

**The Australasian Review of African Studies**

**African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific**

**Volume 32 Number 2 December 2011**

**CONTENTS**

<b>South Sudanese Diaspora in Australasia</b> <i>Jay Marlowe – ARAS Guest Editor</i>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Sudan-born in Australia: a Statistical Profile</b> <i>David Lucas, Monica Jamali, and Barbara Edgar</i>	<b>10</b>
<b>Sudanese heritage and living in Australia: Implications of demography for individual and community resilience</b> <i>Julie Robinson</i>	<b>25</b>
<b>Convenient Labels, Inaccurate Representations: Turning Southern Sudanese Refugees into ‘African-Australians’</b> <i>Melissa Phillips</i>	<b>57</b>
<b>Agency and Belonging: Southern Sudanese Former Refugees’ Reflections on Life in Australia</b> <i>Janecke Wille</i>	<b>80</b>
<b>Sudanese Settlement: Employing Strategies of Intercultural Contact and Cultural Maintenance</b> <i>Jay Marlowe</i>	<b>101</b>
<b>Blocked opportunity and threatened identity: Understanding experiences of disrespect in South Sudanese Australians</b> <i>Ibolya Losoncz</i>	<b>118</b>
<b>South Sudanese communities and Australian family law: A clash of systems</b> <i>Danijela Milos</i>	<b>143</b>
<b>Positive Parenting: Integrating Sudanese traditions and New Zealand styles of parenting. An Evaluation of Strategies with Kids - Information for Parents (SKIP)</b> <i>Santino Atem Deng and Fiona Pienaar</i>	<b>160</b>

<b>The Settlers' Dream: Resettlement Experiences of Sudanese Refugees in New Zealand</b> <i>Julius Marete</i>	<b>180</b>
<b>No Room In My Car</b> <i>Priscella Engall</i>	<b>194</b>
<b>Tribute – Wangari Maathai (1940-2011)</b> <i>Maureen Boyle</i>	<b>204</b>
<b>ARAS Guidelines for Contributors</b>	<b>206</b>

# Agency and Belonging: Southern Sudanese Former Refugees' Reflections on Life in Australia<sup>1</sup>

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*I long, as does every human being, to be at home wherever I find myself.*

Maya Angelou

## **Abstract**

The development of a sense of belonging is today seen as vital for a successful integration process as well as for social cohesion. However, notions of belonging and social cohesion are often discussed with regard to the dominant culture where the focus is on, in the case of Australia, 'Australian values', 'fitting in', and 'common identity'. Social cohesion is, in these contexts, based on a discussion of homogeneity rather than diversity and complexity. This article discusses the conceptualizations of integration and belonging with a group of Southern Sudanese former refugees in Australia. This discussion illustrates the complexities behind integration processes, as well as providing an insight into how belonging is entwined with agency and participation in the Australian society. I argue that the development of a sense of belonging is not achievable without focusing on and recognising people's agency in the integration process.<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

Forced migration continues to be a growing issue due to conflicts within and across borders and is commonly described as the "...movements of

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to acknowledge the supervisors of the project, Dr. Alastair Greig and Dr. Jay Marlowe, for their support while writing this article. I also wish to thank Dr. James Eldridge as well as Til Eldridge Bassett for proof-reading and editing the article and Vanessa McDermott for final comments. Finally, I am very grateful for the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this article.

<sup>2</sup> The author acknowledges the debate and concerns for many refugees regarding the label 'refugee'. As many of the participants in this research questioned the label and its negative connotation the author will here refer to the participants as 'former refugees' in order to signal a shift away from the refugee status in the settlement period. The 'former refugee' phrase is based on work by Aparna Hebbani, Levi Obijiofor, and Helen Bristed, "Intercultural Communication Challenges Confronting Female Sudanese Former Refugees in Australia," *The Australasian Review of African Studies* 31:1 (2010): 37-61.

refugees and internal displaced people (IDPs)”.<sup>3</sup> This journey can lead to a fragmentation of communities and people’s immediate social world that may include loss of family and social relations, disruption in education, work, daily life and livelihood strategies.<sup>4</sup> Such experiences can threaten one’s social, cultural and economic capital and disrupt people’s notions of belonging to place, community and society.

When arriving in a new and often unknown country, refugees will begin the endeavour of rebuilding their social world. A part of this process is the development of a sense of belonging related to home and community, meaning in one’s life and feelings of safety. How this sense of belonging develops and what impacts on this process on a group of Southern Sudanese people living in Canberra is the focus of this article. It examines factors in the new society that foster, or hinder, a person’s perspectives on belonging. Furthermore, by acknowledging that refugees are agents during the integration process, the link between agency and belonging is also analysed.

