EMERALD POINTS

# COMMUNITY WORK WITH MIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN

## 'Insiders' and 'Outsiders' in Research and Practice

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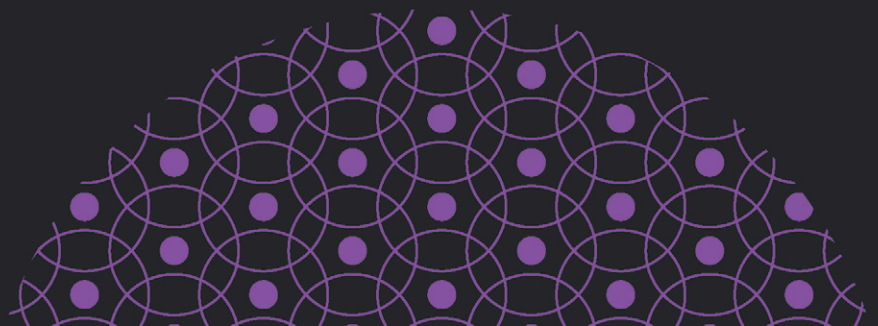

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*While we were finishing this manuscript in summer 2021, the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan.*

*One of the authors of this book was a child refugee; her parents fled the Taliban in 1999 and arrived in the UK in a refrigerated container with their young children.*

*This book is dedicated to all the women who have had to live in fear, surrender their freedom, or flee their homes and countries – to those who stayed and those who escaped, to those who survived and those who tragically did not.*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Naomi Thompson** is a Senior Lecturer in Community and Youth Work at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is a sociologist of community, faith and inclusion. She is an applied researcher with a focus on co-production and on ensuring the voices of marginalised and excluded communities are heard.

**Rabia Nasimi** is a former Afghan refugee who fled Afghanistan in 1999. Whilst studying Sociology, she was extensively involved in running a refugee community organisation, a charity founded by her father to support refugee integration in the UK.

**Marina Rova** is a dance movement psychotherapist and lecturer. She is programme convenor for the MA Dance Movement Psychotherapy programme at Goldsmiths, University of London.

**Andy Turner** has worked for over three decades in community and youth work, living and working in some of the poorest parts of England as a practitioner, manager, researcher, trainer and activist. He is a lecturer and programme convener for the BA Social and Community Work at Goldsmiths, University of London.

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We owe thanks to the Pilgrim Trust who funded the women's project and the accompanying research over three years.

We are very grateful to the director, staff and volunteers who were part of the community organisation in which the research that underpins this book took place. We are not listing names in order to help protect the anonymity of the women's project and the women who engaged with it – but we are immensely thankful to all in the charity who supported the project and the research study over the three years, of which there are many. Thank you also for your tireless work supporting our refugee and migrant communities in London and beyond.

Naomi would also like to thank all the family, friends and colleagues who have supported and encouraged her to complete this book – of which there are too many to name them all. She would particularly like to thank her partner, Steve, and son, Dylan, for their constant love, support and encouragement. She is also very grateful to the women in her life who have taught her about inequality and courage and who have informed and shaped her own understandings – including, among many others, Rachel McRobbie, Funke Abimbola, Dawn Bowman, Vicki Waddingham, Lara Pereira, Charlie Porter-Baker and Živilė Stanton.

Thanks from Rabia: I would like to give a thank you to my family for their love and support. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity my family and I have been given to migrate to the UK for a better life, and the love and support we have received whilst living here.

Marina would like to thank the women who attended the creative workshops for their generosity of spirit in sharing their stories and supporting others during the process. Marina is also indebted to the women who have shared in her own story of becoming, as a cultural nomad and immigrant to the UK, and wishes to thank her DMP sisters Davina Holmes and Nanette

Hoy and her ArtsMinded sisters Claire Burrell and Marika Cohen for being a constant support and source of inspiration.

Thanks from Andy: For Eve, Millie, Jess and Rach – my clan who bring adventure and love. For mum – a counsellor at Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre working with refugees and asylum seekers in areas of torture, loss and bereavement – for all your work, inspiration and love.

Finally and most importantly, we would all like to offer our gratitude and admiration to all the women who shared their stories – without you this book would not exist.

