

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gendered Barriers to Educational Opportunities: Resettlement of Sudanese Refugees in Australia

Anikó Hatoss¹ and Henk Huijser

University of New South Wales, Australia and University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Abstract

This paper argues that whilst equitable educational pathways are integrated into educational policy discourses in Australia, there are significant gendered barriers to educational participation among members of the Sudanese refugee groups. The specific conditions of forced migration reinforce disadvantage and further limit opportunities. Cultural factors play a key role in this, as the data from this study demonstrate. Participants in this study are Sudanese refugees who arrived in Australia as part of the humanitarian program. The paper draws upon interviews and focus group data that were collected for a larger study on the broader issue of resettlement of Sudanese refugees in Australia. This paper argues that women from refugee backgrounds are particularly at risk and face cultural and linguistic barriers in accessing educational opportunities.

Keywords: forced migration, Sudanese refugees, gendered politics of belonging

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Introduction

According to the latest UNHCR figures, by the end of 2007 there were 11.4 million refugees on a global scale. Of these, 523,000 were from Sudan (UNHCR 2008). This paper addresses the role of education in the resettlement process of Sudanese refugees, particularly of women, in Australia. The discussion is focused on a culturally, ethnically, racially and linguistically very distinctive community, thereby offering a unique insight into factors that inhibit the educational opportunities of specific minority groups. While many gendered barriers have been broken down in

¹ Email: a.hatoss@unsw.edu.au

Western education systems, there are significant ways in which higher education, career options and employment conditions are gendered and disadvantage immigrant women in Australia. The specific conditions of forced migration often reinforce such disadvantage and further limit opportunities.

This paper starts from the position that gender roles in society are socially constructed, and as such they are different in different societies and cultures. This, in turn, has an impact on the resettlement process of families and the educational pathways various family members are able to harness. In the case of refugees, gender is not the only potential barrier. Gender intersects in complex ways with issues of class, race, language, trauma and educational backgrounds.

This paper analyses these intersections, and calls for proactive and integrated educational and resettlement policies that have the potential to overcome some of these barriers, and thereby shift relations of power both between and within communities. Ultimately, the aim of educational policies is to create wider access for newly settled refugees, particularly for women, to public spaces and paid employment, and thus to enhance their independence and opportunities, rather than being largely confined to and isolated in the domestic sphere. This can only be achieved through a holistic approach to settlement, incorporating effective English language and educational policies, which allows for the full integration and human development of newly settled refugees.

Forced migration and gendered politics of belonging

Forced migration commonly refers to ‘the movements of refugees and internally displaced people’ (Bermúdez Torres 2007). The effects of forced migration vary in different political, socio-economic, and cultural contexts, and according to factors such as gender, class, age, race, or ethnicity. Since the 1980s, there has been a growing recognition that women have been especially disadvantaged in processes of forced migration (Bermúdez Torres 2007). Despite this recognition ‘the forced migration and conflict literature predominantly treats issues of refugees from a gender-blind perspective’ (Development Research Centre on Migration n.d.). Forced migration is situated in a wider context of human rights discourses which tend to be ‘gender-neutral’. However, as Fenster (1999, 5) argues, ‘women’s dignity, freedom and equality is more readily violated than those of men partly because traditional human rights formulations are based on a ‘normative’ male model and applied to women as an afterthought’. Crawley (2001, 17) similarly notes that human rights law and discourse ‘privileges male-dominated ‘public’ activities over the activities of women, which take place largely in the ‘private’ sphere’. Indeed, ‘human rights are tragically gendered on all scales of analysis’ (Fenster 1999, 6; Marfleet 2006). The gender-related risk factors in the protection of refugees are emphasised in the Report of the 57th Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Program:

While acknowledging that forcibly displaced men and boys also face protection problems, women and girls can be exposed to particular protection problems related to their gender, their cultural and socio-economic position, and their legal status. This means that they may be less likely than men and boys to be able to exercise their rights, and therefore that specific action in favour of women and girls may be necessary to ensure that they can enjoy protection and assistance on an equal basis with men and boys (UNHCR 2006, 24).

