

# Women Migrants in Western Australia: Case Studies of Resilience and Empowerment

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*This article presents findings from an exploratory research using descriptive case studies of 12 migrant women in Western Australia. The purposive sample represents the government, academia, the private sector, community, civil society and not-for-profit organisations and is ranged in age from the late 20s to the 70s. Underpinned by theoretical frameworks of resilience and empowerment, women have shared their personal case narratives, and five case studies are presented in this paper. Our findings resonate with the vital and uncontested importance of education, the desire to be empowered, the capacity to be resilient and adaptive and the importance of giving back to the community. Key recommendations include the need for migrant women's continued access to avenues of empowerment and furthering education. The provision of adaptive structures builds resilience and grows strong communities where women feel empowered. We propose that women migrants, through alliances and collaboration, cross borders of learning and work towards generating change and transformation.*

## Keywords

Migration, women, education, capacity building, empowerment, resilience

## Introduction

Australia, as an immigrant nation, has a strong multicultural society that has taken in waves of migrants since World War II. Migrants have endeavoured to become

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contributing citizens, join the workforce and contribute to the economy. An estimated 29 per cent (7.3 million) of Australia's current 25 million inhabitants were born overseas (ABS, 2019a, b). Of the 12 migrant women in Western Australia (WA) participating in this study, this paper presents case studies of five participants, representing government, academia, private sector, community, civil society and not-for-profit sectors who have made a difference to communities they belong to, their work places and who also empower other migrant women. This study highlights concepts of empowerment, resilience, peer mentoring, family and how these concepts impact women. The narratives highlight supportive families, especially parents, who value education and have encouraged women to obtain a university education. The migrant women are passionate community advocates and have played a supportive role in their communities, displaying strength and resilience. A strong social justice and human rights conscience has helped these women overcome the initial discrimination they have faced and stay positive to their ideals, achieving much success.

## **Background**

### *The White Australia Policy and Its History of Exclusion*

Present-day Australia is an immigrant society, and it differs from the USA or Canada, in that its population has been the product of government policies, rather than private enterprise, that set out to attain specific models of immigration (Jupp, 2002). The infamous White Australia Policy adopted in 1901 by the new commonwealth government following the federation of Australia's colonies formalised attitudes to immigration that emerged during the 1850s. During World War II, Japan's aggression towards Australia contributed to this defensive stand, as Australia subsequently felt obliged to protect itself from the perceived threat of Asian countries. By 1947, it was estimated that excluding the aboriginal indigenous population, non-Europeans accounted for less than 0.25 per cent of the Australian population (Jupp, 2002).

### *Skilled Migration and Immigration as a Tool for Nation-Building*

Migrants from non-European countries began to increase in number after the Malcolm Fraser government came into power in 1975 and followed an immigration revival programme fuelled by the Australian mining boom. There was now a need for skilled migrants to improve the country's international market competitiveness (Birrell, 2003). Migrant groups were encouraged to set up associations to promote the continuity of their cultures, languages and traditions. This change in policy has been largely the result of lobbying by ethnic communities, and subsequently multiculturalism was adopted as a social policy (Earnest, 2009). From 1978, the selection of migrants became more structured with an increased importance on attracting people who would contribute to the Australian economy and way of life. In 1986, an 'Independent' category was established to attract young migrants.

Applicants migrating under this category were required to fulfil criteria and with points that were given to proficiency in English language and professional qualifications. This led to an overwhelming entry of highly educated migrants and the arrival of overseas Asian students.

Similar to Canada, the USA and the UK, Australia uses a points system for the screening of potentially skilled migrants (Phan, Banerjee, Deacon, & Taraky, 2015). Introduced in the 1990s, the Australian Skilled Migration Visa (subclass 457, visa) allowed skilled migrants to work in Australia for up to four years, with the condition that they had a sponsorship by an Australian employer (Bahn, 2015; Spinks, 2010). In 2017, the Temporary Skill Shortage Visa (subclass, 482) replaced the 457 visa and allowed the sponsorship of skilled migrants by employers for either 2 or 4 years (Australian Government, 2019). While skilled migration is a key element in Australia's strategy to address major human capital issues and imperatives, underutilisation and atrophy of professional migrant skills remain critical problems (Cameron, Farivar, & Dantas, 2019). Research into skilled migration policy and practice highlights the need for greater assistance and support in terms of pre-arrival and post-arrival settlement and employment information; income support; professional and peer support and community contact, networking and social support (Cameron, 2011).

