

'I would call it a social capital building exercise': the nature of networks that enable women with a refugee background to access sustainable employment in regional Australia

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Abstract

Securing sustainable employment is an important factor in the successful settlement of women from refugee backgrounds into regional Australia, however, the path to its attainment is complex. Work that takes advantage of the breadth of their untapped skills or offers sustainable careers is not readily available. Further, having to seek refuge suggests that women bring embodied memories of trauma which may, in turn, continue to impact on their health. A pilot program was funded to support women from refugee backgrounds as they navigated the employment pathway. This paper reports the findings from an action research study which was associated with the pilot program. As social capital enables people to be "hired, healthy, happy and housed" (Woolcock, 1998, p. 154), the study investigated the form and function of the networks that enabled these women. Findings revealed the women engaged in building a network that increased the number of people that they knew as both friends and professional paths to employment. Program participants were also keen to be embedded in the geographical and cultural landscape. Further this social, cultural and physical engagement provided opportunities to mobilise and further develop their skills. This interwoven web of connections fostered women's safety and enabled them to discover their unique pathways to potential employment.

Key words: refugee; women; employment; network; social capital; regional

I would call it a social capital building exercise. So, this is really about making those connections that my clients don't come with automatically. So when I was a kid growing up, I had my grandma, my mother and my aunties, and my neighbours, and so when I wanted to learn things like how to drive a car or how to get a job, I had other people besides my parents who I could go to and I had this sort of network of supports to help me to grow up and achieve what I wanted to achieve. My clients are coming through all by themselves a lot of the time and they don't have this social network. So they have to build it, and it's really hard to build it when you don't speak the language and you don't understand the culture. So, I think they just need a bridge, ... people to help me understand my new life (Program staff).

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Introduction

As they settle into a new country, women from refugee backgrounds face and negotiate multiple challenges and social barriers. While securing sustainable employment contributes to achieving 'successful settlement'¹, the work that is readily available in regional Australia does not necessarily take advantage of the breadth of refugees' skills or offer them sustainable careers. In order to harness these skills, appropriate connections need to be made with the right people, at the right time. Understanding more about the social networks, and with it social capital, that facilitate sustainable employment with this cohort provides valuable insights into this aspect of the settlement process. A pilot program was funded to support women from refugee backgrounds as they navigated the regional employment pathway. This paper reports on findings from the program and investigates the nature of the networks that enabled these women to secure sustainable employment in a regional community.

Background

Australian Government policy in recent decades has prioritised the need to settle significant numbers of humanitarian migrants in regional² Australia (Department of Social Services [DSS], 2017). Some of the women participating in the identified program have come to Australia as part of this settlement strategy. Others have been resettled via the *Women at Risk* program, an initiative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and partner Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), that targets women who have experienced high levels of violence and have been placed in extremely vulnerable situations (Bartolomei, Eckert & Pittaway, 2014). Although regional humanitarian settlement aims be mutually beneficial for both the entrants and the receiving communities (DSS, 2017), policies are largely motivated by the economic and population needs of regional Australia (Boese & Phillips, 2017; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006). Little additional support is offered specifically for women at risk settled in the regions. Government objectives aim to 'integrate' refugees and, through their prospective employment, to address gaps in specific industries, such as agriculture and food processing.

Refugees' hopes for a good life in Australia are strongly linked to gaining preferred employment, however this can be especially challenging for this population (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Major, Wilkinson, Langat, & Santoro, 2013). Hebbani, Obijiofor and Bristed (2009, p. 72) found that women who were refugees "were happy about coming to Australia as it offered both themselves and their children a better chance to get an education, a good job, and a secure future". Yet, Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2006) found an overrepresentation of migrant women in the secondary labour market (insecure, low status jobs) when they examined employment opportunities for Yugoslav, African and Middle Eastern humanitarian migrants in Western Australia. Major et al. (2013) also found that the employment available to former refugees is often unskilled or casual.

People with a refugee background face many challenges when settling into Western countries. They struggle with language and cross-cultural communication (Hebbani et al., 2009); live with the consequences of trauma and its impact on mental health and other health issues; need to

¹ The concept of 'successful settlement' is highly subjective. This study uses the Refugee Council of Australia's (2016) description of settlement as being a two-way process between the settler and the wider community, and not just something that refugees 'do' or have done to them, and it includes tangible and non-tangible outcomes.

