grandmothers gather their children and grandchildren around and educate them about the significance of the egg. The Easter egg represents new Life and Hope; every coloured egg is given as a gift to family, friends, and neighbours. Easter eggs symbolise love and attachment and are protectors against evil.

celebrate...rebirth,

Another significant custom is the preparation of Easter Sunday breakfast. Easter breakfast is prepared the day before, placed in a hamper and taken to Church so that it is blessed prior to Easter Sunday. It consists of Easter bread, cheese, prosciutto, and boiled eggs and is shared among the members of the family.

**ivana dalic, social worker,
australian croatian
community services**

celebrate...new life

Like all women, Cambodian women living in Australia celebrate childbirth as one of Life's most important events.

For Cambodian women—most of whom arrived in Australia as refugees (after enduring years of suffering caused by genocide and war)—childbirth is a celebration, not only of new life, but of a shared sense of maternal joy.

Family members—sisters, mothers, grandmothers, aunts,—all share in the joys of new life and in the responsibility of raising the child. Birth and children are the collective duty of women who celebrate their love for one another by sharing responsibilities and easing the difficult burden a new child can be for a new mother.

In my own family the birth of my sister's children has been a cause of great celebration. We have all tried to support my sister during this difficult, but joyous time.

Sadly, this responsibility still falls mainly to women as years of war and murder have led to an imbalance in the number of women and men. Many Cambodian men hold very traditional views on family roles and regard children as women's responsibility.

terri ly
president
cambodian association of victoria youth group



**the ritual of celebrations,
nourish our soul**

Celebrations for women from Arabic background could not possibly occur without the essential ingredients of oriental dancing, food, music and a few 'zalghoutas' specially reserved for weddings. A zalghouta is a sound that women use as an expression of extreme joy and happiness; it involves a tricky and fast movement of the tongue—women compete to see who can maintain the sound the longest.

Oriental dancing referred to in the West as belly dancing, is more akin to folk dancing in Arabic countries, and everyone participates— young and old, men and women. It is done for fun rather than performance, during joyous occasions such as weddings, births, engagements, festivities, or the welcoming of special guests such as relatives returning from overseas.

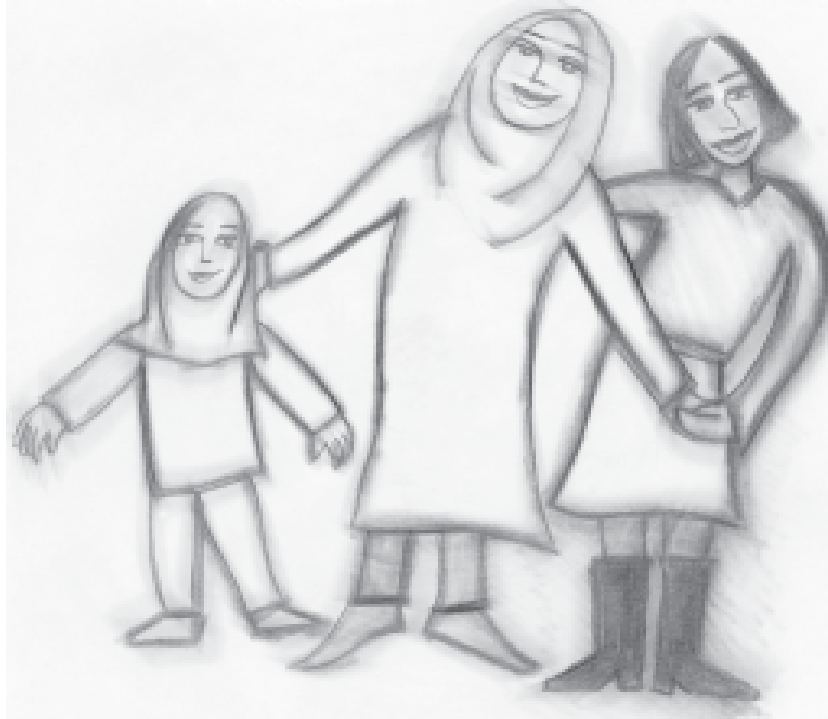
There are many more expressions of celebration, such as body henna-painting; the preparation of special sweets when a baby is born—women in Lebanon make a sweet called 'Mighli' and decorate it with special nuts, distributing it to all their neighbours and to visitors.