### *Migrant Women in the Australian Multicultural Landscape*

In June 2017, Australia's female population numbered 12.4 million, approximately 200,000 more than 12.2 million males (ABS, 2018a). Between 2000 and 2016, there were an estimated 2.2 million permanent migrants arriving in Australia (ABS, 2018b). Permanent migrants to Australia are categorised into three main visa streams: Skill Stream, Family Stream and Humanitarian Stream, accounting for 58, 32 and 10 per cent of migrants, respectively, from 2000 to 2016. Overall, 52 per cent of permanent migrants in Australia are women, with a higher proportion of women in the Family Stream (63 per cent) than the other visa streams, both of which comprise of approximately 48 per cent of migrant women (ABS, 2018b). The majority (73 per cent) of permanent migrants speak a language other than English at home; with the Humanitarian Stream migrants most likely to speak a language other than English at home (94 per cent), followed by Family Stream (73 per cent) and the Skill Stream (69 per cent) migrants (ABS, 2018b).

### *Theoretical Underpinnings*

This paper is underpinned by the key concepts of resilience, empowerment, family and culture and mentoring and capacity building which have been explained in brief.

#### *Resilience*

Resilience is an important concept, as building resilience to adversity is a common thread highlighted among migrants when trying to rebuild lives (Lenette, Brough,

& Cox, 2013; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Atkinson, Martin, and Rankin (2009) define resilience as, 'the ability to return to recover readily from the extremes of trauma, deprivation, threat or stress' (p. 137). Similarly, Rutter (2007, p. 208) states that resilience is the phenomenon observed when individuals have 'relatively good outcomes despite exposure to adverse life experiences'. Common to definitions of resilience is the recovery of the individual from difficult events (Atkinson et al., 2009; Rutter, 2007). Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, and Vlahov (2007) broaden the debate surrounding resilience to recognise protective factors, including family, employment, social support and good health, which promote individual resilience. Further, the notion of collective resilience acknowledges the importance of community assets, including wider community supports in creating and reinforcing personal resilience (Chung, Hong, & Newbold, 2013, p. 72).

### *Empowerment*

Empowerment is inextricably related to and relevant for particular cultural and social contexts in which people live and includes psychological, social, political and outcome empowerment (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009). Freire (1999) describes empowerment as a cultural synthesis, where all actors involved in the empowerment process undergo change and all knowledge is shared equally. Internationally, the term 'empowerment' is used to describe a range of activities including 'micro-credit' and 'employment schemes', 'reproductive health activities' and 'self-esteem for adolescents', women's empowerment programmes and 'spiritual activities' of faith-based organisations. An all-encompassing definition of 'empowerment' by UNESCO is 'How individuals and communities engage in learning processes in which they create, share knowledge, tools and techniques in order to change and improve the quality of their own lives and societies' (UNESCO, n.d.). 'Empowerment' has been successfully incorporated into disciplines of social work, anthropology, education and human rights and incorporates participatory action. Kabeer (2012) suggests that the concept of 'empowerment' is closely linked to the term 'liberation' used in earlier literature, but it is not used in contemporary feminist discourse. Empowerment highlights numerous ways in which changes can enhance the ability of women to apply greater control over their own lives. Paid work also has the empowering and transformative capacity to provide agency and give voice to women and comprises material dimensions of women's empowerment which include economic resources such as access to property rights, credit, social transfers and skills training (Kabeer, 2016).

### *Family*

The family has been known to serve as a protective or risk factor in an individual's life (Caplan, 1982; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). A separate body of research has since considered resilience as a family-level construct, in which the family is portrayed as an important unit of support (McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Han, & Allen, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Walsh, 1996). Family strength is a theoretical construct that has significantly contributed to the development of family resilience (Olson & Gorall, 2003; Silberberg, 2004). Family resilience has been described as how families use their strengths in times of stress (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996). Culture

is also a vital aspect of family resilience and helps strengthen family and community bonds. Many migrants are strongly aligned to their culture they belong to (Boyden & Mann, 2005).