² Regional Australia is defined as "all of the towns, small cities and areas that lie beyond the major capital cities" (Regional Australia Institute, n.d.)

negotiate new social roles (Australia Survey Research Group [ASRG], 2011, as cited in Walker, Koh, Wollersheim & Liamputtong, 2015, p. 325; Perrin & Dunn, as cited in Major et al., 2013, p. 96); and experience cultural displacement and isolation (Ferris, 1987, Iglesias, Robertson, Johansson, Engfeldt & Sundquist, 2003, as cited in Walker et al., 2015, p. 325). Wollersheim, Koh, Walker and Liamputtong (2013) note that some women from refugee backgrounds are more familiar with 'village' living and often feel disconnected post-arrival, especially in vast suburban areas. Yet, in addition to being welcoming and personal, the rural communities in which they are placed can be mono-cultural and discriminatory (Major et al., 2013).

Women from refugee backgrounds also have very specific safety needs that should be accounted for in their support (Bartolomei et al., 2014; Ochala & Mungai, 2016). Ochala and Mungai's (2016) research on the experiences of female single parents of African refugee background now residing in Wagga Wagga, Australia, revealed that, prior to arrival, women had been at a greater risk of violence than men and had less access to health and other services. Vaughan et al. (2015) acknowledged how difficult it is to estimate true levels of violence as these women are often reluctant to report such incidences due to cultural sensitivities and differing understandings of what constitutes unacceptable violence. Refugee women coming to Australia are often from geographic areas with some of the highest incidences of intimate partner violence including Africa, and South and East Asia (Vaughan et al., 2015, p. 2). Yet, there are barriers to accessing family violence services such as language difficulties and a lack of knowledge of rights and services (Vaughan et al., 2015). Many refugee women continue to be at risk in Australia from family and other violence, as well as from community isolation and mental health issues resulting from extreme trauma (Bartolomei et al., 2014). Further, the ongoing effects of violence and trauma pre-settlement may be compounded by the diminished support structures, language difficulties, and lack of access to education and employment during settlement in Australia.

Acquiring sustainable employment contributes to successful settlement, but because of limited workforce opportunities, poor health and the ongoing influences of violence, it is difficult for women from refugee backgrounds living in regional Australia to secure such employment. The pilot program with which this study was associated incorporated safety and health promotion into a work preparation program that was specifically targeted to this female refugee cohort. The program was initiated and coordinated by a local NGO in a regional Australian city over twelve months from 2016 to 2017. The city has become home to people from refugee backgrounds. Work opportunities, through links to particular industries in the region, had been self-identified by migrant groups as potentially safe and proven work environments. The pilot program sought to foster work opportunities that went beyond these existing, and somewhat limited, employment options. While the pilot program sought to achieve practical outcomes, such as the acquisition of work readiness skills, the role of well-being was also recognised as pivotal to the program's success. Participants were supported to identify their employment goals and the program was tailored to enable each participant to develop their knowledge and skills to attain them. Segments were dedicated to vocational assessment, training and work placement. However, a key feature of the program was its attention to creating safe spaces and, in turn, fostering the participants' sense of personal safety. Initially the group program followed a structured educational approach. As the pilot progressed, in response to participants' needs, the program was increasingly delivered in ways that fostered social capital.

Settlement and social capital

Building the 'right' social networks post-migration can offer gateways to sustainable employment (Webb, 2015), and some of the poor psychosocial health issues experienced by this cohort of refugee women can be reduced by promoting social inclusion and building social

capital. Social connectedness can enhance wellbeing to develop self-esteem and foster a sense of belonging (Richmond & Ross, 2008, as cited in Walker et al., 2015, p. 327). It can also assist in coping with the stress associated with settlement, such as understanding cultural norms, finding employment, gender issues, accessing resources and child related concerns (Yakushko, 2010, as cited in Walker et al., 2015, p. 327).

Social capital refers to the actual and potential accumulation of social contacts that enable access to information and decision makers by developing a “durable network” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Social capital can be both a personal and a community asset (Field, 2008; Hogan & Owen, 2000; Winter, 2000). Social capital is analysed and understood by mapping social networks and, in particular, identifying evidence of bonding, bridging and linking. Bonding refers to trusting and co-operative connections between people of similar social identities, such as of similar ethnic backgrounds or with similar lived experiences; whereas bridging refers to connections of trust between people who are not alike (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Linking social capital refers to relationships “across explicit, formal or institutionalised power” (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004, p. 655). Examples of these include relationships between potential employees and employers and/or potential clients and people who provide services.