While the protection of women and girls is more challenging due to these circumstances, women and their dependent children make up most of the world’s

refugees and displaced people (Bermúdez Torres 2007). Furthermore, they represent the large majority of the poor in every country, and their additional exclusion from the public sphere prevents them from being involved in decision-making in shaping laws and institutions affecting women's (and others') lives (Crawley 2001; Fenster 1999).

Similarly, access to education tends to be a major barrier for women in large parts of the world. In Sub-Saharan Africa for example, Oxfam predicted, based on 1999 figures, that the proportion of illiterate women – over two-thirds in the sub-continent (as opposed to one-third of men) – was certain to increase (Marfleet 2006, 199). Furthermore, women and men experience post-conflict situations differently, and women are often subject to discriminatory resettlement policies (Bermúdez Torres 2007). Under these conditions, women are rather powerless and remain at high risk at every stage of the refugee journey, which in many cases is a very long journey indeed (Amone 2008; Browne 2006). Yet, women have a range of skills and motivations that are often overlooked. Policies often depict refugee women as 'vulnerable', and this label in itself can have serious implications. As El-Bushra (2001, 6) warns, 'the use of the word, denying as it does the resilience and determination of those who have undergone such experiences, predisposes assistance programs towards offering palliative care rather than confronting underlying systemic injustices'. On a wider level, it tends to reinforce a binary opposition between refugee women as 'uniformly poor, powerless and vulnerable, while Western women [in this construction] are the reference point for modern, educated, sexually liberated womanhood' (Crawley 2001, 18). This in turn denies refugee women agency and objectifies them as a group, which effectively reinforces existing barriers. What is needed instead, then, is an approach that takes gender dimensions into account (Gururaja 2001), but at the same time can accommodate specificity, diversity and heterogeneity, and thus provide refugee women with the tools and support to shape their own space in the resettlement process, and define their own sense of belonging. This is thus a profoundly political project.

Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran & Vieten (2006, 7) see the 'politics of belonging' as

situated in three different, but complementary ways:

Temporally – there are particular issues, related to historical, technological, economic and political developments, specific to our times which construct contemporary politics of belonging in certain ways.

Spatially – although certain global historical developments, such as the globalisation of neo-liberal markets, affect all parts of the world, these effects are not homogeneous, and different states and societies are affected in different ways.

Intersectionally – intersecting and intermeshing social locations along different power grids in society – such as along class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, stage in life cycle and so on – although unstable in themselves, shifting and contested as they are, have crucial effects on the ways different political projects of belonging construct and represent them, the access they have to any decision-making power or any other resources associated with these projects and even the extent to which they are allowed to be included in them at all.

This is a useful framework in which to situate the politics of belonging of Sudanese refugees in an Australian context, as it comprehensively incorporates and accommodates the specificity, diversity and heterogeneity mentioned above. In other

words, it allows us to transcend solidifying concepts like ‘refugee’ and ‘women’, and instead pay careful attention to the specific ways in which these concepts shape and are shaped by the specific context in which they are negotiated. In short, this framework allows us to view the refugee experience as a fluid, ongoing and productive process of negotiation between different social and cultural value systems, and between different political, historical and spatial contexts. Recognising the multifaceted nature of this process will provide opportunities to identify more tailored approaches to educational policy that will be more specific in the way they define and target their objectives, rather than settling for a ‘one size fits all’ approach defined in narrow ways (Nega 2008).

The Australian resettlement process of refugees (like many others) is characterised by a number of assumptions and objectives, such as the expectation of ‘integration into the mainstream’, at least in terms of employment (McMaster 2001). Ahmed (2008, 26) exemplifies this when he argues that:

All refugee settlement and education services need to be structured to maximise contact with the mainstream, and to minimise partitioning. The more refugees interact and connect with the mainstream, the greater the tendency to natural friendship formation, acceptance, integration and access to the crucial word of mouth job market.

