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## **ARTICLES**

### **AFSAAP Postgraduate Essay Prize Winner 2009**

#### **Adult education and community capacity building: The case of African-Australian women in the Northern Territory.**

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#### **Abstract**

The Northern Territory (NT) is the smallest settlement location for migrants and refugees in Australia. Over the past decade there has been a significant increase in the number of Sub-Saharan African women migrants and refugees in the NT. This influx has generated a range of government and community responses to build these African migrants and refugees' capacity to integrate into their host community. This article is inspired by the author's personal experience as an African immigrant woman and an adult educator, and it is informed by her doctoral study in progress with 23 African-Australian migrant and refugee women in the NT as participants. The study uses qualitative methods informed by feminist perspectives to explore how these women utilize adult education techniques to build their capacity to integrate into wider Australian society. It examines the underlying reasons why the participants engage in adult education, and their experiences of struggles and achievements. It reports on preliminary findings which indicate that education is a potent force which has enabled the participants to find meaning in the challenges of their existence. The stories of the participants attest to empowerment and hope, which can inform opportunities and educational pathways offered to other migrant and refugee groups in Australia and elsewhere.

#### **Introduction**

African-Australians are a new and growing group in Australia. Recent public debates<sup>1</sup> have revealed a number of xenophobic and ethnocentric views and stereotypes about African-Australians reinforcing their social

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Andrews, *Africans, slow to integrate*, ABC News, 4 October, 2007, [www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/10/04/2051216.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/10/04/2051216.htm), (accessed 2 December 2007); NT News, "Ethnic gangs fuelling fears of a race war," *NT News*, 3 April, 2009, [www.ntnews.com.au/article/2009/04/03/42875\\_ntnews.html](http://www.ntnews.com.au/article/2009/04/03/42875_ntnews.html) (accessed 14 April 2009); The Courier Mail, "African refugees take rural jobs from Australian workers," *The Courier Mail*, 19 September, 2008, [www.portmacquariepreservationists.blogspot.com/2008\\_09\\_01\\_archive.html](http://www.portmacquariepreservationists.blogspot.com/2008_09_01_archive.html), (accessed 2 December 2008).

exclusion. Tom Calma, the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner asserts that,

it is facts, not myths, which tell the truth. And it is listening to people tell their stories that enables the wider community to begin to actually understand and relate to an experience and to humanize and personalize those who appear to be ‘different.’<sup>2</sup>

This research is based on such a premise to give a voice to African-Australian women to share their experiences, to demystify the myths that surround their everyday existence and highlight their capacities that have been built through adult education, and their contribution to their communities’ development.

Migrants play a major role in Australia’s population growth. The number of non-European migrants, especially from Sub-Saharan Africa has increased significantly since 2000. This may be due to natural disasters, political unrests and civil wars in their home countries. Education is one of the key avenues facilitating full social and economic participation of migrants in Australia. Moreover, it is also a means of survival and an important step in reconstructing identities and rebuilding their lives.<sup>3</sup> Having an understanding and knowledge of the language, socio-economic, political and cultural issues of Australia will not only help migrants to be aware of their rights and responsibilities; it will also assist them to participate fully in their communities.

This article draws upon a qualitative study in-progress<sup>4</sup> which explores the role of Adult Education in capacity building of African-Australian women in the Northern Territory (NT) communities. It is a case study that aims to give a voice to African-Australian women in the NT. It examines their struggles and achievements, and elucidates the critical role of Adult Education in community capacity building. This article argues that instead of perceiving the African women migrants and refugees as a problem and a deficit desperately in need of services, they should rather be seen as having agency, determination, courage, resilience, motivation

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Calma cited in Australian Human Rights Commission, “African Australians: A report on human rights and social inclusion issues,” Discussion paper prepared by Claire Moroney, 30 June 2009: 3, [www.humanrights.gov.au/africanaus\\_](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/africanaus_) (accessed 23 July 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Agnieszka Bron, “From an immigrant to a citizen: language as a hindrance or key to citizenship,” *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 22:6 (2003): 606-619.

<sup>4</sup> This study is drawn from my PhD research being conducted at Charles Darwin University, Darwin.

and incredible strength, and should be empowered through education for successful settlement.

This article has been inspired by the author's personal experience of being an African immigrant woman and an adult educator. It reports on findings emerging from a study of the role of adult education in the individual capacity building which results in increased community capacity building of African-Australian women in the NT. It reviews the role of adult education and community capacity building with respect to immigrant women, and the development of immigration policies in Australia. The focus is on the promises and challenges these policies pose for African migrant and refugee women in the NT. It describes the participants, the research paradigm and the data collection methods. Finally, it discusses preliminary findings from the study.