Rituals express various celebrations, and are an integral part of our culture and identity—we pass them on to our children and grandchildren.

I cannot even begin to imagine how boring and empty life would be without the 'splashes of celebration' on such occasions—they brighten our lives, revive our souls, and rekindle our connections to each other.

**dalal smiley
chairperson
victorian arabic
social services**

celebrate...connection



As an Australian Muslim, the holy month of Ramadan is the month to which we all look forward. For thirty days, between sunrise and sunset, I abstain from food, drink, and illicit speech, and spend my time contemplating my spirituality and uplifting my morals.

It's a wonderful time because it's extremely difficult in this modern hectic world to find time to sit with the family and eat together, however during Ramadan, I must do this for thirty days. We all sit down together and share the pleasures of food, which we have prepared together. It brings families and friends together.

At the conclusion of Ramadan, we celebrate Eid-Al fitr (the Festival of 'breaking-fast'). We visit family and friends, and give gifts and money to the younger generation. We all put

on our best clothes and pray at the mosque—the traditional congregational Eid prayer where thousands of people gather together and pray side by side. It's all about caring, sharing, food, and helping one another.

I love that I have a culturally rich life to balance out my hectic work demands.

zena yassine

celebrate...
contemplation



on the subject of celebration we would like to welcome our new bilingual Community Health Educators, we asked them the following question: what do you look forward to in your work at Working Women's Health (WWH), what do you think you will celebrate in twelve months time, in the future?

celebrate... coming full circle

Violetta Prestia Italian Community Educator

I was born and educated in Italy. At age seventeen, I migrated with my family to Australia and became involved in welfare work. My years spent working in this field, were fulfilling and rewarding on both emotional and spiritual levels. I then left work to raise a family.

Life, family commitments, and a variety of other jobs kept me busy for many years, providing many different experiences, some positive and some negative. The last few years have taken me full circle; I found myself back at welfare work, which had been the happiest years of my working life. I had found my true passion.

Working Women's Health is the break I needed. I am proud to be part of a team of women dedicated to educating, supporting, and empowering migrant women, dedicated to improving their wellbeing in an holistic way.

I am very enthusiastic about my job as a bilingual Community Health Educator. As an ambassador for WWH, I look forward to reaching as many women as possible, knowing our shared experiences will enrich me more than they realise.



celebrate...opportunity

Sonali Deshpande Hindi Community Educator

It's really great to work with women, being a doctor it's great to work in a related field, to use my medical knowledge. To find work here in Australia is difficult, immigrant women (even with qualifications), find it difficult. Working Women's Health— gives me an opportunity to work; my potential is recognised and the language barrier has been overcome. All things worth celebrating.



Wei Li Mandarin/Chinese Community Educator

I was a doctor in China, a gynaecologist. When I came to Australia my previous knowledge was 'useless'. As a Community Health Educator, I feel like I've found myself again. I can use my knowledge to help women, to help myself.

celebrate... finding oneself

Faranek Safaei

Dari and Farsi Community Educator

As a community development worker, I feel privileged to work with women, for women. I arrived in Australia as a refugee, and faced many barriers—so I decided to become a voice for my community. At WWH I have the perfect opportunity to develop my knowledge and skills, and to share my experiences with women of similar background. We are strong women; we solve many issues together.

celebrate...strength



celebrate...
awareness

Khadija Ali Hashi

Somali Community Educator

When I was in Somalia I was a nurse, but when I arrived here I found that the requirements are different. I tried to get a job, I continued my training, but suddenly realised that this country wasn't my homeland.

Through WWH I have more understanding and more knowledge about women and about myself. I appreciate these real opportunities. My self esteem and self confidence are increasing in my role as Community Educator—it's an opportunity for which I am thankful. I aim to continue to assist women from similar backgrounds, especially those who have had less education and opportunities.



celebrate...foundations

Rachanee Naksuk

Thai Community Educator

When I first came here for training [WWH *bilingual Community Health Educators go through an intensive ten-day training on appointment—Ed*], I gradually developed a picture in my head—of myself starting off in this Organisation, of myself in the future finishing my PhD. I see WWH as a start for me, taking me into the future. My knowledge and experience—together with what WWH gives me—forms a base for my career. There is something here I can build on, for myself and for WWH. Working Women's Health's philosophy, the foundation of its work is one I appreciate.