Implicit in this insistence on ‘integration’ is a denial of past experience and established networks, or what Kibreab (cited in Marfleet 2006, 210) has called *tabula rasa*: ‘refugees [were] treated as if they were *tabula rasa* with no history, past experience, culture, anticipation, skills [and] coping mechanisms to interpret new situations’. Thus, refugees are treated as if they are ‘starting from scratch’, and this denies them agency, which in turn casts them as ‘victims’ to be managed, rather than assets that can be tapped for the knowledge and global connections they bring (Saeed 2008). Mazzucato (2008) talks in this respect about strategies that migrants employ to juggle between their ‘double engagement’ with their homelands and settlement contexts, increasingly aided by new communication technologies. Based on this observation, she identifies the need for a transnational perspective. ‘Social, economic and cultural phenomena relevant for migrants are not all located within one physical space, the nation-state. Rather, a transnational scale needs to be adopted to understand migrants’ lives, the first step for designing effective policies’ (Mazzucato 2008, 200; see also Koser 2007). This is based on the recognition that social capital and economic benefits are connected, despite the fact that these are often separated fields of study in analyses of refugee resettlement (Boswell and Mueser 2008). Nannestad et al. (2008) have recently recognised the connection between the two by integrating the development of various levels of ‘social capital’ in a resettlement context into an economic cost-benefit analysis. However, this is still based on the ‘cost-benefit’ within a particular nation, and social capital in their definition is the social capital required to function within a particular nation, rather than transnational social capital. In this way, refugee voices are ‘all about adding content, or colour, to what is already known, not about *refiguring the parameters of what is known*’ (Bhabra 2006, 38). In other words, the responsibility for integration is entirely passed onto the refugee, rather than seen as a dialogical process, which would entail a refiguration of the parameters. The latter would be far more productive, and the education system could play a vital role in this process.

Refugees and the gendered nature of Western education systems

Historically, western education systems have always been structured along gendered lines (Kelly 2000), but while this was once explicit, the contemporary nature of gendered education is much more subtle. As Martin (2000, 34) notes:

Gender patterns in post-compulsory education and different post-school destinations suggest the focus on formal equality ignored the root causes of inequalities in subject choices and careers. Wifeness and motherhood are still frequently upheld as major ideals to which females should aspire, whereas fatherhood has quite different implications.

While such ideals are no longer a structural part of the contemporary western education context, they still have a major impact on the way in which western societies are structured in relation to work (Kelly 2000). As Vryonides (2007, 105) argues, 'education is not an institution that is isolated from the society in which it is set and thus is deeply affected by intrinsic social inequalities'. It is this complex interaction between education, employment and specific social contexts that challenges 'the meritocratic rationale which advocates that education offers equal opportunities to everybody and that academic achievement is a path to social success' (Vryonides 2007, 105). Cole (2000, 4) makes a useful distinction in this respect between equality and equal opportunities:

Equal opportunities policies, in schools and elsewhere, seek to enhance social mobility within structures which are essentially unequal. In other words, they seek a meritocracy, where people rise (or fall) on merit, but to grossly unequal levels or strata in society – unequal in terms of income, wealth, lifestyle, life-chances and power. Egalitarian policies, policies to promote equality, on the other hand seek to go further, by attempting to develop a systematic critique of structural inequalities, both in society at large and at the level of individual educational institutions.

Dominant discourses related to the role of education in western societies are closely aligned with equal opportunities policies, rather than egalitarian policies. Interestingly for our purposes here, these same discourses also underlie refugee resettlement policies, which explains the common emphasis on education as a pathway to social integration in such policies. Furthermore, education in these discourses is seen as a key towards gender equality and women's empowerment (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Greany (2008, 51) outlines the assumed steps in this process as follows:

Women join literacy programmes; they learn to read and write; they are 'empowered' by meeting together and they subsequently demand more equal terms and conditions on which to live (in the public and private sphere) – both as a consequence of the technical skills accrued and their new-found collective political solidarity.

Greany (2008) goes on to argue that the process is of course 'far messier and more nuanced'. While not denying the potential positive effects of higher education, Weiner-Levy (2008, 139) draws attention to the flaws in such discourses:

Discourses concerning the benefits of education for women – like the related discourse on social mobility – ignore and even deny the hurdles, internal transitions and pain that the inevitable losses entail, overlooking the intrapersonal dynamics and identity transitions associated with processes of change, adoption of an alternative path and detachment from one's previous lifestyle.