Australian immigration policy highlights the importance of social cohesion, belonging, and Australian values.<sup>5</sup> In an attempt to define and analyse a sense of belonging, this research looks at Southern Sudanese former refugees resettling in Canberra. Sudanese refugees began arriving in Australia during the 1990s with arrivals peaking at the beginning of 2000. During 2004-5 the Sudanese community was the fastest growing immigrant community in Australia. In 2006 the Census reported a total of 19,050 Sudanese-born in Australia, “an increase of 287.7 percent from the 2001 Census”.<sup>6</sup> While the majority of new arrivals from Sudan settle

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<sup>3</sup> Anastasia Bermúdez Torres, “Fmo Thematic Guide: Gender and Forced Migration,”(2002), <http://www.forcedmigration.org/guides/fmo007/> (accessed 24 January 2011): 2.

<sup>4</sup> Val Colic-Peisker and Frida Tilbury, “Refugees and employment: The effect of visible difference on discrimination,” Centre for Social and Community Research (Murdoch University 2007); Emmanuel Marx, “The social world of refugees: a Conceptual Framework,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 3:3 (1990): 189-203; and Peter Westoby, “Developing a community-development approach through engaging resettling Southern Sudanese refugees within Australia,” *Community Development Journal* 43:4 (2008): 483-495.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Immigration and Citizenship, “The People of Australia - Australia’s Multicultural Policy,” (Canberra: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Aniko Hatoss and Henk Huijser, “Gendered Barriers to Educational Opportunities: Resettlement of Sudanese Refugees in Australia,” *Forced Migration Special Issue of Gender and Education*, 22:2 (2010): 6.

in the larger metropolitan areas of Melbourne and Sydney, there is a smaller community of about 300 in Canberra.

In what follows, I discuss integration and link it to recent academic debates on multiculturalism followed by a brief look into belonging and how recent literature employs the concept. I then introduce the voices of the participants in my research in order to illustrate the complexities of integration and belonging in the resettlement experience.

### **Current Debates on Integration**

Having moved from the White Australia policy to assimilation, integration and then multiculturalism, post-war Australia is today seen as a successful example of a multicultural society with high levels of social cohesion.<sup>7</sup> While multiculturalism in Australia has been criticised and opposed, the policy itself has survived through various governments since its instalment in 1975. Recent global and local events however, have led to a tension in both public and political discussions around multiculturalism. The September 11 terrorist attacks, the Bali bombings, London bombings, the Cronulla riots in Sydney, as well as the recent terror bombing and shootings in Norway on 22 July 2011 as a direct attack on multiculturalism, has led to heated debate both in the media and in the political arena concerning immigration. Concerns related to diversity, multiculturalism, social harmony, as well as to Australian values.

Following these events there has been an increased debate on the need for integration based on social cohesion, Australian values, common identity, and a sense of belonging.<sup>8</sup> After the Tampa events in 2001 where the

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<sup>7</sup> As it is out of the scope of this article to go into details of the process of developing multiculturalism in Australia I refer to reader to other literature such as: James Jupp, *Understanding Australian Multiculturalism* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996); Mark Lopez, *The Origins of Multiculturalism in Australian Politics 1945-1975* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000); Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, "Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity. Updating the 1999 New Agenda for Multicultural Australia: Strategic Directions for 2003-2006," (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Louise Humpage, "Throwing the Baby out with the Bathwater?: Contradictions in Government Policy Regarding Refugees on Temporary Protection Visas, Social Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Australia" (paper presented at the Knowledge, Capitalism, Critique. SAANZ Conference, New Zealand, 9-11 December 2003); Amanda Wise, "Multiculturalism or Social Cohesion?: The Australian Debate," in *Metropolis Conference* (Melbourne, Australia 2007); Melinda McPherson, "'I Integrate, Therefore I Am': Contesting the Normative Discourse of Integrationism

Norwegian vessel, Tampa, rescued 438 asylum seekers outside Australian borders but were denied access into Australia, the 2001 election year saw the use of a more hard-line approach towards asylum seekers. The infamous words of the then Prime Minister John Howard stating that “we decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come,” marked a turning point in Australia’s history.<sup>9</sup> After this initial outburst, and following tighter border control as well as the worldwide fight against terrorism, ethnic diversity and multiculturalism became highly contested topics in Australia. In 2005, the Treasurer Peter Costello warned that people thinking of coming to Australia “who did not like Australian values and preferred a society that practiced Sharia law should go elsewhere”.<sup>10</sup> This view was repeated in a speech in Sydney in February 2006 where Costello, referring to ‘mushy multiculturalism’, expressed Australian values as being “[l]oyalty, democracy, tolerance, the rule of law”.<sup>11</sup>