Positive settlement experiences and the retention of migrant residents in regional areas are associated with effective community connections (Kilpatrick, Johnson, King, Jackson & Jatrana, 2015). Kilpatrick et al. stressed the need to go beyond the provision of material resources that support settlement, suggesting “liveability extends beyond physical amenity and infrastructure to encompass social connections” (2015, p. 208). Bonding, bridging and linking were all important and a mix of all three was considered essential. Support organisations, including workplaces and churches, play an important role in fostering this capital. Social capital was found to be instrumental in both enhancing and excluding social connections and the extent and quality of these connections impacted on cultivating a sense of belonging for migrants in their new home (Kilpatrick et al., 2015).

Bonding social capital is recognised in the way job opportunities are shared within cultural groups (for example the high prevalence of Yugoslavs in the cleaning industry) (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006). However, in the absence of bridging and linking this approach can be potentially limiting as it promotes a notion of ‘acceptable’ jobs, and many of these jobs are in marginal and insecure industries. This means that many newly arrived humanitarian migrants end up working in jobs that are low skilled and do not necessarily reflect their experience and qualifications. On the positive side, this could be seen as a way to reduce potential discrimination by avoiding industries that are uncommon for a specific cultural group (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006).

In Rodeghiero’s (2015) research with women from refugee backgrounds from various cultural groups now residing in Adelaide, social networks were deemed to be important but ‘complicated’. The author identified the need to have strong family or intra-ethnic connections to be able to move into the kind of bridging networks deemed desirable in government ideals of ‘successful settlement’. However, Rodeghiero (2015) claims the over-emphasis on bridging connections can undermine the importance of bonding connections. The author notes:

The current settlement framework is likely to be ineffective and fraught with problems while it exists within a policy context that favours social ‘bridges’ at the expense of bonding relations – both can be critical depending on the person and circumstances (Rodeghiero, 2015, p. 100).

McMichael and Manderson (2004), in their research with Somali women now resident in Melbourne, acknowledge the importance of community organisations in facilitating social capital. However, there is a negative side to social capital. Intragroup conflict is often overlooked and “an idealised view of community” is often presented (McMichael & Manderson,

2004, p. 88). Community organisations, therefore, need to support new arrivals in making connections but they also need to be prepared for the many challenges encountered when working with diverse clients.

Interestingly, McMichael and Manderson (2004) found that social capital for Somali women in fact eroded post settlement. This was partly due to the continued effects of trauma and displacement but also attributed to settlement conditions and challenges in Australia. They identified how residing in dispersed suburbs led to less contact with known social networks, for example other Somali families, and participants felt they did not know their neighbours. This is in stark contrast to the experience of social life in Somalia where participants would socialise with their neighbours and know they could call upon them for assistance (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). Ensuring clients are not isolated should be an essential feature of any settlement or post settlement program.

In brief, a balance between different types of social capital is deemed necessary to support well-settled and resilient people and communities. The Community Relations Commission acknowledges "...great strength, commitment, and resourcefulness in addressing community needs and assisting new arrivals with the settlement process" (as cited in Major et al., 2013, p. 98). Bonds within communities are important but "connections to the wider Australian community are also identified as significant to feelings of belonging and wellbeing" (Major et al., 2013, p. 98) and broader social inclusion. As social capital is such an important, yet complex, feature of the successful settlement process, we investigated the lived experience of fostering social capital that enabled employability. This study explored the nature of the networks that enable women from refugee backgrounds living in regional Australia to access sustainable employment from the perspective of the lived experience of women from refugee backgrounds. It addressed the question: "What were the forms and functions of the networks that support women from refugee backgrounds living in a regional Australian community to access sustainable employment?"

Methodology

This exploratory, action research study was undertaken through a partnership between the NGO that ran the pilot program and the university. Action research (see Wadsworth, 2010) enabled women who had experienced the disempowerment of seeking refuge, to influence the research process. A reciprocal research strategy was applied to "move beyond harm minimization as a standard for ethical research and...conduct research projects that aim to bring about reciprocal benefits for refugee participants and/or communities" (Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway, 2007, p. 299). These research methods have been used with success with this population in the past (see Collie, Liu, Podsiadlowski & Kindon, 2010; Hebbani et al., 2009; Johnson, Ali & Shipp, 2009; Vaughan et al., 2015).