# 1

# INTRODUCTION – INTERSECTIONALITY, INTEGRATION AND EMPOWERMENT

> *This place means freedom to me because my husband didn't let me go to college, but I explained there are no men here… I travel over an hour on the bus even if I'm ill… I've sometimes felt depressed because of my illness as well but when I'm here I forget all the pain and I'm happy. I don't even know how the day is passing so quickly when I'm here. All I've done for six years is walk to the nursery and school and back but now there is something different.*
>
> *(Mariam, women's project participant)*

Mariam's statement that 'This place means freedom to me' represents the powerful impact of community work with some of the most marginalised groups in society. Mariam's story, before engaging with the women's project, is of a woman who had been several years in the United Kingdom but not yet learned English or made steps towards integration beyond taking her children to school and nursery. She was unable to communicate with their teachers about her children's education – or speak to her doctors about her health problems, without a family member or an interpreter present. She felt almost completely isolated. Other women in our research reported similar experiences of never having been able to shop alone, use public transport, learn to drive, or access services. Many did not socialise outside of their immediate families. Few of them took time to focus on themselves. One small grassroots community project became a place of freedom and empowerment for these women where they developed social solidarity, knowledge and resources, set goals for their

lives and became both more aware of the inequalities they face and more able to stand together to overcome them.

The women's project coordinator described a situation where many of the women 'bring their four walls of isolation with them' when they settle in the United Kingdom and at their point of first contact with the project (see Chapter 5). Some women were living with husbands and families that were complicit in their isolation. However, societal prejudice, structural discrimination and cultural insensitivity had largely compounded the isolation of the women, particularly when they had made attempts to 'integrate' or to access services or support. These challenges meant the women in our study often lacked a means of survival, or even any small part of their lives and identities, that was independent of their immediate families. Such freedoms need to be articulated as fundamental *rights* for all women and not simply *privileges* for some. Policy and practice need to focus on protecting these basic human rights for refugee and migrant women (often a hidden and isolated group) and within this, to support them to overcome their isolation.

At the time of writing, a renewed humanitarian crisis is underway in Afghanistan, the country where around half of the women in our research were from, as well as being the country from where one of the authors of this book fled the Taliban with her family as a young child. A new UK resettlement programme is in place for displaced people from Afghanistan, a country where women and girls in particular are facing new challenges to their rights, freedoms and safety. This makes ever more pertinent the need to consider how we can effectively support marginalised refugee and migrant women to be empowered and fully integrated in their communities and society, taking account of their needs and assets, recognising the traumas they have experienced and the strength they hold.

This book offers the findings of our research (undertaken by academic researchers and community development workers) over three years in one community organisation working with marginalised refugee and migrant women. The proceeding chapters explore a community-based, bottom-up approach to engaging with migrant and refugee women, drawing on our case study. The organisation delivers a model of practice that involves accessible and culturally sensitive English language education, practical/informative workshops and social integration in a women-only community space, rather than these elements being accessed separately in formal spaces.

Some in the community development field, both in research and practice, may take issue with our inference that these women are marginalised – due to a turn away from deficit-focused interventions in community development in recent decades (McKnight & Kretzmann, 2012). However, we argue that our

research demonstrates that the women's needs and challenges first need to be recognised and responded to, in order to work with their assets and potential. This is particularly important for work with the most marginalised, isolated and traumatised groups. We consider the debates about focusing on assets or needs in Chapter 4 and argue for a balanced approach that is bottom-up and long-term, recognising the detrimental impact of top-down, short-term, deficit-focused policy and practice.

Whilst the women in our research have shown great resilience they have also experienced many traumas, and these require a trauma-informed approach that meets their needs (see Chapter 8). The book argues for a bottom-up approach that centres on needs as well as assets, rejecting the binaries of current practice debates in community development. The research has significance in understanding the importance of grassroots needs-based initiatives for engaging marginalised communities. It highlights the importance of cultural relevance of services and a long-term and holistic approach to integration and empowerment that acknowledges the full range of needs and experiences the women face.

This chapter offers the background to the women's project, within which our research was conducted over three years. It outlines the theoretical frame for the text, which is grounded in feminist intersectionality. It explores key concepts such as migrant, refugee, integration and empowerment and highlights contested definitions and understandings of these terms. Finally, it presents an outline of the book and what the different chapters will cover.

## THE WOMEN'S PROJECT

Our research took place over three years with a women's project delivered by a small London-based charity. The organisation was established in 2001 when its founder, a refugee from Afghanistan who arrived in the United Kingdom with his family in 1999, began organising events and trips for other people from Afghanistan. The organisation has since expanded into a charity that helps refugees and migrants tackle the isolating factors which come with migration. The charity works primarily (but not exclusively) with refugees and migrants from Afghanistan and other Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries living in London, providing a range of services that include English language classes, employment workshops, a legal advice clinic, a children's Saturday school and homework club, youth and family support services, drop-in and telephone support, volunteer placements, and cultural and social events.

