

THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF LONELINESS AMONGST WOMEN OF REFUGEE BACKGROUND LIVING IN ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA.

Jane Rodeghiero

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis problematises the Australian government's current settlement model which aims to develop social networking and social capital for new arrivals in order for them to become 'fully integrated' into society and achieve a sense of Australian national identity. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into why so many women of refugee background are experiencing social disconnection and loneliness for protracted periods. Six months of ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken to explore how existing policies and practices relate to the everyday experiences and priorities of a small group of women as they endeavored to rebuild their fractured social world in Adelaide.

I centrally argue that the government's current settlement model is flawed for five key reasons. Firstly, its assimilationist-integration agenda can produce or exacerbate feelings of social alienation. Secondly, it undermines relations with family and people of similar ethnic-cultural background through highly restrictive family reunification policies and the withdrawal of government support and resources to ethno-specific organisations. Thirdly, the assumption that this will inevitably lead to the increased development of relations with the wider population is erroneous. The current political and social conditions have produced an environment where these relations do not easily evolve through informal social interactions or active participation in work and study and there is a lack of effective and properly resourced facilitated opportunities. Perversely then, the very process of social networking and building social capital, considered to be vital to the current settlement model, is likely to be disrupted.

Fourthly, current settlement policies are unsound because they are based on unrealistic assumptions about the capacity of women from a refugee background to develop trusting, reciprocal and durable relations. In doing so, they fail to acknowledge the structures that produce disadvantage and exclusion and the complexity of issues such as changed family dynamics, mistrust, and prejudice. Policy makers need to take more account of the experiential dimension of network building.

Finally, the current settlement model is defective because it overlooks the subjective goals of the women in this study. Essentially, they wanted to feel part of a nourishing and inclusive social world with family and friends. However, and despite their best efforts, many found themselves to be deprived of immediate close supportive ties, often for many years after arrival

and the attainment of citizenship. This generated or exacerbated feelings of profound loneliness, social disconnection and emotional distress, which complicated further network building. This has important implications for policymakers. A lonely, socially disconnected and alienated woman can be seen as being the obverse to one who is socially 'well integrated', and productively building social capital and a sense of Australian national identity. Moreover, these women are unlikely to feel 'well settled' or a sense of social inclusion if they cannot identify with people through intimate relations. Consequently, the government is failing to fulfill its settlement agenda as well as the critical social needs of many women of refugee background. More attention to this issue is necessary to improve settlement outcomes.

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Preface

Over the past few decades or so, the Australian government's overarching settlement-related objectives have been for new arrivals to be self-reliant, well 'integrated' into the economic, cultural, social and political structures of society, and achieve a sense of belonging to Australian national identity. The prescription for the process this goes something like this: learn the English language; participate in work, study and/or volunteering; access mainstream services as quickly as possible; adopt so-called Australian cultural norms and values; and eventually, gain citizenship and vote. This simplistic, linear version of the process of settlement however, fails to capture the complex experiences of many people of refugee background who are likely to face significant hurdles in achieving these steps along the way. Furthermore, many may fulfill these goals but experience intense loneliness and a sense of social disconnection and hence remain feeling fundamentally 'unsettled'. How is this possible?

My personal involvement with people of refugee background began about eight years ago when I became a volunteer with the Australian Refugee Association (ARA) and a year later, was employed as a social support worker. During this time my colleagues and I have been concerned about an increasing number of clients, primarily women, recounting their experiences of feeling lonely and socially disconnected. This is often despite their length of time living here, English language competency and participation in employment or study, for example. A key issue raised by these clients was the lack of opportunities they had in meeting people from diverse backgrounds, within a context of informal interactions, in order to develop friendships. This persistent pattern warranted further investigation.

One of the female clients who particularly inspired me to explore the themes of this thesis I met soon after I began working at ARA. The woman, who I shall call Rose, was from South Sudan, in her late 20's and had been living in Australia for about two and a half years. A social worker had previously identified social 'isolation' as being a key issue impeding Rose's settlement progress. It was suggested that she might benefit from the engagement of a volunteer 'friend' who could visit regularly. I arranged an introductory visit. We arrived at her city flat one warm afternoon and knocked on the door. We waited but there was no response. I knocked again more loudly and still there was no response. Minutes passed and I was about to ring Rose when the door opened tentatively. We were quietly welcomed and ushered into the darkened lounge room. The volunteer and I sat down on a couch while Rose sat on the other side of the

room in a single armchair with a shawl wrapped securely around her. Her English was very good and we chatted generally about how her life in Australia was going. Rose came to Australia alone and had no relatives here. She had been living alone in the same gloomy block of flats for about two years and did not know any of her neighbours. Rose said that she only had one friend in Adelaide whom she met when she was attending English classes but because she was now living a long distance away, she only saw her very occasionally.