### *Mentoring and Capacity Building*

Mentoring is a vital contribution to a successful career, particularly for women. Mentoring has traditionally been defined as a one-to-one relationship in which an experienced older career person guides and supports the career development of a new or early-career member. This enables newly arrived migrants the opportunity to create a social network, learn about their new home and meet the community (Earnest, 2009). Sorcenelli and Yun (2007) propose a model that encourages a broader, more flexible network of support and capacity building, in which no single person possesses the expertise to help someone navigate a career but there is a network of support that helps new members. In this model, robust networks engaging multiple 'mentoring partners' in non-hierarchical, collaborative, cross-cultural partnerships are established which address specific areas of mentoring, such as research, teaching, working towards success and striking a balance between work and life.

## **Methods**

Using an exploratory, multiple, qualitative case study approach in a real-world setting, the aim of this study is to present multiple case studies of migrant women from WA and to give a 'voice' to the participants who are female migrants. A case study approach is the methodology of choice as its main characteristics help bring the realities of the participants' experiences to the reader and it is a method now widely employed across disciplines (Longden, 2001; Noor, 2008). There are several key components of a case study approach. First, it taps into the viewpoints of participants (women migrants to WA); second, it allows participants to describe their experiences in their own words. In this study, the women have presented their narratives in their own words; third, it is the preferred methodology when there is a need to 'closely examine contemporary events' (Yin, 2014, p. 7). In this study, the migration and resettlement experiences of women migrants have been examined.

The participants were purposely selected and migrant women were from WA. The purposive sample of 12 women are represented in government, academia, the private sector, community, civil society and not-for-profit organisations and range in ages from their 30s to 60s. Migrant women have been selected as they are known in WA among migrant, community and women's networks and have made a difference to the institutions they have worked for, the communities they belong to and also have played a role in empowering other women. The migrant women have been provided with a template to write and share their story. All women commented on their:

- Family: their current family, children, household roles and different role models who have influenced them while growing up.

- Educational experiences: their educational backgrounds and where they obtained their qualifications from.
- Professional careers: their current job, the challenges they faced and future aspirations if any.
- Their mentors: who influenced them, whom they now mentor and how they build and share capacity.
- The concept of resilience: their thoughts on resilience and how their own resilience has impacted their lives.

They have provided their life histories and shared some photographs, underpinned by theoretical concepts of family, education, career, mentors, capacity building and resilience. Each woman presented personal case narratives. The authors then read the narratives provided by the participants to gain familiarity with their stories. Initial coding have provided themes without losing the context of the participants' voices and narratives (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). To increase the credibility of this study and present participant voices, the narratives are presented as written by the women themselves with some minor editing (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Due to the word limitations of this paper, we have chosen 5 of the original 12 case narratives, and in this final selection we have attempted to represent migrant women from different parts of world. The study received ethics approval and all women were invited to participate by phone followed by an email invitation; they have participated voluntarily. All were provided with a final copy of the full paper presented at the Commission on the Status of Women 59 in March 2015 and a conference in Singapore in December 2015.

### *Quality Criteria in the Study*

The careful and purposive selection of participants has allowed for a deeper understanding and exploration of issues faced by migrant women. The non-leading, open-ended questions has guided the narratives in order to gain depth and insight into each woman's migrant experience. The qualitative research design also permitted for a rich understanding and in-depth exploration of issues (Jirojwong & Liamputtong, 2009). Member checking, through sharing information among authors and participants, has been undertaken to ensure data accuracy, along with a concurrent review of relevant and recent literature (Sharts-Hopko, 2002). The findings have been presented in a careful, meaningful and credible manner and the analysis provides for a nuanced understanding of issues faced by migrant women in our study (Kitto, Chesters, & Grbich, 2008).