The women's project was one aspect of this range of support. For the three years in which our research took place, the project received funding centred on the delivery of monthly workshops on issues relevant to the women's lives (e.g. health, education, rights) and on the provision of one-to-one support for some of the women. However, the provision our research participants were engaging with was much wider than monthly workshops and one-to-one support. Much of the women's project work was delivered 'in kind' and by volunteers. The women's project ran weekly (rather than monthly, as funded) and provided English classes alongside workshops, as well as a range of regular social events, all in a women-only space. Children's classes and homework clubs were also provided during the times that the women's project was running. Many of the women also accessed other elements of the charity's provision such as the legal advice clinics.

The broad aims of the women's project were: firstly, to engage marginalised migrant women, particularly those from more conservative backgrounds or living isolated lives; to facilitate their involvement in practical workshops focused on topics that support their empowerment; to supplement this with individual mentoring support; and, ultimately, to move towards the women running workshops themselves and making broader changes in their lives that support their empowerment and integration. The project worked with both newly arrived women and those who had been in the United Kingdom for many years but had remained isolated over time. This book draws on the research data we collected with the women's project over three years. The study was dominantly qualitative and provided rich accounts of the women's experiences with the women's project over time. More detail on the research approach and methods is provided in Chapter 2.

## A THEORETICAL FRAMING IN FEMINIST INTERSECTIONALITY

Feminism and intersectionality provide a theoretical frame for this text. Feminist theory gained prominence in the 1970s to pay particular attention to the structures and divisions of gender in society, in response to the context in which women's voices and experiences were marginalised (and often entirely absent) in traditional and mainstream sociological theory (Cree, 2010). The voices of migrant and refugee women are often still marginalised today in theory, research, policy and practice. For these women, while their gender often exacerbates their marginalisation, other issues such as race, religion, culture, poverty and displacement all contribute to their invisibility and

oppression. As such, an intersectional frame allows us to recognise the range of factors that impact on their lives and experiences. Critical race theories emerged at a similar time to feminist theory (Cree, 2010) and are also relevant in this context, again justifying the intersectional approach.

Critical and intersectional feminist and race theories present an appropriate frame because they emerged as a challenge to the marginalisation of both women's and racialised groups' voices and encompass an understanding of other factors that marginalise people. Intersectionality itself emerged from within critical feminist and race theories to recognise how gender and race are intersecting issues that cannot be viewed or responded to separately. In particular, it was developed to make more explicit that the experiences of oppression for Black women are unique and intertwined and cannot be simplistically divided along the lines of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989).

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) argued that being 'Black' and being a 'woman' need to be considered together and not as separate issues for Black women. Coming from a background in law, she argued that legal systems (not just academic theory) needed to recognise how these issues intersect rather than treat them as separate issues of discrimination. She introduced the concepts of *racialised sexism* and *gendered racism*, specific forms of oppression for Black women, that reflect the interactions between the intersections of race and gender and create unique barriers and forms of prejudice. She was interested in how overlapping (minority) social identities relate to systems and structures of oppression. Her theory is now used widely to understand how people face multiple and intersectional discriminations and oppressions.

As such, framing our research in feminist intersectionality allows us to recognise the multiple identities and oppressions experienced by refugee and migrant women. It also emphasises gender as a key issue for these women that exacerbates their isolation beyond that experienced by refugee and migrant communities more broadly. Their isolation and oppression are often compounded from both within and without their communities. The intersectional framing, however, allows us to develop broader intersectional understandings of refugee and migrant women's lives, with potential to understand the complexly interrelated roles of factors such as class and poverty, religion and culture, race and ethnicity, as well as gender.

Our approach to conducting the research is grounded in this theoretical frame as we use qualitative narrative research to draw out nuanced understandings of refugee and migrant women's experiences in their own voices. In their book 'Telling Stories' Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) advocate for this approach to draw out marginalised voices and to provide counter-narratives, such as those of women in male-dominated institutions. This

book is our attempt to present the marginalised voices of migrant and refugee women, who have been neglected in the discourses informing policy, practice and research, including in our field of community development.

We have deliberately not overemphasised the positions of already dominant theorists in community development. Instead, we focus on drawing out newer and more marginalised perspectives that problematise some key assumptions in our field. Our engagement with the community development literature occurs primarily in Chapter 4. However, most prominent and important to the theorising we do in this book are the voices of migrant and refugee women themselves. We hope the women's stories in this book help to shape community interventions with them, and academic discourse about them, and that it contributes to addressing the absence of their voices and experiences in both policy and academic debates in our field.

## MIGRANT, REFUGEE OR ASYLUM SEEKER?

Migrant people are categorised in different ways. Labels are often applied by others, through policy definitions, from the outside – and contribute to the 'othering' of migrant and refugee communities, particularly where they are bound up in problematic discourses about them.

In the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is defined as 'someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' (UNHCR, 2021a). However, whether someone is considered a migrant or refugee has become increasingly defined by the host countries, with governments and their agents reserving the right to decide whether the person's 'fear' is 'well-founded' or not. Right-wing governments and populist calls to become tougher on migration mean such decision-making processes have been changeable over time.