Chau Bao Tran

Vietnamese Community Educator

I was a doctor in my country [Vietnam] and have lived in Australia for eight years.

As a woman experiencing migration, I have sometimes felt lonely. Even though I am well educated—with the advantages education can bring to the adapting process—on occasion I have experienced loss of confidence.

At WWH I can use my knowledge, I can share it, and learn from others. I can do something for my community. I feel like I have found myself by talking with women from my own culture, using my previous work. Maybe it's too soon to say as I've just started here, but it seems to me that WWH does very interesting, successful work with immigrant women.

celebrate...knowledge
in its many forms

I celebrate my Name Day on the 15th of August every year. My name is Maria (Mary) Despina Panayouta and the 15th of August is the Feast Day of The Virgin Mary. Being named Maria (Mary) and knowing I have the same name as Christ's mother makes me feel very honoured and grateful; each year on the 15th, is a time to celebrate my name and open my home to anyone wanting to celebrate with me.

The week prior I fast by not eating meat, as a way of purifying my soul and as a sacrificial service. On the day itself, a special church service is held; candles are lit and prayers offered in honour of Mary, whom we hope will answer us with her blessings.

After church, I go home and 'break the fast'. I bake sweets the day before, in anticipation of anyone visiting me to acknowledge my name. My family arrive for dinner; usually a roast and lots of colourful vegetables. I also bake everyone's favourite 'Pita', (filo pastry sprinkled with feta cheese; very delicious when eaten hot). The meal is preceded with a toast of homemade red wine; we toast to good health and happiness, and hope every year will be celebrated this way.

Many relatives call me with wishes for a happy Name Day; those who visit bring flowers, wine or other gifts, making me feel very special. My home is full of colourful flowers that I have picked from my garden as a reflection of my appreciation of the beauty around me. In honour of my Name Day I share all these things with love and happiness for all who come and celebrate.

maria despina panayouta

[celebrate...commemoration](#)

celebrate...citizenship

Although I arrived in Australia from Chile at the age of nine years, the impact of migration—of beginning anew in a different place—has marked my life extensively.

My recollections of this movement between places remain vivid. I remember attending primary school for the first time. I remember the tears shed and the fear felt at being left in a strange place where I did not understand the language. But while these experiences were difficult for me, I still marvel at my mother's journey and experience, and her ability to rise above the difficulties adult migrants often experience.

Children always seem to blend in quickly and are able to more rapidly learn new customs and language. For adult women like my mother, the transition was marked by isolation, fear, and depression.

Despite these challenges, it was lovely to attend my mother's citizenship ceremony. For her this was a time to celebrate her decision to once and for all become a truly Australian citizen. With this step she fulfilled the dream of becoming a citizen and of being accepted into this country we now call home. While this is a ceremony common to many migrants, it is, I think, a celebration that is poignant and important to many of us.

paula hernandez



Ever since I arrived in Australia, I have always felt like home. This country has been a multicultural society for over a century. The arrival of migrants from so many different countries around the world has brought another dimension to Australia's rich Indigenous and non-indigenous cultures. This has benefited the country tremendously. I am so glad to be part of this beautiful country and its people.

The recent arrival of my baby girl to this world has brought us so much joy. We celebrated Christmas and the birth of my baby at the same time. All the family stayed with us. We prepared our traditional food for both occasions. And we had a great time. I am so lucky to have my family by my side when I need them. It makes life much easier.

My child (as children of so many migrant families), will have so many opportunities to lead a happy and successful life. Being part of diverse cultures—one their roots, the other their adopted country—is something that everybody should be proud of.

nigisti kidane
member of the eritrean
community in melbourne

celebrate...multiculturalism

celebrate...participation

We are all women who know what it is like to move away from the things we love, leaving behind family, memories, culture, and a country in which, we not only grew up, but also where we learned most of the things we know today.