## **Case Narratives of Migrant Women in WA**

*Dr Carina Hoang*

*(From a former Vietnamese refugee to a multiple award-winning author, publisher and tireless advocate)*

Carina Hoang is a former Vietnamese refugee and multiple award-winning author. Since the publication of her first award-winning book in 2011, *Boat People: Personal Stories from the Vietnamese Exodus 1975–1996*, Carina has been sought after as a guest speaker or panellist, within WA, nationally and internationally. At the age of 16, Carina escaped Vietnam on a wooden boat with her two siblings and 370 other people. She survived the harrowing journey and the extreme challenges of the journey and a primitive refugee camp. The Hoang children were accepted for resettlement in the USA. Over the next 20 years, Carina continued her education. She completed a Bachelor of Arts in Chemistry at Rosemont College, Pennsylvania, an Honours Bachelor of Arts in Gender and Cultural Studies at Murdoch University and a Master of Business Administration at California State University, Pomona. She went on to hold management positions in the marketing and human resources.

Carina is a fearless and influential advocate for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees and an inspiration to other advocates. She uses her personal experiences to inform and lobby government. She helps Australians to understand the issues surrounding contemporary asylum seekers who have arrived by boat, by sharing the experiences of the Vietnamese boat people in public forums and with students and adults. Not only is her personal story one of resilience, but also her clear advocacy for all refugees, asylum seekers and detained people on and offshore has gained her an attentive audience. She spends a great deal of her time behind the scenes, in putting forward a case for a particular individual/family as well working with others on changing systems. No matter the forum Carina is a forceful and quiet voice for the rights of refugees—and indeed other minorities—and she emphasises the human rights of dignity and fairness according to law.

One of her achievements is the voluntary assistance she gives to the families of former Vietnamese refugees who have lived through terrible conditions on uninhabited Indonesian islands. Many family members died there before they reached safely, due to hunger, illnesses and violence. Families from different parts of the world, especially Australia and the USA, have contacted her to help search for the graves of loved ones. And from careful, respectful interviews related to harrowing searches she has been able to assist people find the graves of family members, so that family members are able to grieve and find closure.

Carina is a woman of great integrity and works tirelessly to promote social justice, especially for refugees and asylum seekers, no matter which country they are from. Her voice is made all the more authentic as she has lived the experience. Following the publication of her book *Boat People: Personal Stories from the Vietnamese Exodus 1975–1996* in 2011, she has received many awards, including the Induction into the WA Women's Hall of Fame (2011); Appointed as Special Representative to the UN Refugee Agency's Australian charity, Australia for UNHCR (2012) and Ambassador for Refugee Week (Refugee Council of Australia) (2014). In 2019, she responded to an open casting call by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to appear in an Australian TV series, *The Heights*, and made her acting debut. The former refugee has completed her PhD in refugee policy, is an inspirational speaker and continues her advocacy work.

## *Rabia Siddique*

*(Fearless humanitarian, speaker; author)*

Rabia Siddique was born in Perth, Australia but then spent the first five years of her life in India. She is the eldest child of an Indian Muslim father and an Australian mother. In 1976, her family migrated to Perth where she grew up and was educated. Rabia's first experiences of social inequality and injustice were at a young age when she witnessed first-hand the difficulties and discrimination faced by migrants in conservative 1970s suburban Australia. At the vulnerable age of nine she also experienced abuse, which robbed her of her childhood and her innocence. These experiences informed decisions and choices that Rabia later made in life.

Rabia obtained a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws degrees from the University of Western Australia and started her legal career at Legal Aid WA, where she practised as a criminal defence lawyer. She then moved to the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions, where she became one of the youngest federal prosecutors in Australia. In 1998, Rabia moved to the UK and commissioned as a Legal Officer in the British Army, a rather unexpected career choice. Her career in the Army took her to England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Germany, Italy and the Middle East.