### **Migration and Women**

According to the UN's Population Division "there are now almost 200 million international migrants ...including 9.2 million refugees ...Migrants are now to be found in every part of the globe...Almost half of all migrants are women, a growing proportion of whom are migrating independently."<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, women increasingly engage in migration to ensure family survival. The economic restructuring and the shift away from male-dominated manual labour has seen the loss of male employment and increased the occupational choices and opportunities available to women migrants. All these factors have contributed to the feminization of international migration. Women increasingly migrate alone for employment reasons instead of following their male relatives. They may also migrate with other migrants outside of their family circle.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM), *Migration in an interconnected world: New directions for action, Report of the Global Commission on International Migration*, 2005, 1, [www.gcim.org](http://www.gcim.org) (accessed 22 February 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Nicola Piper, *Gender and migration*, Paper prepared for the policy analysis and research programme of the Global Commission on International Migration, 2005; United Nations (UN), *World survey on the role of women in development: Women and international migration*, (New York: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Trends in total migration stock 1960-2005*, (POP/DB/MIG/Rev.2005, New York: UNDP, 2005); United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *State of the world population 2006: A passage to hope; women and international migration*, (New York: UNFPA, 2006); Kristine Zentgraf, "Immigration and women's empowerment," *Gender and Society*, 16:5 (2002): 625-646.

There is limited literature on the pre and post migration educational experiences of adult migrants and refugees in Australia. Extensive research has revealed that there is no major study on African-Australian women in the NT. The only research project on Africans in the NT commissioned by the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) focused on African refugee groups.<sup>7</sup> Most of the studies in other states have dealt with health, culture, English language literacy, unemployment, housing and settlement issues of some groups within the African community.<sup>8</sup> The objective of this research is to understand the role of adult education in the development of African-Australian women in the NT; and how their ability can be promoted and effectively utilised as part of a holistic approach to effectively make use of Australia's female leadership talent. Hence this study is novel and fills the existing knowledge gap. It may contribute to a better understanding of adult education in capacity building as well as inform policy adjustments.

Sub-Saharan Africans represent one of the fastest growing communities in Australia with most of them arriving under the Humanitarian program. Africans currently account for 5.6 per cent of the overseas-born population with almost 72.6 per cent from Southern and East Africa; 22.9

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<sup>7</sup> Ibtisam Abu-Duhou, *Engagement of the African community in the Northern Territory: Their settlement, education, workforce and community participation*, (NT Office of Multicultural Affairs: Darwin, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Pascal Allotey and Lenore Manderson, *Storytelling, marginality and community in Australia: How immigrants position their difference in health care settings*, 2003, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12041294.pdf](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12041294.pdf) (accessed 8 November 2008); Paul Atem and Lou Wilson, *Housing pathways for African refugees in Australia: Towards an understanding of African refugees housing issues*, Paper presented at 31<sup>st</sup> AFSAAP Annual Conference, Melbourne, 2008; Ignacio Correa-Velez and Gerald Onsando, "Educational Outcomes Amongst African Men From Refugee Backgrounds Living in Urban and Regional Southeast Queensland," *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 30:2 (2009): 114-127; Surjeet Dhanji, "Welcome or Unwelcome? Integration and the Resettlement of Former Refugees from the Horn of Africa and Sudan in Metropolitan Melbourne," *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 30:2 (2009): 152-178; Jo Flanagan, *Dropped from the moon: The settlement experiences of refugee communities in Tasmania*, (Tasmania: Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare, 2007); Claire Higgins, *Offshore refugees: Settlement experiences of humanitarian arrivals in Victoria*, Research Paper, Parliament House of Victoria, 2009, [www.parliament.vic.gov.au/research/2009RPHumanitarianSettlement.pdf](http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/research/2009RPHumanitarianSettlement.pdf), (accessed 22 July 2009); Temesgen Kifle, "Far from Home but Altruistic in Nature: Evidence from Eritrean-born People in Australia", *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 30:2 (2009): 86-97 ; Jay Marlowe, "Conceptualising Refugee Resettlement in Contested Landscapes", *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 30:2 (2009): 128-151; Apollo Nsubuga-Kyobe, "Settling Sub-Sahara African migrants in rural Victoria", *Migration Action*, 27 (3), (2005): 10-20.

per cent from North Africa and 4.5 per cent from Central and West Africa.<sup>9</sup> Most of these African migrants are humanitarian entrants and were likely forced out of their countries by civil war, political and socio-economic disasters, insecure and life threatening situations and deplorable living conditions. Australia also has one of the highest refugee resettlement in the world and considers itself as a “generous patron to refugees.”<sup>10</sup>

However, Australia’s shifting immigration policies which increasingly favour the admission of highly-skilled migrants while retaining a focus on family re-unification have led to the selection of females including highly-skilled African women migrating independently as skilled workers. This has interestingly led to an increasing trend for highly skilled migrants to come here from Africa, and those coming for family reunion purposes; and also to the selection of females including highly-skilled African women migrating independently as skilled workers. Inglis observes that “Well-educated and skilled professional women can now more easily apply to migrate to Australia based on their own attributes, rather than those of their husbands or father.”<sup>11</sup>

