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Refugee Women, Representation and Education

Creating a discourse of self-authorship
and potential

Melinda McPherson

书馆

ROUTLEDGE



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Refugee Women, Representation and Education

Even with increased attention to refugee women's issues in the late 20th century, post-colonial discourses have nurtured limiting representations of refugee women, predominantly as subjects of charity and as victims. Adding to a growing body of work in the field, the author challenges this preconception by offering an opportunity for women's voices to shape and influence policy, especially as it pertains to the role of education in the authoring of their own lives.

In this volume, Melinda McPherson centres refugee women's voices in the educational policy debate. Drawing on interviews with a group of refugee women in Melbourne, she explores purposes of education, and asks what kind of society these women imagine for themselves and for others. Their critical reflections, personal experiences and diverse backgrounds offer a contrasting picture to that privileged in ordinary policy debate. The women require support, resources and guidance; but they are agents in their own lives who bring strength, thought and imagination to crafting their own destinies in a new country. Education is a pivotal tool in exercising that agency.

Throughout the book, discussions centre on why education matters to refugee women, focusing upon the integral links between education, civil society and successful settlement, and conversely on the negative impacts of exclusionary practices. Representation and participation in education is a topic of critical social justice concern, and as such, the book will form important reading for academics, students, policy makers and community development researchers.

Melinda McPherson is an Honorary Research Fellow at Federation University and an independent consultant who works for the government and community organisations on education, gender, diversity, strategic planning and evaluation in Australia. She gained her Ph.D. from Federation University (formerly the University of Ballarat) Victoria, Australia.

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Preface

I grew up in Melbourne's northern suburbs during the 1970s and 1980s at a time when the population was largely working class and migrant – before gentrification. My experiences and relationships growing up had a profound influence on my views about education, social justice and gender. In a complex, multicultural community I was both outsider and insider. On the one hand, I was a young woman who belonged to the dominant 'Anglo' culture in Australia. On the other, most of my primary relationships were with first or second generation migrant and refugee girls and their families. These relationships steeped me in diverse cultural worlds and sensitised me to the perspectives of my friends. My understandings of them – and their representations of themselves – did not seem to coincide with the ways in which the mainstream 'culture' understood them. Further, these girls had gendered experiences of their home cultures, and the mainstream culture more widely, that commonly remained invisible or marginalised. What bothered me was how easily these dominant understandings of migrant and refugee women, which are negative and limiting, translated into real-world outcomes; into discriminatory attitudes, behaviours and treatment that became manifest on a more bureaucratic level such as policy, programmes and services.

I saw education as intrinsically linked with the possibility of social justice change – with the project of opening minds, changing perspectives, and sharing of differences. My secondary school had a 'social justice' orientation and our classroom texts, lunchtime films, drama-in-education visits and excursions were frequently themed around social justice issues, such as the effects of xenophobia. I left secondary school to become a music and drama teacher and returned to work in Brunswick and Northcote between 1990 and 1995. I became increasingly interested in issues of gender as they manifested in education policy and pedagogical frameworks. I pursued a Master's degree in Women's Studies and Education and in 1996 I moved into the university sector as a student union adviser and advocate. I also worked in a residence for international students, where conversations about culture, identity, representation and experience were commonplace. In these environments, my interests in gender, ethnicity, education and representation grew.

My Master's thesis was concerned with 'opening up' dominant understandings of women international students by hearing from the women themselves at a time when international student voices were not widely encountered. I interviewed a small group of women about their reasons for studying overseas, the particular challenges they faced and their views on education and its benefits for them. The endeavour challenged my own thinking about these students. On the one hand, I heard from the women about negative, discriminatory and ugly experiences they had in Australia. On the other hand, I observed in detail the strategic ways in which they made choices, navigated difficult circumstances and opened up opportunities for themselves.

In 2001 I took up work as an independent consultant and soon after joined a firm undertaking projects for the departments of justice, education, and human services in Victoria. Through this work, I was privileged to engage with a range of Victorian communities, including migrant and refugee women's communities, and indigenous communities, on important social issues. Between 2002 and 2005 I worked on three significant projects with migrant and refugee women – one examining migrant and refugee experiences of justice and emergency services (Success Works 2003), one exploring issues of family violence amongst culturally and linguistically diverse women in rural communities (Success Works 2004), and another that included consultations with nearly 500 migrant and refugee women regarding their social services and policy priorities (Success Works 2005).

These activities further crystallised my interest in the link between representations in policy and the material effects of those representations. Pertinent to this equation was the role of education as a site. From the perspective of many migrant women I engaged with, education was of material importance because of their belief that an education could facilitate personal, social, work and life opportunities. It was also a location in which they saw opportunities to develop skills so as to articulate their perspectives and engage in conversation, especially in relation to contesting dominant representations. I cannot think of a more central capacity to exercising agency than the exercise of voice – the ability and conditions within which to speak for oneself. It was a desire to interrupt dominant and negative representations of refugee women – women who confront and navigate more challenging and heart-breaking circumstances than I could ever imagine – that formed the motivational basis for undertaking this research.