Rabia later became the British Army's 'poster girl' for promoting equality and diversity within the British Armed Forces. In a terrifying ordeal, while deployed to Iraq in 2005, Rabia, along with a male colleague, assisted with the rescue of two Special Forces soldiers from Iraqi insurgents during a hostage situation. After the Iraq hostage incident, Rabia's male colleague was awarded a Military Cross for outstanding bravery for his part in the incident, while her involvement was ignored by the British Army and Tony Blair's government. In her fight for justice, she brought a landmark race and sex discrimination case against the UK Ministry of Defence. In 2008, Rabia left the British Armed Forces and became a Crown Advocate in the British Counter-Terrorism Division of the Crown Prosecution Service, and she worked on some high-profile terrorism and hate crime prosecutions. This role also took Rabia to the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

In 2008, Rabia welcomed precious triplet sons into the world. Parenting triplets was to become Rabia's biggest and most rewarding challenge yet. In 2011, she decided to move back to Australia in order to provide her family with a safe, balanced and healthy lifestyle. Rabia currently works as a professional public speaker and facilitates engagements on the publication of her first best-selling book, *Equal Justice*. She also guest lectures at the University of Western Australia and appears in various television and radio programmes related to her story and her work in promoting 'Women in Leadership', resilience, equality and diversity in the workforce and the rights of women, children and ethnic minorities.

Rabia was awarded a Queen's Commendation for her humanitarian work in Iraq in 2006. In 2014, Rabia was a finalist in the Telstra Australian Business Women's Awards and was named as one of the Australia's 100 most influential women. In October 2015, Rabia received a standing ovation from 1,700 people at her TEDx talk entitled, 'Ripples and Waves' where she spoke about the power we all have as individuals to create the change we wish to see in this world. Rabia

is a member of the Red Cross International Humanitarian Law Committee, UN Women Australia, Equal Opportunities and Human Rights Committee, Women on Boards Australia and is an Ambassador of a number of women and children-based charities. Rabia believes passionately that education is the vaccine against violence, ignorance and oppression and has dedicated her life to inspiring and empowering others, especially women, to find their voice. Rabia continues her role as an ambassador to make the world a better place and to give voice to the voiceless. She is an Australian ambassador for the USA-based Support Veterans Now; Project Peace on Earth and several Australian charities. Rabia is also director of the International Foundation for Non-Violence and The Museum of Freedom and Tolerance Western Australia. More about Rabia can be found at [www.rabiasiddique.com](http://www.rabiasiddique.com).

### *Dr Barbara Nattabi*

*(From rural Northern Uganda to Western Australia: A story of education and empowerment of a black African woman)*

Having migrated from Uganda to Australia 11 years ago, Dr Barbara Nattabi is currently a lecturer in the School of Population and Global Health at the University of Western Australia, one of Australia's top universities. With a degree in medicine, a Master's in public health from the University of London and a PhD in international health, Barbara is the past recipient of the prestigious Australian Government Endeavour International Postgraduate Scholarship (2008–2011), and she was also awarded the highly competitive National Medical Health and Research Council Early Career Research Fellowship.

However, Barbara's accomplishments should not come as a surprise considering the strong women and benevolent men in her life. Born to two academics, her early formative education was in Canada and later at one of the best Catholic boarding high schools in Uganda, where her mother was head girl almost 30 years before. Barbara was fortunate to be born into a family where female education was the norm and not the exception. Her maternal grandmother was a school teacher, and her main role model is her mother, one of the very first veterinary PhDs in Africa who in her 70s is still a busy academic at the University of Botswana. Her mother is the matriarch of her family, setting an example for Barbara that a woman can achieve anything she sets her mind to. However, these accomplishments would not have happened if Barbara's grandfathers had not been men ahead of their time and seen the importance of education for girls.

Barbara is more than a doctor, researcher and academic. She is a single mother of a young adult son; she is a friend of many, a sister, an aunt, a grandmother, a mentor and an active community member in her rural town. Until recently, she was a committee member on a local community organisation, the Midwest African Association whose purpose is to create a vibrant community of African Australians in the Midwest who positively impact the local community. As part of this organisation, Barbara has positively contributed to the local community by participating in local community events including the largest African cook-up

for the Geraldton community; she is also a member of the African Professionals of Australia, a not-for-profit organisation that has the main function of upskilling African Professionals in Australia. She serves on several academic committees including the Sexual Health and Blood-borne Virus Applied Research and Evaluation Network (SiREN); the Project Interest Group; the Vision CRC Continuous Quality Improvement Working Group, Brien Holden Vision Institute and many others.