Due to these conditions and circumstances, African women migrants and refugees’ formal levels of education vary greatly. Adjustment to life in Australia presents significant challenges including language barriers, cultural differences and difficulties in accessing services and opportunities. Their capacity to overcome these challenges varies and depends on their pre-migration experiences, reasons for migration, the similarities and differences between their country of origin and Australia; and the level of support they receive during the settlement period. These individuals need new education and training to extend as well as enhance their knowledge, skills and talents to engage meaningfully in their new environment.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). *Perspectives on migrants: Census 2006- People born in Africa*. 2008, [www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nfs/Lookup/3416.0Main+Features32008](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nfs/Lookup/3416.0Main+Features32008), (accessed 6 March 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Glen Nicholls, “Unsettling admissions: Asylum seekers in Australia,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11:1 (1998), 71.

<sup>11</sup> Christine Inglis, “Mothers, wives and workers: Australia’s migrant women,” *Migration Information Source*, March 2003, [www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=108](http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=108), (accessed 6 July 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Bron 2003; Ignacio Correa-Velez and Gerald Onsando, 2009; Surjeet Dhanji, 2009; Frank Galbally, *Migrant services and programmes: Report of the review of post-arrival programs and services to migrants (Galbally Report)*, (Canberra: Report and Appendixes, Vols 1 and 2, AGPS, 1978); Apollo Nsubuga-Kyobe and Liz Dimock, *African communities and settlement services in Victoria: Towards better service*

The NT is the smallest settlement location in Australia and receives about 0.8 per cent of the national settlement target of migrants and refugees,<sup>13</sup> and approximately 95% of humanitarian migrants settling in the NT are from African countries.<sup>14</sup> The family reunion and skilled migration programs have also assisted in the growth of African population. As noted by Multicultural Council of Northern Territory (MCNT), “the government’s intentions to create a flow of skilled labour to regional centers has put the NT in a prime position to benefit from this steady growth in population.”<sup>15</sup>

Most of the African women are humanitarian entrants through the ‘204 Women at Risk programme’ visa subclass, and have suffered hardships and trauma in refugee camps. They have varying levels of literacy and educational qualifications and may lack education and English language skills. Even African migrants and refugees with adequate English language skills encounter challenges in their settlement because of their accents and different cultural backgrounds. Even though settlement services have improved substantially in the NT, questions remain as to their cultural sensitivity and benefits to migrants and refugees.

Various studies have suggested that African communities are struggling to adapt to the Australian way of life in terms of culture and lifestyle and that they face many complex problems, such as unemployment, obtaining affordable housing; mental health and social isolation.<sup>16</sup> In 2007, the then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Kevin Andrews, stated that “recent refugee and humanitarian arrivals from the region of Africa are continuing to experience difficulty in successfully settling in Australia,

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*delivery models*, (Bundoora: Australian Multicultural Foundation, 2002); Sundram Sivamalai and Apollo Nsubuga-Kyobe, *Towards developing personal attributes in “New” migrants: A case study of capacity building for rural Australia*, Conference Paper for People, the Workforce & the Future of Australia 12 -14 August 2009, Townsville, Australia, <http://www.culturalfest.org/registration2.htm> (accessed 29 August 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), *Northern Territory: Settlement trends and needs of new arrivals 2007*, (Canberra: DIAC, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Abu-Duhou, 2006; DIAC, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT), *Strength through diversity*, (Darwin: NT Government Printer, 2004), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Browne, *The longest journey: Resettling refugees from Africa*, (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006); Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock, 2002; Janet Taylor and Dayane Stanovic, *Refugees and regional settlement: Balancing priorities*, (Fitzroy: Brotherhood of St. Laurence, 2005); Lawrence Udo-Ekpo, *The Africans in Australia: expectations and shattered dreams*, (Adelaide: Seaview Press, 1999).

and the result is high levels of community concern.”<sup>17</sup> The Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) reported in 2007 that,

in the NT some Africans have found it difficult to manage the transition to cultural and family roles that are the norm in Australia. For example, there is greater independence within the family unit for women and children in comparison to most traditional African cultures.<sup>18</sup>