On the one hand, these discourses tend to gloss over previous experiences, and the enduring impact of such experiences in refugees' resettlement contexts. Moreover, a side-effect of such discourses is that refugees who do not achieve the anticipated 'social mobility' may easily be blamed for individual 'failure on merit'. On the other hand, such discourses tend to allow little room for complexity within neatly defined categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, class and refugee. Yet, various recent studies suggest that such categories overlap in complex ways, for example in the labour market (Schrover et al. 2007), and in schools (Archer et al. 2007). In recognition of the need for a dialogical approach and process, as identified above, this study explores the adjustment of Sudanese refugees and discusses the adjustment process from the perspectives of refugees, particularly in the education system. In order to position these experiences, however, it is important to outline the broader policy and demographic context of refugee settlement in Australia.

The Australian context of refugee settlement

Australia has a long history of resettling refugees. In recent times Australia has become home to a large number of refugees who were resettled from African countries, particularly from Somalia and Sudan. Sudan-born migrants are currently one of the fastest growing groups in Australia. Since 2001 more than 98 percent of these have arrived in Australia under humanitarian programs.

The 2006 Census recorded 19,050 Sudan-born people in Australia (ABS 2007), an increase of 287.7 percent from the 2001 Census. In 2006 the median age of Sudan-born people was 24.6 years compared with 46.8 years for all overseas-born and 37.1 years for the total Australian population. Sudan-born males account for 54.2 percent of the Sudan-born population with females making up 45.8 percent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). At the date of the 2006 Census 10.8 percent indicated that they had arrived between 1996 and 2000 with 73.4 percent of Sudan-born respondents arriving between 2001 and 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007).

The main language spoken in the home by the Sudan-born Australian population was Arabic (51.2 percent) with a further 23.6 percent speaking Dinka. Other African languages were spoken by a further 5.5 percent. Of the 18,040 Sudan-born Australians who spoke a language other than English in the home, 67 percent indicated that they believed they spoke English well or very well with 30.3 percent indicating that they either did not speak English well, or did not speak English at all in the home.

At the 2006 Census, 38.8 per cent of the Sudan-born aged 15 years and over had some form of higher education or post-school qualifications compared to 52.5 per cent of the Australian population. Among the Sudan-born, 15.5 per cent had a diploma level or higher qualification and 7.5 per cent had certificate level qualifications. Among the Sudan-born, 8,160 had no higher education or non-school qualification, of which 66.4 per cent were still attending an educational institution (Department of Immigration and Citizenship n.d.). Sudanese refugees experience a range of issues upon arrival and during their settlement process and these issues directly or indirectly relate to and impact on their educational opportunities and pathways. Among the most common issues, the Refugee Council Australia has identified the following:

- challenges in gaining sufficient settlement support;
- the impact of trauma on resettlement;
- the financial burden of repaying travel loans;

- supporting family members still in Africa;
- the struggle to reunite split families;
- learning English and adjusting to schooling and tertiary education in Australia
- finding secure employment, including recognition of qualifications and of past work experience; and
- accessing health services (Refugee Council of Australia 2008).

Culturally specific gender roles and dynamics play a major part in the ways in which anyone of these issues is addressed, and they impact in a holistic way on how specific refugee groups engage with resettlement programs provided by the Australian government.

Australian government resettlement provision

The Australian government provides important supporting programs for migrants who arrive within the humanitarian program. The settlement services include the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS), programs funded through the Community Settlement Services Scheme (CSSS) and the services offered by twenty-four Migrant Resource Centres and four Migrant Service Agencies across the country (UNHCR 2004, 9). Refugees are provided immediate access to federal government health care and social security. In addition, settlement services are provided within the Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) to meet refugees' individual needs. Although these support programs play a crucial role in the settlement success, acculturation and settlement outcomes are dependent on a range of characteristics that migrants have as well as a range of wider societal attitudes (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003). Achieving adequate levels of English language proficiency continues to be a critical concern and a critical barrier for accessing tertiary education programs as well as entering the workforce (Chiswick, Liang Lee, and Miller 2002). Adult Humanitarian Program entrants with lower proficiency than functional English are entitled to 510 hours of English language tuition through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). Humanitarian entrants with special needs are eligible for up to 100 hours extra English tuition through the Special Preparatory Program (SPP). Currently, however, there is little research evidence to show whether the exit level of 'functional English' is sufficient for successful integration into mainstream society. 'For many, the initial intensive settlement assistance, which goes for six months, isn't sufficient nor does it adequately address their basic needs' (Nega 2008, 35). Several studies have also pointed out that the restriction of English classes to the initial six months of settlement leads to inadequate support, especially for women with child bearing commitments:

Refugees and humanitarian entrants maintain that it is not always possible to enrol in English classes within the first three months after arriving in Australia. This is especially so for women who disproportionately bear the burden of family responsibilities and thus do not see taking steps towards formal language acquisition as an immediate priority (Refugee Council of Australia 2008).