Rose conveyed feelings of extreme loneliness and social disconnection and talked freely of the depression she said she was experiencing at the time. I remember her asserting that 'we don't have depression in my country', and 'I've never felt lonely before'. She said that her main desire was to meet new people, to 'find a friend' and have somebody to talk to. Apparently she spent most of her days at home alone. The volunteer immediately enquired if she had been in touch with 'her community', the assumption being her 'ethnic' group. Rose looked at us blankly. It transpired that she was from a minority ethnic group and not only did no such formal 'community' exist here but she had no interest in mixing socially with others from her ethnic and cultural background. This was due to tensions resulting from the war and issues of mistrust as well as a wariness of inviting gossip about her single status. Rose was not religious and therefore did not have the opportunity to meet people via religious membership. One of the main problems she identified was that she did not know how and where to meet new people in Adelaide.

As the atmosphere slowly became more relaxed, Rose spontaneously opened up about her past traumatic experiences. Her parents and brother had been killed during the war and she did not know the whereabouts of her other siblings who she missed terribly. She talked about how she felt 'lost' and did not know where she 'fitted' in her new social environment and I remember clearly her words: 'I feel so alone in the world now'. As she told her story she became overwhelmed and started to cry uncontrollably. The volunteer and I immediately rushed to her and gave her a long hug. This outburst was unexpected and I felt out of my depth in being able to provide any real solution to her situation. Rose's case drew my attention to the importance of social relations to easing the settlement process. Not just for practical support, but for emotional support and friendship and a sense of social connection. It also raised a common perception that people of refugee background have ready access to a strong co-ethnic/cultural community network upon arrival for settlement support and social connections.

Another particular case has stayed with me for many years. This woman, who I will refer to as Razieh, was from Afghanistan, in her 30's and had been living in Australia more than five years with her children when I met her. Her husband had been 'missing' for 10 years. Again, she knew nobody when she arrived. Razieh was desperate to be reunited with her mother and sisters who were living in Pakistan. After waiting for several years for a decision, her application to sponsor her younger sister and mother was rejected. She was heartbroken and continued to worry constantly about their safety and welfare but was determined to rebuild her life here. She had worked very hard to learn the English language, drive a car, complete tertiary studies, gain her citizenship and had also secured a decent job. Although her work colleagues were friendly, she said that they had not invited her to socialise with them outside work. Razieh was socially distant from others from her country of origin due to issues of mistrust and the desire to avoid judgment about her choice to be non-religious. The need to move house numerous times had made it difficult for her to get to know her neighbours.

Like Rose, Razieh was feeling socially disconnected and extremely lonely. She told me that sometimes she was so distressed about her situation that she would go to the local park and sit by herself and cry. Her main desire at the time was to find friends but she said that she didn't know how to go about doing it here. Razieh claimed that she could not feel 'at home' in Australia until she was able to do so. In this case, although the key outward markers of apparent 'successful' settlement had been addressed, Razieh was still struggling to achieve *her* settlement goals.

Whilst I stress here that people of refugee background are individuals who have diverse pre-migration and post-migration experiences, they are also very likely to face many common settlement issues and challenges. For most, war and conflict, displacement, and for a small minority, eventual third country settlement, results in the separation from family members and friends. Many are able to re-establish previous relations and/or create new ones with little problem. For others however, particularly those who are forced to entirely rebuild their social networks here, the process can be much more difficult. During early settlement people commonly experience periods of feeling lonely and socially alienated or, a subjective state of social disconnection and detachment. For some however, it can get worse over time and continue to be a critical issue for many, many years. This is often coupled with limited opportunities to meet new people within an informal context. For all the women in this study, settlement in Adelaide resulted in separation from significant loved ones. Re-establishing and

building new social relations and networks meant that often complex and diverse situations needed to be negotiated in the new socio-cultural and political context, raising significant challenges as well as opportunities.

The Government's version of 'successful' settlement overlooks the key priorities of people of refugee background. I argue that central to this is their social well-being; the capacity to be reunited with family, build friendships and feel a sense of social connectedness. Social relations can play a critical role in supporting and fuelling the process of settlement. Indeed, smooth settlement can often depend on a person's ability to build supportive social ties. However, and as I will show, the process for the women in this study could be problematic and complicated by a number of factors. Despite their best endeavors many found their immediate social world bereft of intimate social relations. Accordingly, many experienced extended periods of feeling socially alienated and lonely. This is a problem for both people of refugee background and the government. A person who is feeling lonely and socially alienated is unlikely to feel subjectively 'well' settled. Furthermore, they are unlikely to feel a sense of belonging to Australian national identity if they cannot identify with people through their immediate personal relationships. Various factors related to pre-migration experiences and the political and social conditions of settlement interplay to shape their capacity to re-establish and build new social ties. Significantly though, Australian Government policies and practices (or their absence) do not reflect the everyday life world of the women I have come to know and can produce or exacerbate social alienation.