Abu-Duhou’s study on African refugee groups in the NT revealed that their participation in the work force was hindered by their lack of proficiency in English, unfamiliarity with Australian workplace culture, discrimination and racism, childcare considerations, and a lack of recognition of their African tertiary and vocational qualifications.<sup>19</sup> Spinks has noted that “There has been a recent focus in meeting the specific needs of humanitarian entrants from Africa, following increased community concern relating to the successful integration of these groups.”<sup>20</sup> Abu-Duhou has also observed that due to the disruption of African migrant and refugee women’s lives after migration, they take on new roles and responsibilities that raise the need for them to acquire new skills, knowledge and tools with which to handle their new life.<sup>21</sup> Apart from adult education programs like Adult Migrant Education Programme (AMEP), the NT government, DIAC and the Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) have funded a range of projects “including initiatives to build community capacity and provide employment and entrepreneurial advice...the development of leadership ...and assist [African] community members to develop knowledge and skills that facilitate participation in mainstream society.”<sup>22</sup> Most of these projects emphasise the importance of utilising adult education techniques to build the capacity of African women to integrate into wider Australian society.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Andrews cited in Harriet Spinks, *Australia’s settlement services for migrants and refugees*, Research Paper no.29, (Australian Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliamentary Library, 2008–09), <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/2008-09/09rp29.pdf> (accessed 18 July 2009).

<sup>18</sup> DIAC, 2007, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Abu-Duhou, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Spinks, 2009, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Abu-Duhou, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> DIAC, 2007, 33.

<sup>23</sup> DIAC, 2007; Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT), *Strength through diversity*, (Darwin: NT Government Printer, 2004); Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT), *Multiculturalism Matters*, (Darwin: NT Government Printer, 2003); Office of the Status of Women, *State and Territory consultations with*

Most African-Australian women have taken the initiative to deal with the growing anxiety about African migrants and refugees' ability to adapt and integrate into the wider community by embracing and utilising a wide range of adult education activities to build their capacity as well as enhance their attributes to participate actively in the socio-economic, cultural and political activities of Australia and thus built their community's capacity to engage in the wider Australian community. Hence the meaning of adult education and its potential to build or improve the capabilities of African-Australian women in the NT must be strongly considered.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Participants**

This study is based on a qualitative interpretive paradigm, in order to explore in detail pre and post migration and adult education experiences of the participants. The interviews were conversational but as Dexter indicates, it was a "conversation with a purpose."<sup>24</sup> Twenty-three information-rich participants from each of the African countries represented in the NT were identified<sup>25</sup> and were contacted informally through established networks in the NT African community. In total, 18 from Darwin and five from Alice Springs participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The selected women satisfied all of the following criteria:

1. Born in any of the Sub-Saharan African countries represented in the NT across family types and socio-economic backgrounds;
2. Aged between 18 – 60 years old;
3. Entered Australia under any of the major immigration streams namely: Humanitarian, Family or Skilled;
4. Lived in the NT for more than 12 months;
5. Studied or were studying as adults in any course of study regardless of the delivery method, to develop skills or qualifications to gain/enhance existing skills and knowledge or attributes;
6. Involved in their ethnic/wider community in some capacity – leader, paid/volunteer worker, public servant, self-employed.

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*migrant and refugee women: Australian women speak*, (Barton: Commonwealth of Australia, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Dexter cited in Sharan Merriam, *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1998), 71.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative evaluation methods*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1990), 196.

All the interviews were conducted in English and recorded under pseudonyms chosen by the participants. Apart from three participants, the rest of the interviews were carried out in the participants' homes. Two were interviewed in their workplace and one at a beachside café. Because the interviews were guided by the participants, there were large variations in their duration. The participants' responses determined the order of the themes and the time spent on each one of them. Participants were encouraged to digress into details of their personal histories and recount anecdotes about each of the themes discussing the progress, catalysts and decisions about all the themes in their complexities. Transcription of all the interviews was undertaken by the author. This has also permitted the addition of questions for a second interview with the participants in order to confirm, clarify and obtain more information as required.

Since socio-economic indicators for integration outlined by DIAC's Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) affect resettlement and integration; and education, employment and training have been identified as factors in building capacity for effective settlement and integration,<sup>26</sup> the study explored how African-Australian women utilise adult education opportunities to build their capacity. It also addressed the strategies they use to overcome challenges and barriers in the process. The following six themes to be discussed below, emerged from these interviews: 1) Migration Choice; 2) Competency in English; 3) Adult Education; 4) Empowerment; 5) Barriers and Challenges; 6) Resilience and Determination

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<sup>26</sup> Australian Migrant Education Service (AMES), *Skilling Australia for the Future*, Research and Policy Paper for Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 30 April 2008, [www.dewr.gov.au/Skills/ProductivityPlaces/Resources/Documents/Responses/RESPONSE14.pdf](http://www.dewr.gov.au/Skills/ProductivityPlaces/Resources/Documents/Responses/RESPONSE14.pdf) (accessed 27 November 2009); Correa-Velez and Onsando, 2009; Dhanji, 2009; Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), *Fact sheet 2: Key facts in Immigration*, 2008a, [www.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/02key.htm](http://www.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/02key.htm), (accessed 12 June 2009); Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) *Settlement Programmes*, 2008b, [www.immi.gov.au/iving-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programmes](http://www.immi.gov.au/iving-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programmes), (accessed 12 March 2008); Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), *Report on the Review of Settlement Services for Migrants and Humanitarian Entrants*, 2003, [www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programs/settlement-policy/review-settlement-services.htm](http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programs/settlement-policy/review-settlement-services.htm), (accessed 6 March 2009); Galbally, 1978; Sivamalai and Nsubuga-Kyobe, 2009; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Refugee Resettlement Handbook*, 2004, [www.unhcr.org/3d464bc14.html](http://www.unhcr.org/3d464bc14.html) (accessed 6 March 2009).