Barbara recognises that she is a product of different people from various walks of life and they have served as her mentors and taught her to be resilient. From her female school teachers and high-school principal to the resilient women whom she worked with in war-torn Northern Uganda, many of these women have had very little in terms of material wealth and had experienced the horrors of war, including the AIDS patients with whom she interacted closely. Finally, to the friends and *de facto* family that has formed around her in Australia, to the strong women in her family who have overcome various odds, Barbara's mentors have informed her attitudes, and her passion for the marginalised and vulnerable.

Prior to her migration to Australia, Barbara spent 10 years working in war-torn Northern Uganda where she oversaw one of the first anti-retroviral projects in a conflict zone and busiest AIDS clinics in Africa, serving over 10,000 HIV-infected people. Barbara has continuously emphasised the importance of people, teamwork and mutual support.

In rural WA, where Barbara lived for several years and her work focusses on aboriginal Australians who despite living in a developed country face many similar challenges to those who live in Africa. Although it is early days, Barbara hopes that the experiences she has will be transferable and relevant to the indigenous communities in Australia as an advocate for girl's education and empowerment, and the true empowerment of men. Having experienced domestic violence herself, and having interacted with many women who have, Barbara recognises the unilateral emphasis that the empowerment of women cannot occur without dismantling structural barriers that undervalue women. Through her work, Barbara works to contribute to the true empowerment of both women and men to achieve full and lasting potential so that all can positively contribute to the communities in which they live. Barbara is an academic and lecturer in the School of Population and Global Health at the University of Western Australia. More details about Barbara can be found at <https://research-repository.uwa.edu.au/en/persons/barbara-nattabi>

### *Mina Jafari*

*(From Iran to being a registered migration agent in Perth, WA)*

Mina Jafari's passion in life is to help people in the time of need. She enjoys helping people by providing them different type of services, including community services, language and translation services or just providing them with information they need to adjust to a new country, a new working environment which enable them to fit into the new society. As a bilingual migration agent, she has been approached by many people inside or outside Australia. Her mission is to help

them improve their quality of life by enabling them to come to Australia and establish a new life. Through her job as a migration agent, she has helped many refugees settle in Australia in order to shorten the process of them sponsoring their families and settle them to Australia. This way she has empowered them to enjoy a better life and to reunite with their family by saving their family from living in danger and suffering from life disadvantage.

As refugees, her clients are mainly from male-dominated countries. She always provides them with advice regarding their family life, rights of their wives and daughters, and she always encourages them to facilitate their female family members' education as a priority after their arrival in Australia. She also provides community services to her fellow Iranians by organising gatherings on cultural occasions with the hope that they have an easier time being away from their families on those occasions.

Mina studied BA in Political Science in Tehran University, Iran and at the same time a BA in English Translation at Azad University, also in Tehran. She continued her postgraduate studies in Australian Immigration Law and Practice at Murdoch University and also completed the New Zealand Immigration Law and Practice course with Australian National University. Her very first priority in life is her family—her husband and two children. She always fosters a family environment to encourage her children's education and her husband's success at work. Mina runs her own migration and translation business as a sole trader. Her challenges in this job are to keep herself available for all her clients, update herself with regular immigration changes, meet Department of Immigration deadlines and provide services of a high standard to clients. She likes to work as a sole trader, as she believes this way, she has the chance to meet all her clients face to face, hear their stories and cater her services based on their need.

She is a member of the Case for Refugees and Metropolitan Migrant Centre and has provided their clients with free consultation. She has visited detention centres to meet refugees in need and has provided them with support as required. Mina also works with multicultural groups (from Japan, China, Nepal, Taiwan) in the education sector to facilitate international students' education in Australia. As a migrant herself, her initial settlement in Australia was difficult. Facing a new way of life with a completely different culture was hard to cope with. However, the Australians were always kind but getting familiar with their way of thinking and living was a challenge. However, these days she considers herself as an Australian with a mission of getting fellow Australians to become familiar with other parts of world. Mina continues her translation and migration support work and more details about her work can be found at <http://www.aasan.com.au/about-us/>

### *Andrea Creado*

*(CEO of a Multicultural Women's Health Service)*

Andrea arrived in Australia in 2002, after growing up, studying and marrying in India. She completed her Master's degree at Nagpur University, followed by a Graduate Diploma in Counselling from Xavier's Institute of Counselling in Mumbai, India. Expecting her first child, Andrea was concerned with the changing

political and social environment in India and decided to migrate to Australia, choosing Perth for the climate and an aunt there who would provide initial support.