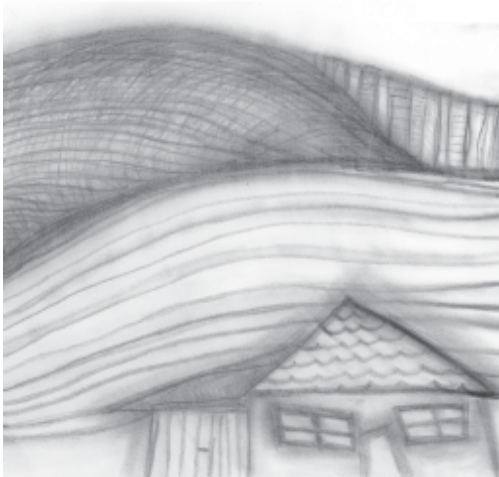
We come from all over the world with one thing in common 'knowing what it feels like to lose something that means so much'. We come together on a weekly basis to support each other through a trying time, perhaps the most trying to date. We give support to each other by talking, listening, speaking freely of our experiences as well as being able to speak in our own languages.

We participate in activities, dancing or cooking, where each of us is able to prepare and present a bit of our own country. We welcome all the things we learn and the information we hear, which broadens our views and knowledge of all our countries.

We work together and support each other with celebrations. We also keep in mind religious celebrations and dietary needs with our food preparations. All these subjects, big or small, are taken into account, because we are free to talk about all these things without judgement or persecution of any kind.

We are a group of women for women!

jeannette vervaart
nesb links
migrant support group ballarat



celebrate...rights

No one understands fully the emotional stress of migration—except another migrant. As the saying goes, 'a full stomach, doesn't know an empty one' and that doesn't only apply to food.

Those who haven't migrated cannot understand the loss that goes with it. The closeness of a shared experience—like having no one you can speak with about your country of birth—cannot be exchanged, if you haven't lived it.

This loss gets compounded by racism—where after nearly fifty years of living in Australia, some people still believe my accent is a handicap, that 'this was a good country before migrants came'.

Within our Migrant Support Group we are all equals, we are all sisters, age, accent, background, is no barrier. We learn from each other—and know that support is 'right there' and that people are willing to help. We all feel we have the right to be there. We have things to give and we learn with an open mind.

The Group acts as 'therapy' for loneliness and depression—when we gather, the hall where we meet sounds like a beehive. This coming together, the atmosphere of instant harmony is what most migrants have missed.

We started in February 2003 with twelve people; now we have forty women in our Group. The Group creates a feeling of usefulness, it keeps the brain active, and is good for our health generally. This support was long overdue and this kind of gathering needs to be encouraged.

Many migrants share similar reasons for leaving their country: freedom, escape from war and dictatorship. Home is always home. Childhood memories resurface as we get older. When the love for one's country can be shared with other migrants, the effect is better than any medicine (and healthier). We are looking for a new venue for our gatherings—sheep keep flocking into our current space. Maybe it's the warmth!

maria rosenberg
nesb links
migrant support group sebastapol

celebrate...enhancing life

The vigour of immigrant women's spirit is certainly kept alive and kicking by the work done by a select group of very special women at the Co.As.It. Adult Day Care Centres across Melbourne.

On a daily and weekly basis, workers and volunteers, spend priceless hours with older members of the Italian community—people who have suffered strokes, heart attacks, suffer from acquired brain injury, and generally do not have the physical or mental capacity to access social groups within their own council areas.

Co.As.It. provides service provision that is Italian-specific. Members enjoy Italian food, sing-a-longs, 'tombola' (bingo), and generally the opportunity to speak their language and spend time with other people.

In terms of enhancing the lives of people less fortunate than themselves, the women's contribution is enormous. The workers and volunteers are certainly a special breed, and the spirit of giving through their own culture is certainly reflected in their work.

elvira andreoli
duty worker
co.as.it



Teaching English, exploring women's abilities to become leaders and empowering them in the early stages of settlement, are high priorities for the Adult Multicultural Education Service of Victoria (AMES); an organisation that has a long trajectory working with newly arrived migrant and refugee women.

Regaining confidence and self-esteem is one of the most difficult challenges when women are uprooted because of war, migration, loss, trauma, or simply by big changes to their lives. It is easy to become depressed, socially isolated, or ill. Bearing this in mind, AMES organised a gathering of young women students, at the end of last year. The camp, which took place in Anglesea, attracted sixty-one women of twenty-five nationalities, aged eighteen to forty. All were attending English classes across Melbourne.