To establish trust between program participants and the research team, one researcher made multiple visits to program sites before gathering data. After a period of participatory observation, informal interviews were undertaken in locations where participants felt comfortable. The researcher also participated in and observed activities including swimming lessons, bike riding and social outings. Visual research methods, in particular audio-visual recording, were used to document the program and capture the participants' experiences throughout the 12-month pilot. Interviewing the women participants on camera provided an authentic voice to narrate program development. On camera contributions from program facilitators and steering committee members also provided an important opportunity for reflection and analysis. The participatory approach allowed participants to have input into what was recorded, view filmed material and opt in or out at any time. Participants could choose to be anonymous or choose to be identified on camera. This approach is consistent with an ethical documentary approach (Evans & Foster, 2009; MacDougall, 2005; Nash, 2011; Pink &

Leder Mackley, 2012). Data were gathered from interviewing program participants (n=11), staff (n=3) and steering committee members (n=2), observation of, and participation in, the steering committee, as well as meeting minutes. Informed consent formed the basis of all documentation. The researchers always placed the participants' interests first in seeking to promote a reciprocal and respectful research environment. Ethics approval was obtained (ECN-16-289).

Several interconnecting groups emerged as sites of data generation and analysis. The first group consisted of the program participants who were women from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds including those from Myanmar (multiple participants), Afghanistan (multiple participants), Indonesia, Ethiopia Eritrea, Togo, Congo, Iraq and India, who were humanitarian migrants now settled in the regional city. The humanitarian migrant community in the regional city in which the pilot was based comes from regions that have experienced very high levels of violence (Vaughan et al., 2015). The participants' life experiences and aspirations varied but most were female heads of households. The second group consisted of the program staff, comprised of a program coordinator and part-time facilitator, and additional teaching and support staff. Personnel changed during the pilot. The third group, the steering committee, included representatives from a vocational education institution and the regional university that guided the research, including an academic with post-doctoral interests in this field, one of the authors of this paper, and the program coordinator.

De-identified interview transcripts were thematically analysed by two of the researchers for reference to social networks and/or relationships between people and entities such as support organisations. Emerging themes were discussed with participants, staff and the steering group (see Doyle, 2007). These multiple points of discussion reinforced the rigour and trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings

The women welcomed and participated in fostering a web of relationships that enabled them to develop their understanding of, familiarity with, and connection to the social, geographical and cultural landscape. Participants revealed how these connections reinforced their confidence and facilitated their access to potential work opportunities. Key features of the structure and function of the social network that emerged are described below. Fundamentally, an interwoven social network developed which 'held' the women (as noted by program staff), supporting them as they made sense of and mastered pathways to employment. Their developing social capital enabled this process, and this process, in turn, enabled the further development of social capital. From the conversations with the women, several themes emerged which each represent an important factor in them successfully building social networks. These are identified below.

Developing bonds and bridges

The women and staff members involved in the pilot program developed a network of trusting relationships. Bonding social capital developed between women who had sought asylum. Yet the same women were bridging across cultural backgrounds. The women valued meeting new people with whom they could be at ease. As one program participant from Myanmar said: *"When we were studying, we made a new friend and we met good teachers. That's very good."* Another woman appreciated being able to feel *"very comfortable and very relaxed. I have many friends, and I can talk, and they talk to me. We have nice conversations."* Another program participant stated: *"I made new friends, fourteen, my new friends...and... A core group of women spent five or six months together ... Becoming a lot more comfortable ... with each other."* The women invested in the social capital that they were developing. They often arrived *"an hour or so earlier than they need to, to chat"* (program worker) with one another.

They wanted time to get to know one another. While the staff who facilitated the group educational sessions paid particular attention to fostering a safe experience, their efforts were minimal as the women created “*a really supportive group ... in terms of common courtesy and respect for each other and respect for opinions*” (program worker). The women developed “*their own sense of self within the group while they were broadening their own networks*” (program worker).

As their familiarity with one another developed, a program worker observed how the women revealed their “*skills or their work or life experience. ... (They) bring a whole depth of not only experience but skill level.*” However, this was dependent on them being “*comfortable enough to talk about the things they’ve done in the past, in terms of their skills and experience or work or education background, or how they work together as a family or small community*” (program worker). Thus, the women drew on the social capital in which they had invested when they learnt from the wisdom of others in the core group. As one woman from Myanmar said: “*I like many different people there and we can talk with them and we know their backgrounds and also they can show to us their experience, work experience, so I like it there.*” The group provided this space. As this staff member said:

as the women come to know each other more and understand more about (NGO) staff or other people that they’re meeting, if in fact they felt unsafe, there would be people that they could talk to about that. They would feel confident that they had a relationship to be able to talk about that. And there’s another dimension... (as) they’re more confident in themselves ... they feel more empowered and therefore they’re safer.