Despite the excitement of the new lifestyle, she had to grow accustomed to the quiet of the city, so different from the hustle and bustle of India. She relished the challenges of driving for the first time on Australian roads with gusto. In her migration experience, she faced many challenges—she taught herself to drive, applied for over 100 jobs and got rejected and was told that with no local experience she would never get a job in human services. She was told to get a job, packing on a factory production line. With dwindling savings, her husband in India nursing his father and a small child, she set only one goal—to get established in Australia. Andrea began with voluntary work to get experience, and eventually she got a permanent job in 2003. She started work with the Ethnic Communities Council, later completing an Honours Degree in Psychology and going on to become Director and CEO of *Ishar*, a women's health agency located in the northern suburbs of Perth.

In India, Andrea volunteered with the church, working with orphanages, old-age homes, delivering sex education to high-school students and counselling couples. In Australia, she has continued her voluntary work with non-governmental organisations focussing on migrant and refugee women. She has volunteered with the church, cooking for seniors, with her children's school, as a Scout Leader and as a manager of the soccer team.

Through her work and personal life, Andrea has mentored several women who come from various backgrounds. One such migrant woman was in an abusive relationship and had two young children. Through counselling and gaining knowledge of the support available to her, she slowly gained the strength to make the decision to leave her abusive relationship. In the early days of her separation, Andrea gave her and her kids shelter in her own home and the woman said that after years she felt she was being looked after. The journey of mentoring continues to ten years later on a weekly basis. The woman has obtained an accounting degree, a job, a house, learned to drive and has raised two young boys who are doing well in school. This mentee often says when she doubts herself, "Look back and see how far you have come on your own." This helps her gain the strength to carry on.

Andrea has developed various projects that empower women to become independent, successful and contributing community members. She has developed programmes that focus on women developing skills to enter workplace or establish small businesses. Hundreds of migrant women have been impacted by these programmes. In recognition of this work, *Zonta International* awarded Andrea, a *Woman of Achievement Award*. Through the years, she has worked hard not taking a break to have her second child and has raised her family while working fulltime leading an organisation. She supports her parents who live with her. She says, 'I am the first point of contact for all my family when they are in need'.

In *Ishar*, she has found a cause in which she passionately believes and for which she advocates fervently—the empowerment and independence of women, particularly those from migrant and humanitarian backgrounds. Under her leadership, *Ishar* has grown in strength being recognised for its work by the government and community. In 2014, *Ishar* made 60,000 contacts with women from 60 different ethnicities. The top five major concerns that women

presented were mental health issues, family relationships, lack of housing, lack of employment skills and lack of life skills. Her inspiration comes from the refugee women she works with every day. Like all not-for-profit, non-governmental organisations, Ishar faces a constant and competitive battle for funding, both for the core activities of the organisation and for additional projects and programmes. It is her ongoing challenge to initiate the development and implementation of innovative and proactive programmes, addressing the particular settlement and other needs of the migrant and refugee women while complying with restrictive funding guidelines.

Her experience of migration has been utterly empowering, testing the limits of her capabilities and strengths. Her future goals are to get a Doctorate in Psychology, guide her children to establish responsible lives, expand her voluntary work and influence government policy in the areas of women's health and education so that there is a systemic change to reduce domestic violence, homelessness and impoverishment of women. Andrea leads a passionate team supporting refugee and migrant women's health in WA and more details about Andrea can be found at <https://www.ishar.org.au/team>

## **Discussion**

The economic wealth that places Australia in the ranks of the developed Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries of the world has been made possible due to the remarkable contributions of its migrants. Migrants in Australia have built a dynamic and multicultural society, with each ethnic community contributing richly to the success and prosperity of the larger community of which they have become an inextricable and invaluable part. The country will likely remain an attractive destination due to its openness to migration flows, and employment options (Cully & Pejowski, 2012).