One of the aims of the camp was to express the women's creative potential through specific activities. A lack of English skills does not mean women need be 'invisible' in Australia—ideas can also be expressed powerfully through drama, painting, and other forms of artistic expression. In this way women participants acknowledged their sense of pride and achievements, to value themselves, their stories, their lives.

Racism and ethnicity were also explored. Examples from peoples lives and media reports were used to discuss discrimination and racism, and inform women of their rights. This also challenged their own stereotypes and prejudices, and encouraged them to foster links with women outside their own cultural groups.

The camp was a success. Although cultures are diverse and unique, something prevails in all cultures and that is basic humanity. The camp proved that.

olga yoldi
business and community
development manager
ames

celebrate...
pride in expression





Last year, Darebin City Council collaborated with a group of artists from diverse cultural backgrounds, to create a series of get-togethers—showcasing the art of NESB artists and creating a welcoming space for NESB artists to interact.

Afternoons in Synergy (Series 1) featured NESB artists practising different art forms; artists included theatre actor/director Bagryana Popov and musician Sivaganga Sahathevan.

Looking at areas of commonality and/or contrast between artists' individual work, *In Synergy 2*, paired artists from different cultural backgrounds, practising different art forms. Sculptor and performance artist Arhonda Orestia, dancer Tatiana Bistrin, and Sivaganga Sahathevan were involved in this series.

Artists took the opportunity to showcase their art and engage an audience in an intimate, salon-like atmosphere—transforming this space into a celebration of art, diversity, and gender. Artists made links amongst themselves (and with others), resulting in further opportunities for their work and its presentation. The Series were held at Synergy Gallery Northcote, the title of each alluding to all manner of synergies.

vicky tsaconas

arts and cultural development officer

city of darebin

celebrate...artistic endeavour

My name is Natasha Cho and I help to run a group called Yellow Kitties. Yellow Kitties is a Melbourne-based group for Asian lesbians.

I helped to start up the group with a friend, Chris. Chris is Korean and she felt isolated from other lesbians because her English skills were still developing. Meanwhile, I was interested in making contact with other Asian lesbians. I am Australian-born Chinese. Until I helped to start up the group, I had very few Asian friends. I don't speak Chinese and I don't know that much about Chinese culture. But I was interested in learning more about Chinese culture and also meeting other Asians.

The group now has about forty members. The members are from all different parts of Asia including Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Japan. We meet once a month and organise regular social events.

There is much to celebrate about this Group. It's a place where Asian lesbians (and their partners and friends) can meet and feel less isolated. Previously, I had read very little (if anything) about Asian lesbians in the queer media. Due to the publicity about our group, we have given Asian lesbians more visibility within the queer community. And one of the really great things about our group is that it has helped to create ongoing friendships. *For more information about Yellow Kitties, email yellowkitties@hotmail.com or phone Peggy on 0418 363 513*

natasha cho

celebrate...visibility and identity



celebrate...leadership and laughter

The women congregated in the kitchen. Once a year, our families would gather to remember and honour our past ancestors. Mothers, daughters, aunts, grandmothers and nieces, three generations of women, came together to prepare a family meal to celebrate and remember past loved ones.

My mother would be busy in the kitchen delegating tasks. The atmosphere was jovial as the women chatted while going about their work and there would be many marvellous aromas flowing throughout the house. In the midst of all this, my grandmother patiently taught me how to make spring rolls.

As a child, I was too young to understand the meaning of the day, however I knew it was important. We would eat and drink to our health and have hearty laughs at stories told by each woman.

This regular gathering of our family provided women with the opportunity to not only display their exquisite cooking abilities, but also their leadership skills, cooperation and support. For me, it also provided fond memories of my family and cultural heritage.

bich thai

youth support worker

vietnamese community in australia-victorian chapter



I come from China where people celebrate festivals and events throughout the year. In China whenever we celebrated an occasion, people would gather together and lots of food and various dishes were served.

I still wonder why eating plays such an important role in these celebrations. Perhaps poor food supply and severe personal restrictions make the provision of food a symbol of respect, a way to express happiness.