Thus, the safe environment enabled them to increase the number, diversity and depth of bonds in their network. As the group was comprised of women from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, this fostered bridges between ethnic communities.

Communicating in English

While the women appreciated opportunities to develop their skills and engage in a range of experiences, they were particularly keen to improve their English by using the language in conversation within the safety of the group environment. As one program participant said:

I liked the program because if I get friends we can talk about other things. And yes, I have a chance to swim, to walk for exercise for my health, and then I also have a chance to improve my English.

Learning English and skills enabled bridging within the group and to broader social networks.

Connecting across cultures

Extending their networks broadened their understanding of Australian culture which, in turn, was envisaged to help them to not only find a job, but to make a success of their career. The group was comprised of women from a variety of cultural backgrounds. They acknowledged Australia as a multicultural society and wanted to understand how to live and work within this diversity. As one participant from Eritrea commented: “*Yes, it’s very important to have those connections, especially here in Australia, there’s a lot of culture, people from different background.*” Their interest was specifically targeted to understanding the work environment because, as indicated by one participant who stated: “*We can communicate with the other people. And ... very good too, very easy to find a job.*” A participant from Myanmar further

commented on the benefits of connecting as a culturally diverse group because she could “*get ideas from them*” and be informed by their experiences. Another participant reiterated: “*It does help with work because you never know who are you going to work with. In countries like Australia there are a lot of cultures and diversities.*” Thus, it is apparent that the women were looking for clues about how to break into, and thrive in, Australia’s work environment.

Connecting to place

Despite living in the community for some years, many of the women were unfamiliar with geographical sites, amenities and community groups. The walking and swimming groups introduced them to local parks and swimming places. These were places that the women were yet to discover. Like others in the group, one participant from Myanmar highlighted that she had “*been in (regional city) for three years but I don’t know anywhere. This course they bring to other place to around (regional city), so I know many places*”. The program staff confirmed that they “*take them to places that are only five minutes from home but they’ve never been to them because that’s not part of their experience*”. Social activities provided important opportunities to meet people. As an example, an older local woman invited the group to her home for morning tea to meet her friends and see her way of life. A participant acknowledged the importance of the social elements of the program: “*The positive points I find ... the opportunities to go out and visiting other places, visiting elderly people and I found those things quite helpful and positive.*” This reinforced the sense of participating and belonging within the broader community.

Belonging

While the women were keen to create new bonds, they continued to be embedded in their own communities by strengthening connections to people from similar cultural backgrounds and communities. One of the staff described the “*women’s’...good sense of themselves*” with their connections with local communities including “*women from similar backgrounds.*” A participant talked about her connections with “*the Chin community, we have our church and I go to the church and I am connected to the community.*” The women described their responsibility to the communities to which they ‘belonged’. Locally, some planned to work with people who had been through similar experiences. As an example, once she had secured sustainable employment, one woman said she’d “*like to work with refugees people, especially for Burmese people and other refugees people. I would like to help them.*” Further, through local communities they remained connected to, and supportive of, their families and friends in their country of origin.

We have Mindat community. Every month we have in Burma, something problem, maybe flood, we do donation, yep, donation we send to Burma. And also we did two weeks, one times two weeks, we made together and we cooking, yes, every two weeks we did that. (Program participant)

These ongoing connections revealed bonds within the cultural group. The program also fostered bridges and links to resources.

Connecting to resources

Program staff linked the women to community resources. Child care was provided during the program to foster a link with child care providers. They visited the women’s refuge, attended White Ribbon Day, and joined self-defence classes. It was the people that the women met through these encounters, rather than the organisation and its role and/ or function that the

women referred to. A participant from Myanmar explained: “*Yes, we have networked, one time for one month at (name of organization). So we met many people there, so good for us.*” Thus, through these activities the women identified people who could act as bridges to social resources into the future.

Augmenting employment pathways

The pilot program sat within a settlement path that was supported by several organisations in the region. The pilot’s host organisation had linkage social capital through its well established inter-organisational relationships, however the place of this innovative pilot program in the pathway needed to be negotiated. A staff member explained, the “*hurdle was ... explaining the program to people*” as it was not “*targeted training,*” such as an English language course. Referrers and potential participants struggled to grasp what they were being asked to invest their time in. When they did refer, it was for support akin to case management rather than a program that partnered with them in preparing women to access paid work. The pilot program ‘augmented’ the employment support and settlement pathway. As one staff member said: “*Most of our women are registered with the job network agency and that job network agency has responsibility to help them find employment. What we’re doing makes them more employable.*” The relationship with funding body representatives was crucial. Fortunately, the funder championed the innovative approach developed in the pilot. Their willingness to partner with the Program team was essential to the pilot’s success. Nevertheless, more broadly, program funding arrangements including competitive tendering and output-based funding undermined relationships between organisations; this influenced collaboration and increased stress for the pilot program staff.