Findings of our study also highlight such limitations which consequently create significant barriers to educational opportunities.

The study

This paper reports on some of the findings of a larger study funded by the Australian Research Council. The study addresses the broader resettlement issues of Sudanese refugees in Australia, with a particular focus on language, literacy and educational and cultural barriers that refugees face in their new 'home country'. Data was collected in a medium-sized regional settlement in South-East Queensland, Australia. The data collecting tools included focus group discussions and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The benefits of qualitative data collection in the context of immigrant communities have been emphasised by a number of researchers in the field (see e.g. Holmes 1997). The study targeted Sudanese refugees who had settled in Australia for at least 2 years as a two-year minimum period of settlement is considered to be necessary to allow some degree of development of social adjustment in the host country (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003, 66). The aim of the focus group discussions and interviews was: (1) to explore the prior educational experiences of participants in Sudan and other African countries where participants have spent years in various refugee camps; and (2) to identify and explore the key issues and areas of concern that Sudanese refugee-background women experience in their resettlement, particularly in their educational and cultural adjustment.

The findings

For the purpose of the current educational sub-section of the study 14 Sudanese-background men and women were interviewed. Participants reported a high level of instability and disruption in their education prior to coming to Australia.

I started moving away from my village to Ethiopia in 1987 when I was 9 years old. I walked about 3 months from my country and we were a great number of Sudanese young boys. We actually started our school there without any building, there was no running water. It was just a refugee camp. In fact there were not many teachers, but there were some young boys who sacrificed their time to help and teach us. The class actually had 150-200 students and everybody was different ages. Actually the number of girls was very few. Mostly there were boys (Interview EG 2).

This respondent is currently in his second year of his undergraduate university studies in an Australian university, studying business. He explained that most of the boys are doing better in the Australian education system and adjust more readily than girls, as they arrive with better literacy and educational background. This is largely due to the fact that the so-called 'lost boys', of whom he was one, were educated in the refugee camps when they fled from Sudan and went to Ethiopia and later to Kenya where they had more stable and structured classes. In contrast, the girls typically stayed behind in their homeland and joined the boys later.

The few girls that were there were able to go to school, but they were afraid because the government of Sudan would be likely to kill boys rather than girls. So for security the boys had to run away, but the girls stayed back in Sudan with their mothers as they were afraid to flee. So they joined school much later if at all (Interview EG 2).

In the interviews, respondents talked about the years of transition in refugee camps. Here, Sudanese youth were provided with some basic form of education, but due to the war situation and the lack of funding, education was provided in temporary special arrangements, often under a tree. Despite the harsh circumstances, however,

participants in the study reported that students were generally highly motivated as education was the only avenue for achieving some sense of achievement and purpose in life. Often, the opportunity to focus on learning remained the only way of gaining some hope in their fractured life worlds:

Of course you know being a refugee is a very hard life and for them you know to have a better life they need education. These were people, you know, who were not, you know, given education by the Sudan government so if they get that opportunity they should realise so you really find people are desperate to learn. You could find someone who is 30 or 25 years old in class 2 sitting down as a pupil, you know, and try to learn. People were eager to learn. (Interview EG2)

This reflection mirrors the conditions described in various reports by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2006; 2007). Approximately 48 percent of children of school age are not attending school in the Khartoum camps. Teachers are scarce because they are paid so little, if at all (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2006).

These early educational barriers were also reflected by the findings of a longitudinal study in Australia which explored the settlement of humanitarian entrants conducted by the Department of Immigration (Department of Immigration 2003). In addition to the constant disruptions by violence and war, education policy also had an impact on the educational opportunities and adjustment abilities of those arriving in Australia from Sudan. One teacher explained the education situation in Sudan with the following words:

We have one education system in Sudan. The official language is Arabic and it was introduced after independence in 1956, when the British left. Before English was the official language all over Sudan. When the British left the power was handed over to Sudanese who are Arab. And those people cancelled English as the official language and put Arabic into place. English remained in the South. But we still have a lot of difficulties, because those schools where English is being taught are the target of the Central Government of the north. So it was very hard for English language to officially and really be taught in the South (Interview F1).