Living in Australia, I find not only myself, but other Chinese people changing. Food doesn't seem as important as it used to be; here people don't worry so much about it. Chinese people still gather together to celebrate. Instead of focusing on eating, we also sing, dance, hold fashion shows, and competitions. We enjoy being a member of this society—living in a happy environment and healthy lifestyle.

Last Chinese New Year, I attended the North-East Chinese Association's celebrations; I will never forget, there were so many people singing 'I am, you are, we are Australian'.

lina xin

celebrate...health

Many immigrant women—including those immigrant women originally from Asia—experience depression, loneliness, and a sense of being without a firm direction.

These experiences stem from having to adapt to the changes in family, work, and lifestyle that immigration creates; many also stem from the disadvantage of language barriers: from finding themselves in a foreign environment without the necessary communication skills.

Language barriers hinder immigrant women from being able to properly express their health needs; this affects their ability to access the medical support they may require regarding their emotional and physical wellbeing. Where are the doctors that could support them? How can they access doctors if language barriers exist? Where else can these immigrant women access information and assistance?

Many immigrant Asian women participate in our Association. The Association runs various activities including Tai Chi, exercise, dancing, singing, arts and crafts, information sessions, English classes, cooking, and excursions.

I got a job in a clothing factory after nine months in Australia. I found that many workers including myself were bullied by management and by other workers. I feel the reason we were bullied was because we didn't understand English. As I learnt more English they stopped bullying me.

The union came to the factory to intervene on behalf of a worker who had a stress condition caused by her workplace experiences. On that day I was elected by the Vietnamese workers to be their representative. Since the union intervened to help this worker the stress level at the factory has decreased.

Workers have also attended an English course that the union organised. At the course we were taught not only English, but a lot about the rights of workers, and occupational health and safety.

I now feel more confident when I ask about the rights of workers. We are very happy to hear that the union is talking to management about organising English courses, giving the opportunity for more workers to improve their English language skills.

These opportunities to socialise with women of similar backgrounds and experiences (including the experiences of migration), provide women with an 'alternative clinic, an alternative doctor'; participating, sharing, and building mutual support, improves their sense of wellbeing.

The Association is also developing its writing and reading activities to empower women's creativity and to support their emotional needs. These activities also assist to stem the language barrier which is a major issue in accessing medical treatment.

It is imperative immigrant women's needs are understood and met. Our Association assists women to conquer their problems, improve their wellbeing, and find strength in connecting with women of similar background and experience.

sophia liu
president (2002-2003)
victoria hua xin chinese
women's association

celebrate...mutual support



Learning English, knowing your rights and occupational health and safety, will increase your confidence and help stop things that aren't right happening to you.

loan vo
celebrate...activism

celebrate...reclaiming
the tumba!



**the macedonian women's choir—
a celebration of women gathering**

Women gathering to sing is commonplace in many village and tribal cultures around the world.

As a child I was fascinated by the stories that my mother told of what she had heard and learned in her village 'na tumbata'—on the mound. Here women gathered at the end of the day to sing, tell stories of the day's events, and of course share the mandatory dirty joke or two. This was one way in which women offered each other support, advice, and shared their own wisdom and knowledge.

Migration has changed how Macedonian women gather. Often it is a very private experience of having coffee between neighbours, having a chat during a break at work, or going for a walk with 'Mara' up the road.

In reflecting upon my eighteen year association with the Macedonian Women's Choir the rehearsal space has reclaimed the 'tumba'. Each fortnight we leave our lives as mothers, partners, wives, and working women, to gather and sing songs from our homeland and parents' homeland. We exchange recipes, crack jokes, share food, tell stories. We celebrate each other's successes and support each other through illness and difficult times. Our children are also welcomed at rehearsals and play as we sing.

Just five months ago my husband and I celebrated the arrival of our daughter. Upon my own entry into motherhood I have realised the importance of choir rehearsals as food for the soul in a week filled with multiple feeds, nappies and housework. But more importantly it has kept me connected with other women through the often isolating experience of motherhood in Australia.

The Macedonian Women's Choir has enriched the lives of many of its members and through our public performances we celebrate our creativity and participation within the broader Australian community.

vasilka pateras