In the current context, United Kingdom and international policy retains the right to determine whether someone is legitimately a refugee or not. Governments have implemented processes of deciding whether someone will be granted 'refugee status' after they seek asylum in a particular country. As such, prior to their application being successful, they are considered by policy to be an 'asylum seeker' rather than a refugee (Refugee Action, 2016). Even whether someone can legitimately be considered for asylum is bound up in complex rules around when and where the individual first claims asylum after their

displacement, during their migration journey and/or after arrival in the United Kingdom.

As such, an 'asylum seeker' is defined by policy as someone whose asylum claim has been submitted and is under consideration, whereas someone with 'refugee' status is a person within the first four years of a successful claim (Taylor, 2009). Following this, they can apply for 'indefinite leave to remain' but rights to family reunion remain restricted until a person is granted 'exceptional leave to remain' (Taylor, 2009). As such, a person's status as asylum seeker, refugee, or citizen is entirely validated by the host country (in this case, the United Kingdom) and not the individual.

Asylum seekers in the United Kingdom are not allowed to gain paid employment, but they can claim a restricted level of welfare and healthcare (Taylor, 2009). Those refused asylum lose this limited access to support though they retain very limited access to urgent healthcare if and while they remain in the country. These people whose claims have been refused may be deported or become undocumented migrants without recourse to public funds, unable to gain legitimate employment and living in fear of deportation. The UNHCR (2021b) emphasises that when a person is refused asylum, it does not mean that their claim was 'bogus' or 'illegal' and argues they should not be framed or treated as criminals. Despite this, over the year ending in March 2021, the United Kingdom entered almost 13,000 asylum seekers at various stages of their claims into detention, and this was a 44% reduction on the previous (pre-pandemic) year. While this figure represents the number of entries into detention over a one-year period, there were a total of 1,033 individuals in detention at the end of March 2021, and this was also lower than pre-pandemic figures (UNHCR, 2021b).

In addition to refugees arriving in the United Kingdom and seeking asylum after arrival, some refugees are proactively brought to the United Kingdom through resettlement schemes, though these schemes settle relatively small numbers of people overall (UNHCR, 2021b). Recent examples include the schemes for vulnerable persons from Syria (for refugees fleeing ISIS) and Afghanistan (for refugees fleeing the Taliban).

The broader term, migrants, is used to refer to both economic and undocumented migrants – as well as often, erroneously, also for those who have fled to the United Kingdom for safety, creating the sense of a homogenous group of alien invaders that seek to benefit from UK society. Populist fears about exaggerated influxes of economic migrants are often conflated with fears over arrivals of asylum seekers, as seen in the Brexit campaign when the UK Independence Party's poster contained an image of a line of non-European refugees, confusing migration from the European Union (EU) with those

seeking asylum from other countries and continents. Grouping all migrants together in media and populist discourse, whether asylum seekers and refugees or not, serves to purposefully disregard their reasons for migration. Banded together, these migrants are viewed as a burden on welfare and the taxpayer and/or as 'taking jobs' from British people (Philo, Briant, & Donald, 2013). This is despite limited rights to welfare and to gaining employment, particularly while seeking asylum or, even more so, after an application is refused (Taylor, 2009).

In a climate of increasing right-wing populism, those risking their lives to seek safety are often referred to in derogatory ways. For example, they have been referred to as 'terrorists' and 'cockroaches' by public media in recent years (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 2018). Such framings are racialised and serve to criminalise those fleeing harm. Overall, the terms and categories relating to migration have arguably become 'othering' definitions, often framed in negative ways and used to distinguish between who is a 'legitimate citizen' and who is an outsider. This is reinforced in policy, media and populist discourse.

## INTEGRATION (AND IDENTITY)

Shaping positive identities and facilitating integration are key government priorities for marginalised and migrant groups who are settled in the United Kingdom (Home Office, 2015). However, evidence suggests that developing a positive sense of identity and engaging with communities and society can be particularly challenging for many migrant communities. Hall (1995, p. 8) argued that identities 'actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognitions which others give us'. This creates a conflict between internal identification and external grouping, particularly when negative labels are present, such as those associated with migrants, in the current global context of political populism.

Rostami-Povey (2007, p. 241) found that women from Afghanistan displaced to the United States and United Kingdom were 'constantly engaged in mediating between Western values and their Afghan/Muslim cultural identities'. Similarly, Mandaville (2009) argued that Muslims in Europe with transnational identities are viewed with suspicion. This clash of identities affects not just migrant groups but Muslim groups more broadly. For example, UK research has found that both migrant and British-born Muslims