## **Migration Choice**

Participants were asked why they chose to migrate to Australia and ended up settling in the Northern Territory. Responses showed some patterns and commonalities amongst migrants and marked differences between migrants and humanitarian entrants (refugees). All refugee participants did not have much choice about their resettlement in Australia. They had come directly from overseas and had no idea which regions they were being sent to, but almost all were grateful that they were in a secure and safe place. Those who had relocated to the NT from interstate sought education and employment or were joining relatives and friends already there. Some were also attracted by the NT's 'country outback lifestyle' that is, the more peaceful, quiet and family-oriented, easy-going lifestyle; and the perception that there were fewer negative social pressures such as substance abuse and youth peer pressure. The following quotes from three participants in the study illustrate these reasons:

I came to Australia because I am a refugee from Sudan and I can't return to Sudan because of the war and refugee camp life has many troubles and problems and not safe at all. Like today I'm running a good business, tomorrow there could be a protest and I will be killed...at the camp, you apply and UNHCR people, they just tell you the country that accepts you, and for me, I was accepted by Australia so they brought me to Australia (Interview with Kiden, 13 May 2009).

I migrated to Australia with my family when I was a kid and my father died in the war in Sudan. We lived in Melbourne and I like Melbourne very much...Yeah I'm in Alice [Springs] now because I had lots of problems and my mum was sick of me so I came to live with my auntie and it's good... There are few distractions; it's a small place so I can't mess up because my aunty will know before I get home. Yeah I thank my auntie for giving me a second chance with my education ...Yeah I won't disappoint her (Interview with Erica, 14 May 2009).

First when I came to Australia, we were sent to Darwin but I moved to Sydney because I didn't want Centrelink money I wanted to work and there was plenty work for Sydney. Then I got married and I wanted to work and study same time with my children and I moved back...Here everything is close day care, uni and the nursing home where I work so I don't run around too much ...it's good for me

because people are nice and helpful not big city like Sydney (Interview with Mariam, 14 May 2009).

Unlike the refugees, migrants have made their own decisions to migrate to Australia. They spoke of multiple reasons for their choice of Australia and the NT. Their migration was mainly due to unavailability of jobs and unsustainable livelihoods back home; and hopes for professional development, opportunities, education and employment. Most of them were attracted to Australia because of its cultural diversity. The NT was deemed attractive because of its topography and weather which is similar to their countries of origin and most importantly, the friendly people. Therese, who migrated from the Seychelles, initially to Papua New Guinea, describes her journey to Australia:

At the time, Papua New Guinea was getting unsafe for families like mine with children and after a few holidays we noticed that Australia was peaceful, free and people were friendly and then my husband got a job in Brisbane as a [mentions husband's profession] and so we ended up in Australia...We didn't want to go back to [mentions husband's country] where my husband comes from and we didn't want to go back and live in the Seychelles because of my husband's job because there was no scope and opportunities for him there and we knew there were plenty of job opportunities for him in Australia as a [mentions husband's profession] ... We lived in Brisbane for a year and got transfer to Alice [Springs]...Overall it's been good because the energy and creativity in this town are just fantastic! (Interview with Therese, 12 May 2009).

### **Competency in English**

All participants believed that proficiency in English had a direct impact on their ability to integrate quickly in Australia, which confirms earlier findings.<sup>27</sup> The interviewees highlighted its important role in facilitating successful settlement by providing a path to building social networks and employment; accessing information and services and participating in the lives of their communities. Even those who attended English classes on a part-time basis due to their personal commitments, attested to the fact that it gave them opportunities to socialize with other women in the 'same boat', build their confidence and establish their own networks:

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<sup>27</sup> Donald Stewart and Bien Nam Do, "Health needs of migrant Vietnamese women in South-West Brisbane: An exploratory study," *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 38:2 (2003): 247–262.

Hey, AMEP [Australian Migrant Education Programme] help me lots. When I get here first there were few African women for AMEP...mainly Asian women and Bosnia. But I go there and I talk, talk, talk to all the women who in the 'same boat' with me, no English and we laugh and I forget my problems and loneliness. I didn't like weekends because I miss my classmates. Then we exchanged phone numbers and we call each other and sometimes we just laugh on the phone but now we all speak good English and we still friends (Interview with Joey, 29 June 2009).