While the increasing presence of women in migration flows worldwide has been documented (IOM, 2012, 2014, 2017), their contribution to global economies warrants further exploration. Female migrants constitute slightly less than half 130 million or 47.9 per cent of global international migrants (UN DESA, 2019). As women outnumber men in the Australian population count, and immigrant women continue to migrate to Australia in high numbers, there is an urgent need to document the important part migrant women play in shaping this multicultural landscape and have contributed in diverse ways. In support of this broader conceptualisation, our research highlighted that for migrant women, resilience encompasses a holistic view that includes family, education, well-being and the environment's ability to provide culturally appropriate and accessible services and fulfilling employment (Lenette et al., 2013). It also documented that resilience and empowerment for the migrant women in our study was an ongoing, non-static process, experienced in navigating everyday life (Lenette et al., 2013).

The narratives of the skilled migrant women in our study document how women migrants find themselves renegotiating and reforming their qualifications and experiences. The women in this study have supportive families, especially parents and partners, who value education and have encouraged them to get a

university education and further their studies. Nearly all of the women undertook further study in Australia. These migrant women are passionate community advocates and have played a supportive role in their communities—they have mentored, advised, volunteered and build the capacity of other women. All display a strong social justice and human rights conscience and are passionate advocates of gender issues.

Similar to the studies conducted by Pfeiffer and Cameron (2014) on the employment outcomes of migrant women in a rural community-based, labour market programme in Queensland, and Webb's (2015) study of female migrants negotiating the vocational education sector in Australia, the narratives of the skilled migrant women in our study highlight how they find themselves adapting their qualifications and experiences as they confront Australian labour market practices. Through an analysis of their collective migration experiences, our study also documents that there are 'blind spots' (where qualification and previous experiences are not recognised, where experience in their home countries is undermined, where registration practices are expensive and stringent) in current labour market policy and a better understanding of the gendered and racialised practices of education and employment needs further research (Webb, 2015).

Immigrant women's access is influenced and challenged by their migration experience and gender-related complexities. All programmes and interventions aiming to benefit immigrant women's access to health, education and social services should be framed within a justice, social equity and human rights approach to counter ongoing disparities and existing practice and discourse. This study also documents that protective factors such as education, social support, family and employment have mitigated resettlement issues enhancing participants' resilience and self-reliance.

This study focussing on reflective narratives of migrant women's lives at different stages of the migration process provides longitudinal perspectives on migration resettlement trajectories. Migration cannot be experienced as a linear and rational process but it involves disruptions to careers trajectories and transitions that are multilinear and multifaceted, nuanced over time and impacted by the gendered geographies of power (Pessar & Mahler, 2003). These migrant women in WA have overcome the initial discrimination they have faced as migrants and as educated women and stayed positive to their ideals achieving much success. The literature indicates that strong connectedness and being able to seek reassurance and safety are all factors that help increase family resilience. These strong connections and the need for social and cultural cohesiveness are all factors observed within the family (Brookes, 2010). The findings from this study resonate with the uncontested importance of education, the importance of empowerment, mentoring and capacity building to enhance resilience and of giving back to the community.

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Currently, WA is home to people from more than 190 countries, with more than 240 languages spoken across the state. As of 2018, there were more than one

million women in WA. In 2016, 45.8 per cent of the 960,000 women (aged 18 years of age and older) living in WA were born overseas (BCEC, 2019). There is need for holistic and supportive policies to help migrant women with challenges faced in accessing services. The development of those policies should articulate their needs, aspirations and voices. We advocate policies that reduce barriers to the economic and community integration of immigrant women through recognition of previous training, work experience and educational qualifications. Our key recommendations are that policymakers, education providers, employers and others working with skilled migrants especially women need to consider ways of providing more guidance to migrants and employers on how to recognise and ‘translate’ the qualifications and experiences gained in their countries to be matched in WA. We also need to continue to provide women with avenues to feel empowered, to have opportunities to further their education, to offer adaptive structures and mechanisms that build resilience and to grow strong communities where both men and women are engaged in growth. We propose that through transnational alliances and collaboration, women can cross borders to generate change, transform and bring about capacity building. Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is dedicated to gender equality and it highlights that gender equality can be achieved only when women are valued, enabled and empowered societally, environmentally and economically—our findings reinforce this in relation to migrant women.

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