Education or lack thereof was a central concern for all refugees who left Sudan and not surprisingly the opportunity to resettle in Australia was seen as a great opportunity to become educated and get children into proper educational programs. Generally, most respondents saw education for themselves and their children as the main reason for seeking to settle in Australia. One respondent gave the following explanation:

I like the security first of all and I like Australia because our kids have got education good education because when we were in Sudan we can't have good education because we run from the war and the war continue until now. When we travelled to Australia we are happy because we are thinking our kids will not be like us some other years coming (Interview with a female respondent, July 2007).

Another aspect of educational opportunities and motivations for children was explained in the context of transnational citizenship. Several respondents emphasized the view that those Sudanese who are well-educated can return to Sudan and contribute to the development of their country where educated citizens are badly

needed. These comments are echoed by other refugee groups such as Somali refugee girls in the UK (O'Flynn & Epstein 2005).

One of the most important things for us is that [in Australia] children go to school. We know the children are going to serve two nations. I think one daughter is educated here or if they are all educated here, I think one can go to Sudan and one can remain in Australia, to serve Sudanese, because in Southern Sudan, maybe we've got the population of one million with two doctors or one doctor (Family Interview with female respondent).

One of the interesting cultural themes that emerged from the interviews was the way Sudanese traditional culture views women. As one male respondent explained about his daughter:

For example, in our cultures, the girl is the property of the parent. Yes, a source of income, but not here in Australia. With this [missus] of mine, I think I paid [60 cows], but what our culture says, the culture says that if you buy your missus with 60 cows, the daughter will be [worth] that (Family Interview with male respondent).

A specific question directly addressed the gender issue in educational opportunities. As the following excerpt demonstrates women have many barriers mainly due to their household chores and the duties associated with bringing up their children.

Facilitator: Do you think that it is more difficult for women to get education than for men?

Respondent: Yes, truly because a woman ... they like ... take care of a lot of children especially the youngest one, and when sometime they get pregnant ... so they are doing things around the house a lot, rather than follow their education. Especially for the women who already have children it is very difficult for them ... unless you are a girl [meaning not married] you cannot go ahead with your studies ... so I think it is easier for the men because women are closer to the children (Individual interview with female respondent)

Women's family roles are set by the cultural norms of the community. According to traditional cultural norms and expectations, women are expected to be at home and support the family, while men are expected to find a job and make enough money to support the family, but in Australia and the western world in general, these traditional roles are shifting considerably. This in turn influences especially the younger members of the Sudanese community, and in some cases men are willing to take on some of the women's chores in order to provide support and allow the women to get educated. As one young female respondent explains:

Yes, men encourage women to study, but it was not like that in the past. Long time ago when we were in our homeland we were not close to cities, so women were not interested in education ... so a lot of them are not interested in education now ... but the men [they] already know if you get good education you can do better in life. Nowadays women are getting the idea, but it is too late for them now ... It is difficult to start and when they go to TAFE (vocational post-school education) they get frustrated because it is hard to study for them (Individual Interview with female respondent).

This reflects wider changes in women's attitudes towards educational opportunities and their view of the role such opportunities play in their shifting identities:

Education is essential for us as women because we are facing many constraints, many problems, and we are living in a society where men are dominant. We feel

that as we are human beings, we should contribute in the development of our country and our lives. So that's why we think education is a very essential and very important tool in changing any society (a member of a local teachers' consortium, Khartoum cited in Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2006, p.6).

This suggests that these women view education as an avenue to gain agency to change their lives and their society. Agency, however, was less explicit and evident in interviews with those women who were of mature age at the time of arrival in Australia. Also many of the respondents who were relatively recent refugees in Australia, have had relatively little exposure to Australian education, while still being fully immersed in the Sudanese community, both linguistically and culturally. In this context, their agency is constrained to some extent through a limited level of English and the obligation to fulfil the expectations of their families as they relate to age and gender roles and expectations. Thus, the development of agency through education, among Sudanese women who have deeply rooted cultural and social constructed roles in their traditional communities remains problematic and creates potential conflicts in their new Australian social context. The main challenge is to shift the traditional gender roles so that women can take full advantage of educational opportunities, while staying mindful of the potentially irreconcilable cross-cultural conflicts between the host society and long-established cultural gender roles. As Bermúdez Torres (2007) warns:

Attempts to improve women refugees' agency and to empower them often lead to men resenting such challenges to gender roles and relations, and sometimes is perceived as bad by women themselves. Another common source of complaint in such contexts is the changes in relations between generations.