Education for English is life here for Darwin and without English you can die. I say this because of what I see with my two eyes at RDH [Royal Darwin Hospital]...This African refugee woman her baby was sick. She couldn't speak English and I happen to go to ED [Emergency Department] and see her she was crying and I interpret for her because I speak Swahili...She was happy and she say to me, God save my son for bringing you here...I say to her when you are in a new country with different people, different culture and different language, education for language [English] is life because it helps you know many things and live well here (Interview with Vilma, 8 July 2009).

The participants who arrived here from Anglophone countries or already had functional English found their settlement process easier. Most of them commented on the incredible advantage they had in accessing services, finding employment, attending educational institutions and making friends:

I grew up in Seychelles which was a colony and had two colonial masters - the French and the English and I have been speaking English since I was in kindergarten...I got here and walked into volunteering at my kids' school, made lots of friends and got my real job through my networks (Interview with Therese, 12 May 2009).

Some participants commented on the problems arising from incompetency in English. They repeatedly mentioned inability to secure employment, access services, a sense of isolation, dependency on other people and limited social networks:

When I come here, I can only speak Arabic. My first day at AMEP, I greet everybody "Salaam malekum" like greeting for Arabic and everybody look at me. For two days I never say anything for class.

I'm like a child, yeah like dumb woman. I hear everything and any time I want something I call for one woman interpreter and she is always busy. It was very hard so I sit down and learn English myself with my children. Now I don't need help to do things like before. It's a good feeling for me and my children because I study more after AMEP (Interview with Fatuma, 19 June 2009).

I mean I came here as a Skilled migrant and I'm lucky I had very good English to operate here... Since coming here, I have noticed how difficult it is for some of my African brothers and sisters who have little or no English. They have to depend on other people for almost everything... They are not considered for even menial jobs like cleaning and kitchen assistants that don't require reading and writing skills in English. And even when they are employed they are given the messiest things to do and underpaid; all because they don't have the language to complain (Interview with Kalumburu, 5 July 2009).

### **Adult Education**

On the issue of why they decided to be involved in adult studies in particular programs, the responses of the participants had a recurring theme of taking advantage of the educational opportunities to gain personal and financial independence. Most of them talked about boosting their human, economic and social capital<sup>28</sup> to be able to enter the labour force; enhance their skills for promotion; to understand and be part of multicultural Australian society. They were all very certain and hopeful of better lifestyles for themselves and their families:

Hopefully, after TEP [Tertiary Enabling Program] I'll do my nursing...and I'll be able to secure a good job which will pay good money so I can support mum and my siblings...buy a house for mum because she has suffered for us. I can also help Sudanese and Australian people who have helped my family (Interview with Erica, 14 May 2009).

For some of the participants it was a long-term dream that due to past circumstances beyond their control, they had not been able to fulfill or there was another catalyst for action. McGivney describes the return to study for adult learners as being "often serendipitous" or because others

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<sup>28</sup> Josephine Balatti, Stephen Black, and Ian Falk, *Reframing Adult Literacy and Numeracy Outcomes: A Social Capital Perspective*, 2006, [www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr4L05.doc](http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr4L05.doc), (accessed 2 March 2008).

in their circle are doing it and because of the need to deal with an immediate situation in their life.”<sup>29</sup> Many of the participants talked about these kinds of serendipitous factors.

It was tough for me and my children. I was pregnant with...and my husband left me. I used to take my son to Day Care and I will volunteer because I was lonely and sad to come home. They were doing training for Certificate II Community Services – Child Care and the Manager asked me to join because I was good with the kids... I work full-time for RDH now...but I keep working at the Day Care one day a week because I am very grateful what they did for me. I learnt loads of English and Australian ways from the kids. You know kids they don't judge you they just want to have fun; like if I say something and they don't understand they will crack up and say it with their Aussie accent and I will repeat and we all crack up. I didn't feel nervous and afraid learning with them. It was a fantastic learning experience for me and even my children are not there anymore, I feel happy to go back and work once a week (Interview with Vilma, 8 July 2009).

### **Empowerment**

In accordance with earlier studies,<sup>30</sup> a large majority of the participants indicated that their education increased their chances of independent income through employment. They thought that employment fulfilled two important functions of a) income generation for the satisfaction of needs and b) provided a sense of worth, security and fulfillment. In addition, most participants reported on an achievement of some sense of enlightenment and empowerment as a result of their education. While there are multiple theoretical and operational definitions of women's empowerment, a small number of concepts are common to many: options, choice, control and power. Each of these makes frequent references to women's ability to make decisions and influence outcomes that are important to them and their families.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Veronica McGivney, “Attracting new groups in learning: Lessons from research in England,” in Judith Chapman, Patricia Cartwright & Jacqueline McGilp, eds., *Lifelong Learning, Participation and Equity*, (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006): 85.