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To my many supportive friends – Amber Mills, Andrea Speed, Annabel Harkin, Sonia Rendigs, Josephine Palermo, and Ombretta Zanetti whose interest in my progress sustained me. And to Sharon Licqurish, who has been a supportive presence at all of the major births in my life.

To my family, especially my parents whose hard work paid for my education and life chances; and in particular my mother, whose practical and moral support sustains me. To my cousin Toni, who is a kindred spirit. To Martin, who believed I could finish and did everything he could to help.

To the beautiful girls in my life; my daughter Jaeda, my nieces Natasha, Ashleigh, Millie, Grace, Astrid, Siena and the daughters of my friends, whose magnificent potential always inspires me to try and improve the world for girls and women.

To Georgina Tsolidis, whose inspiration, intelligence and kind heart helped me realise my dreams. In the true spirit of Foucault's 'Parrhesia' she provided frank, fearless and generous feedback.

Finally, to the refugee women who laughed, cried, story-told and intellectualised with me. Through their contributions, I hope we have somehow made things better.

Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACBCMA	Australian Catholic Bishops' Committee for Migrant Affairs
ACCRMS	Australian Council of Churches Refugee and Migrant Services
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
AHC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AI	Amnesty International
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AMES	Australian Multicultural Education Services
AMEP	Adult Migrant English Program
ANCORW (formerly	
ANCCORW)	Australian National Committee on Refugee Women
ANCCORW	Australian National Consultative Committee on Refugee Women
BDPA	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
BIMPR	Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural, and Population Research
CGRS	Centre for Gender and Refugee Studies, University of California
CRR	Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales
DEST	Department of Education, Science, and Training
DIAC	The Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Citizenship (Department title as of 23 January 2007)
DIMA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (27 January 2006–23 January 2007)
DIMIA	Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (26 November 2001–27 January 2006)
FMO	Forced Migration Online
GBP	Gender Based Persecution
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (Australia)
HSS	Humanitarian Settlement Services
IDC	Interdepartmental Committee of Australian Government Agency Heads
IDRC	The International Development Research Centre
IHSS	Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy

IRBC	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
JHRP	Journal of Human Rights Practice
JRS	Journal of Refugee Studies
MIMA	Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
MV	Motor Vessel
NCTAUS	National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States of America
OECD	Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development
OSW	Office for the Status of Women
RCOA	Refugee Council of Australia
RFS	Review of Funding for Schooling, Commonwealth Government of Australia
RRT	Refugee Review Tribunal
RSC	Refugee Studies Centre (Oxford University)
SIEV	Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel
SSCCM	Senate Select Committee on a Certain Maritime Incident
TPV	Temporary Protection Visa
UKY	Urbis Keys Young
UN	United Nations
UNCSTD	United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNIANWGE	United Nations Inter-agency Network on Women and Gender Equality
WRC	
(formerly	
WCRWC)	Women's Refugee Commission (formerly Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children)

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Introduction

This book is driven by a social justice interest in the lives of refugee women. Social justice researchers and activists are concerned with questions of inequality in society – in particular, how some groups of individuals come to fare less well in what, we perceive, should be a community of equal enjoyment, fulfilment, respect, and material wellbeing. As Choules¹ (2007, 463) summarises it, ‘Social justice looks to challenging and changing of structural and systemic injustice in which certain groups are singled out for less favourable treatment and others are privileged’. The focus of my social justice interest is in the link between representations of groups marginalised by dominant discourses and the material effects that transpire from these representations in policy. A strong link exists between the way marginal groups are represented or imagined and the kinds of policies that are made to govern them. Policies premised on limited or inherently problematic representations of a group of people can lead to negative material outcomes for that group.

This book draws attention to the ways in which refugee women are represented in Australian government settlement education policy,² the effects of those representations, and the ways in which those representations might be challenged and interrupted. I explore the broader socio historical context in which representations of refugee women have arisen since the inception of the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 2010) and examine the material consequences of these representations in policy and practice. I draw on the work of researchers, activists and community workers who propose new and different ways of engaging with and representing refugee communities, and in particular refugee women, to illustrate the ways in which representation and policy making can be done differently. As evidence that creating different paradigms for representation can materially affect our approaches to policy, I share feedback and analysis from my own interviews with refugee women about the purposes of education. These interviews illustrate the possibilities for representation beyond the marginalising and limiting representations of refugee women that have dominated much refugee policy.