Getting a job

The program aimed for “*Jobs...firstly*” (staff member), however, achieving this outcome proved to be complex. Enabling the women to access jobs relied on fostering their health and the networks that supported their well-being in order to prepare for employment. While the program participants recognised the importance of making connections as a pathway to work, as the pilot progressed, it took longer than hoped for. One woman expressed frustration at not having been offered employment as a result of her participation in the program, commenting:

I got more confidence from [pilot] program, yeah. Because I met with other people ... they introduced other people, so more confidence and the social network ... they don't believe anymore [pilot] because when we start [pilot] program they promise we can get a job for you but now after six months we never get a job so, so they don't believe.

Undoubtedly, her frustration is that of many jobseekers, however, there is also a fundamental misunderstanding of the Australian workplace. Bridging and linking social capital bring work opportunities. They cannot guarantee that a job will be made available. When one of the participants secured employment, she did so through “*the right connections with the right people at the right place. I found it through [names agency running program].*” Thus, in this case, employment was provided through linkage social capital.

Discussion & Conclusion

By increasing the number and diversity of their bonds, bridges and links, the women developed their confidence and planned how to secure more sustainable employment. Concurrent with this, their increasing familiarity with the geography and culture of the community fostered familiarity and with it, safety. Existing bonds between women within cultural groups were strengthened and bridges between cultural groups were established. Further, through these

relationships and cultural insights the women planned to successfully secure and keep paid employment. Thus, consistent with previous research (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Kilpatrick et al., 2015; Major et al., 2013; Rodeghiero, 2015), this study confirmed the importance of bonding, bridging and linking in the settlement process, albeit in this one aspect, that is, securing sustainable employment in a regional community. Contrary to the findings of McMichael and Manderson (2004), intra group conflict was not at issue with these women.

The network that emerged incorporated strong bonds between the women and the program staff, bridges between cultural groups, and links to churches and community resources. The network of strong group bonds that was established within the group became a primary structure. It was reinforced by connections to physical spaces. The space was not rigidly defined. It grew to incorporate widening geographical areas, such as places to walk, places to ride and places to swim. From this richly connected base, the women linked to other places and organisations such as other NGOs and programs. However, the women continued to be connected to their own cultural communities, at home and in Australia, while they consolidated and expanded bridges and links in the regional city.

These structural features served several functions as actors within the network exercised their agency. Firstly, this network enabled the women to develop their cultural competence, to improve their command of English, understand the cultural nuances of Australian work places and be introduced to work opportunities. They incorporated the information that they gleaned from a variety of sources to build their understanding of Australian cultural traditions. Similar networks might be available through churches or English language classes, however, the accessibility of the physical location and the allocated office space meant that the women could drop in as a point of reference throughout the working week. It was accessible during office hours, not just class time. Secondly, this network fostered safe spaces within which, despite traumatic experiences of broken trust and decimated communities, women from refugee backgrounds deepened and extended bonds and bridges with people and place. The facilitators fostered a safe learning space and the women, implicitly understanding the importance of safety, reinforced it. Thirdly, the network provided a source of trusted referrals. Traumatic experiences, such as past or current experiences of violence at home or elsewhere, were not addressed directly, yet the women had built a network that they could rely on should this situation arise. While one of the women was disappointed that she was not introduced to work opportunities in a similar way to that which friends and family had offered a direct path to industry, she began to understand that the program offered entry points to employment.

Paradoxically, a reliably safe space that enabled women from refugee backgrounds to share their position of 'other', in which they could analyse and interpret the Australian culture and workplace, enabled integration. The participants and staff fostered social capital that the women could draw on to access sustainable employment. By using action research methods, this study has learnt from and acknowledged the expertise of program participants and staff. The program and the research approach sought to support access to knowledge, provide a space for the women participants to be heard, and encourage decision-making and participation. The program continues, with a future focus on using the funding from this pilot to influence human services practice in supporting the social inclusion of women from refugee backgrounds, alongside awareness building about the value of social inclusion in regional communities. In all, there is deep connection with the program's fundamental aim to facilitate empowerment.

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