Changing gender roles can be highly sensitive and refugees may see changes in gender relations as a sign of 'moral decay' where 'women no longer respect their husbands' (Bermúdez Torres 2007).

In our culture women are responsible for the children and working around the house, like cooking and cleaning. It is a shame for a Dinka woman if her husband has to do the cleaning or the cooking. We don't do this. So it's difficult to change the tradition in Australia. This makes it difficult for us to study. Even to study English. (Interview with female respondent)

Such views were evident in some of the interview data collected from female participants. Similarly, some women expressed a strong view about keeping the family together and spoke with criticism of those who want to challenge traditional roles and of the fact that if they cannot change the roles in the family, they separate from their husbands:

In our culture we don't separate but when I arrived in Australia, I met some people that have fled from a family, but it's not in our culture. Maybe a woman calls the police to take her husband out of the family, but it's not like that in Sudan...we live together (Individual interview with a female respondent).

Discussion

As the findings of the study demonstrate, the settlement of Sudanese refugees in Australia is contingent upon a range of factors. As education is an important part of building social capital and represents an essential tool for gaining employment, refugees' ability to utilize the educational opportunities provided for them by the host country government have a strong impact upon their general wellbeing and

settlement. Still, this ability is limited by a number of social, cultural and gender-related factors. As canvassed in the literature, the factors that impact upon refugee settlement incorporate pre-settlement experiences as well as post-arrival factors. In the context of the current study the transnational space constructed between the country of 'home', that is the country of ethnic origin, the countries of transition, such as the refugee camps in Africa (including Kenya, Ethiopia and Egypt), as well as the country of 'arrival' (Australia) all play a part in shaping the educational opportunities of Sudanese refugees.

While the Australian government provides a range of educational support programs, participation in them is often limited by social, economic and cultural factors that are deeply linked to pre-migration as well as post-arrival contexts. The interviews from this study have demonstrated that Sudanese refugees' educational pathways are severely disrupted by the war in Sudan and the constant insecurity of years in African refugee camps. Most women arrive with limited or no English language proficiency at all, which affects their educational attainment in Australia. The post-arrival context is further complicated by commitments to support family members with no English ability, the commitments to financially support those left behind in Africa and the family roles that young women play in bringing up children and supporting their husbands. In the context of such severe dislocation, social and cultural gender roles can provide rare instances of stability, which may in some cases be preferable to challenging this long-established status quo.

Nevertheless, Sudanese refugee men and women are generally highly motivated to learn and take full advantage of their educational opportunities. This willingness and a high level of motivation are evident in their expressions of their goals in Australia. Yet, these educational goals are difficult to achieve under the current circumstances where cultural expectations severely limit educational opportunities for women.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the educational opportunities and barriers that Sudanese refugees face after resettling in Australia. The interview data demonstrate the limitations that refugees, particularly women have in accessing educational opportunities and building their social capital in the new country of settlement. Family obligations, related to socially constructed gender roles, both in the new country and in the home country continue to pose challenges to women's educational pathways. In addition, the desire to work and contribute to the social capital of the wider community often competes with accessing the essential English language programs that would allow an entry into tertiary education and yield long-term educational and social capital outcomes on a transnational level. Still, education is seen as one of the most important goals in refugees' lives. A more holistic approach to resettlement programs, which takes temporal, spatial and intersectional factors into account, and is linked to English language literacy and other educational and trade programs, would be desirable to ensure that government-funded programs effectively harness these motivations and bring long-term benefits for all. In addition, it would move such programs beyond male-dominated participation rates in education, which can be seen as a result of short-term resettlement programs. Finally, such an approach would overcome common mainstream perceptions of refugees as a 'drain' on the public purse, and would instead productively engage with the transnational social and economic capital that refugees bring to their new places of settlement.

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