<sup>30</sup> Sue Richardson, Lauren Miller-Lewis, Phong Ngo and Diana Ilesley, *Life in a New Land: The Experience of Migrants in Wave one of LSIA 1 and LSIA 2*, (Canberra: DIMIA, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Jean Dréze and Amartya Sen, *India: Development and participation*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); United Nations Population Fund Agency (UNFPA), *Empowering women through education*, 2004,

Henry writes, “Education is a key factor that ensures individuals are endowed with capabilities that allow them freedom to choose to live their lives in ways that have real meaning and real value.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, most of the participants talked about the transformative nature of their educational experiences such as changes in their view of themselves and others. Many talked about changes in other’s perception of them; growth in status, respect and acceptance from others. They also reflected on their significant personal growth manifested by their new knowledge and skills or an enhancement of existing skills; a confidence boost as well as enhanced opportunities and ability to engage effectively in their new community:

All the things I do [here] for [in] Australia like my work, house, investment unit, cleaning business, my friends, volunteer for Africa people and Australia people, yeah how I can work for all the things, I do them all is because I get education for Australia... My real family [is] not here but I make friends with Aboriginal people, white people, Asian people, Spanish people and Africans you see not only Sudanese. They are my big family. They understand me and I understand them because of education (Interview with Kiden, 13 May 2009).

McLaren’s study of mature-aged female students found that “education was a significant instrument of change.”<sup>33</sup> Other studies of women as mature-age students<sup>34</sup> have supported the profound change in women and different understandings of ‘self’ through education.

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[www.unfpa.org/gender/empowerment2.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/gender/empowerment2.htm), (accessed 6 June 2008); World Bank, *Education Adult literacy and Non-Formal Education*, 2003, [www.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTEDUCATION/0](http://www.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTEDUCATION/0) (accessed 15 October 2008); World Bank, *Empowerment and poverty reduction: A sourcebook*, Washington D. C.: World Bank, 2004; World Bank, *Investing in Adult Education-Empowerment and social development*, 2008, [www.worldbank.org/archive/website00573/WEB/ASP/INVEST-5.ASP](http://www.worldbank.org/archive/website00573/WEB/ASP/INVEST-5.ASP), (accessed 6 January 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Ken Henry, “Addressing extreme disadvantage through investment in capability development,” Keynote address to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Conference, *Australia’s Welfare 2007*, (Canberra, 6 December, 2007), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Arlene McLaren, *Ambitions and realizations: Women in adult education*, (London: Peter Owen, 1985), 171.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women’s ways of knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind* - Tenth anniversary edition, (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Rosalind Edwards, *Mature women students: Separating or Connecting Families*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 1993); Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994); Susan Kelly, *The Prize and the Price: The*

## **Barriers and Challenges**

Some of the major barriers and challenges the participants described when accessing adult education and training included English language proficiency, discrimination, ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, financial struggles and caring responsibilities – balancing the requirements of study with the needs of family, partners and children. This applied to those who arrived with qualifications and functional English, and to those with little or no English alike. Participants talked extensively about their daily routines before migration and adult education, and emphasized the importance of extended family support. Most of them cited expensive childcare, and with limited or non-existent family networks, they had no option but to access part-time study and work unsociable hours in low-paid jobs. The lack of extended family involvement/support left them with exclusive responsibility for children and other caring responsibilities, which they found challenging especially whilst studying. Abbott-Chapman et al found in a study of mature-aged students that “mature-aged students face particular challenges in terms of family and employment pressures and demands which compete with studies.”<sup>35</sup>

Similarly for all the participants, life was a constant juggling act – with most of them juggling a combination of the demands of study, family, partners, children, housework and paid work. However, for all the barriers and challenges, virtually all the participants seemed to agree that the gains outweighed the struggles as Kalumburu importantly stated that:

When you are educated, you don't only become a master of your future but also an important resource to all the people around, and you know we African women always have lots of people around us (laughs) (Interview with Kalumburu, 5 July 2009).

They elaborated on the need for diverse education for all women and most importantly for African migrants and refugees. Joey describes an embarrassing example of misunderstanding that she argues could have been avoided with more diverse education offered to newly settled migrants or refugees:

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*Changing World of Women Who Return to Study*, (Sydney: Methuen Haynes, 1987); John Martin, *Second chance: Women Returning to Study*, (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988).

<sup>35</sup> Joan Abbot-Chapman, John Braithwaite & Jayne Godfrey, *Promoting Access, Increasing Opportunities for University Education: A Study of Mature-aged Students From Disadvantaged Regions*, (Hobart: University of Tasmania Press, 2004), 171.