A new century – a new political and policy paradigm in seeking asylum

Representations of refugee women take place in a broader context of representations of migrants and refugees that currently prevail in global politics and policy making. Much 21st-century debate around refugee issues has been strongly influenced by the events of September 11, although other issues such as climate change, the Arab spring, and a host of troubling international conflicts and 'terrorist incidents' have also significantly influenced debate. However it is September 11 which seems to have reignited Western debate on the dangers of 'otherness' to a degree not seen since the post-war and Cold War periods.

The concept of 'otherness' that is promulgated in white, Western, patriarchal, heterosexual representations of marginal groups is of course not a new phenomenon (Said 1978). Its resurgence after September 11 was crystallised in the comment made by George Bush to the US Congress on 20 September 2001, 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists'. Bush's categorisation of 'us' and 'them' precipitated a flurry of discussion across numerous Western nations about what it meant to be 'us' – and by definition, therefore, 'them'. At least two significant discourses arose in Western policy reflecting these understandings of 'otherness'. One discourse represents the other as dangerous, illicit and knowingly evil. Its policy manifestations include 'pre-emptive' or 'protective' measures; that is, harsher visa, travel and border protection arrangements, a range of impositions on civil liberties including arbitrary detention and renditions, and wars. The second discourse represents otherness as misconceived, uncivilised and uneducated. It emphasises the West's role as charitable benefactor, sharing its enlightened views about civil society. If the problem is that 'they' are different from us, then we need to 'help' them. Within this discourse, a 'successful' migration policy is designed to help them be more like 'us'.

The emphasis on 'teaching outsiders' to infuse normative values has a long history in 20th-century Western migration policy. Policies of assimilationism in particular have been driven by a view that social harmony is best effected when outsiders conform with the dominant norm. Visible difference is seen as the problem; a deficiency to be tolerated until the outsider can 'adjust'. However by the late 20th century, nations such as Australia, Great Britain, the US and Canada had traversed policies of assimilationism and integrationism towards different varieties of multiculturalism. I am not asserting that multiculturalism was embraced everywhere, but rather that it was a strong element of the normative discourse around which political and policy debate coalesced. The events of September 11 coincided with a retreat to policies of 'integrationism'; a retreat encased in the language of government's important role in helping migrants to 'adjust' and 'fit in'.

Under the leadership of Australia's Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2006), multiculturalism was demonised because of its alleged overemphasis on the importance of social bonds (privileging connections within an ethnic/cultural group) over social bridges (privileging connections to, and assimilation with, the

mainstream) (Modood 2005). ‘Dangerous’ ethnic enclaves were blamed for the failures of ‘mushy multiculturalism’ (Costello 2006), and held responsible for the Cronulla riots (a violent public altercation between Lebanese Australian and Anglo-Australian male youth on Sydney’s Cronulla beach) and incidents of ‘African gang’ (read refugee) based violence (Caldwell 2007; Oxfam Australia 2007). The policy message is that difference, and those who are different, are dangerous.

Australia’s efforts to ensure outsiders are ‘clear’ about ‘our’ values was effected significantly through projects and speeches of the Howard Liberal government. The Minister for Education devised a National Values Statement expressing purported ‘Australian’ values to be taught in schools, while the Department of Immigration and Citizenship constructed a Values Statement to be signed by all migrants to the country.

Representations of refugee women in Australia are shaped by these discourses, in addition to the shifting gendered, race and colonial discourses that have always influenced refugee representations. If 21st-century migrants and refugees to Australia are automatically represented as problematic ‘subjects’ by government and media, then policy solutions will be narrowly crafted to respond to them in this way. The stakes are higher for certain groups, like refugee women, whose specific subject positions have been invisibilised, infantilised or paternalised in representations.

Representations of refugee women: a social justice paradox

Refugee women typically navigate a series of negative material and life circumstances. They are survivors. Fleeing from persecution, and contemplating an uncertain future in transitional living arrangements, refugees arrive in third countries of settlement without the capital and resources of most local residents, including other migrants. Women refugees can experience the stages of their journey – persecution, flight and settlement – in a manner peculiar to their sex and gender. However these experiences have not always been properly captured or reflected in the legal and policy instruments protecting and servicing them.

Much feminist criticism of the Refugee Convention alleges that it has not properly recognised women’s discrete experiences (Kelley 2001; MacKinnon 2006). On an international scale, it wasn’t until 2001 that mass rape was recognised as a war crime (AI 2001). And only during the 1990s did Australian policy makers become aware of the extent of torture and trauma suffered by refugee women prior to their arriving in Australia (Pittaway 2001). So it is that, until recent decades, refugee women’s interests have largely been represented as absent from, incidental to or marginal within, mainstream human rights discourses.

The problem of representation of refugee women extends beyond invisibility. Various refugee researchers (see e.g. Bracken *et al.* 1997; Eastmond 2007; Dona 2007; Marlowe 2009) have noted, ‘a propensity [in forced migration studies] to represent refugees in essentialist ways, the hegemony of trauma as the major articulation of refugee suffering being an example of such essentialist representation’