We need all education for Australia not just the one for classroom. We need education for shop, hospital and talk for different neighbours and for bus. I tell you one day there was...party. Before, I see this shop for town say 'Adult Shop' so I tell my friend we go there, buy nice dress for party. Oh my God, we get there door close so I push, open door and the people for shop look at us funny. Then we see the things for shop ah we just run and run away. My heart was beating, we didn't stop to look we were just running. It was shocking and embarrassing for me...I learn lots that day (Interview with Joey, 29 June 2009).

### **Resilience and Determination**

All the participants reported receiving help, support inspiration and motivation from family members – husbands, partners, children, parents, friends, community people, employers, lecturers, institutions' support services such as counselors, career advisors and fellow students. Nyainbo admits:

Ah I wouldn't be able to do all these [wife, mother, work full-time, study part-time] without my family. My mum lives in the next suburb... so when it's too much for us [husband and self] we just drop [mentions son's name]...My son is my biggest cheerleader. He really inspires me. He is always telling people what I'd be when I finish and I can't disappoint him (Interview with Nyainbo, 22 June 2009).

Resilience is a quality seen in every participant in the research. Stein defines resilience as "the ability to recover readily from illness, depression, adversity, or the like."<sup>36</sup> All the participants seem driven to succeed and stay focused on their goals, which help distract them from their problems. Bryce-Laporte comments on the tenacity and persistence of African immigrants, "...as a selection of people, Black immigrants represent persons who are highly disposed to run risks and engage in sacrificial, persistent, and ingenious activities in order to accomplish their life goals."<sup>37</sup> All the participants openly discussed their problems and it was remarkable how they ended the discussions with positive statements

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<sup>36</sup> Jess Stein, ed., *The Random House College Dictionary*, Revised Edition, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., (New York: Random House, 1988), 1123.

<sup>37</sup> Bryce-Laporte cited in Tara Boadu, *Experiences of Recent African Immigrants Living in the United States*, A Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology, (University of Chicago, 2003), 136.

about hope and faith in God and the future, demonstrating their resilience and fortitude. For example as Sally explains:

Hmm, I know God brought me here for a reason...I had a feeling that one day I'll go to 'Varsity [University]...but I got pregnant straightaway when I got here [Australia]... After my baby he [my husband] got this job in Darwin that's why we moved here from [mentions name of interstate city]. I got pregnant again and again and now we have three children...My friends think I'm a super-woman because I don't complain and say negative things about my situation...But yeah, I think this positive attitude may be cultural with us Ghanaians, you know how it's like a taboo to say negative things about yourself. It's like, we believe saying or thinking something negative is self-fulfilling prophecy so whatever the situation, you shake yourself and move on (Interview with Sally, 5 June 2009).

Boadu and Hovey found in their respective studies that resilience and positive outlook on settlement experience help in the adaptation and integration process of migrants and refugees.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the pre-migration experiences of torture and trauma and the subsequent obstacles and challenges experienced in accessing education in the NT, incredible determination to succeed was a key factor in their persistence to pursue education as Mangi and Kalumburu share their beliefs and values:

Yeah, I'll say I have got this far because of my networks and sheer determination to succeed and not give up...Yeah, I believe if you want something badly you have to be determined and get it because the opportunities will be there and so will the challenges (Interview with Mangi, 8 June 2009).

I think what keeps me going is, as a child my parents always told me 'The sky is your limit' so I don't like to give up on anything that I start. I'm always determined to finish whatever I do and that's why I always tell my students 'the sky is your limit...if you want to change your situation through education, you have to be in the driver's seat of your learning and allow me, your lecturer to be your guide'(Interview with Kalumburu, 5 July 2009).

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<sup>38</sup> Boadu, 2003; Joseph Hovey, "Psychosocial predictors of acculturative stress in immigrants," *The Journal of Psychology*, 134:5 (2000): 490-502.

## **Conclusion**

Migration leads to changes in people's lives. What emerges from this study is that education is a potent force which has enabled the participants to find meaning in the challenges of their existence. In embracing the processes of change through active participation in educational activities, they have learned to adapt to new roles and employ a variety of coping strategies. Through adult education they have gained linguistic skills and ability to examine, understand and map out aspects of practices from their original cultural backgrounds and host community and then make the changes they consider appropriate for the survival in their host community. The participants' responses strongly indicate that adult education has assisted them in building their capacity to contribute to the development of their community as it has provided them with essential social, professional, political, and cultural knowledge. It has further provided them with skills to participate in the labour market and bring social, cultural and intellectual dynamism to the different communities they have joined. Their stories attest to empowerment and hope, which can inform opportunities and educational pathways offered to other migrant and refugee groups.

The study gives the wider community an opportunity to gain an understanding of how the personal stories of the participants and their varied views can be seen within the context of the aspirations and values among all African-Australian women. Finally, it is hoped that the findings and recommendations which will be included in my final Doctoral Thesis will provide a useful resource for developing and shaping future policy and stimulate further research.

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