In 2007, the Government implemented a citizenship test, with the intention of formally testing migrants’ values, rights and responsibilities as well as language, provoking further debates on integration and Australian values. Also in 2007, the then Minister of Immigration, Kevin Andrews, suggested one specific group, Sudanese refugees in Australia, were not capable of integrating into the Australian society: “some groups don’t seem to be settling and adjusting to the Australian way of life as quickly as we would hope, and therefore it makes sense to [...] slow down the rate of intake from countries such as Sudan”.<sup>12</sup>

With a change in Government in 2007 followed by the introduction of a reviewed multicultural policy in February 2011, multiculturalism in Australia has received new attention.<sup>13</sup> Although defined and implemented in different ways depending on context, there are, according

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through Conversations with Refugee Women,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23:4 (2010): 546-570.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Scanlon, “Howard and Hanson Will Dance Again,” *The Age*, 11 December 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Grattan, “Accept Australian Values or Get Out,” *The Age*, 25 August 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Costello, “Subscribe to Our Values or Don’t Come Here,” *The Age*, 24 February 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Cath Hart and Samantha Maiden, “Race to Point Finger of Blame,” *The Australian*, 6 October 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, “The People of Australia. Australia’s Multicultural Policy,” ed. Department of Immigration and Citizenship (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2011).

to Vasta, two key principles that can be found within all multicultural policies: social equality and participation; and cultural recognition.<sup>14</sup> Within the new Australian multicultural policy we can, confirming Vasta's notion, find focus in the same principles: cultural diversity; participation in the various social and cultural opportunities; understanding and acceptance of different cultures; as well as a strong focus on social cohesion and Australian values.<sup>15</sup> This focus on social cohesion is often confused with returning to a policy of assimilation, or rather 'integrationism'.<sup>16</sup> 'Integrationism' is, according to McPherson, still "concerned with the adaptation by outsiders to local norms."<sup>17</sup> As noted by Humpage, the Australian Government's focus on social cohesion is "associated with belonging and inclusion based on shared values and norms" and reflects a notion of the need for outsiders to adapt to 'our' norms and values.<sup>18</sup> This 'becoming like us' echoes a sense of integrationism rather than a "multicultural Real": where diversity becomes part of the norm and where the definition and understanding of multiculturalism reflects a "we which is itself diverse."<sup>19</sup> Looking back at the statements by Costello, Andrews, and Howard as well as the current focus on 'our' values and 'the Australian way of life,' a two-way integration process tends to become unbalanced. Andrews not only singled out one specific group as the 'odd one out,' but also, as previously noted, emphasised how this group was unable to integrate, to become like 'us.'

To reach a better understanding of what integration and belonging mean for people arriving and resettling in Australia, this article takes these debates and relates them to people's own experiences. I continue by clarifying the concept of integration to provide background for this article and then provide a discussion of belonging, before looking at Southern Sudanese former refugees' understanding of and experiences with the two concepts. The aim is to provide a personal understanding of the complex process of resettling, integration and the development of a sense of belonging.

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<sup>14</sup> Ellie Vasta, "Accommodating Diversity: Why Current Critiques of Multiculturalism Miss the Point," (Oxford: Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford, 2007): 7.

<sup>15</sup> McPherson; Vasta.

<sup>16</sup> McPherson; Vasta.

<sup>17</sup> McPherson, 547.

<sup>18</sup> Humpage, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ghassan Hage, *White Nation. Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Annandale Pluto Press Australia, 1998): 139.

### **Conceptualising integration**

The concept of integration is highly contested with numerous definitions. Berry starts a discussion of integration by looking at the process of acculturation: what happens when “individuals who have developed in one cultural context attempt to re-establish their lives in another.”<sup>20</sup> His definition of integration is useful as he describes it as occurring in “a situation where it is considered valuable to maintain one’s own identity and characteristics as well as maintaining relationships and participating in the larger society.”<sup>21</sup> A considerable strength with Berry’s work lies in his focus on newcomers themselves as the centre of the analysis and as agents where they play a vital part in the integration process. Not considered to the same degree, are the possible barriers to integration with the wider society. An adjustment and willingness within the host society is necessary to facilitate the integration process. As Zetter notes: “...even if positive relations with larger (dominant) society are sought, the refugee may well be rebuffed by society.”<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the refugees’ agency as well as barriers in society must be analysed when assessing an integration process. This two-way integration process is dependent on the willingness of both the newcomer and the larger society to adjust to each other.<sup>23</sup>

Based on the debates on integration as well as Australia’s multicultural context, I will adopt the following definition of integration, or rather ‘multicultural integration’:

A multicultural integration process is a two-way process that impacts on and requires adjustments from both newcomers and the established society, where people can feel free to retain their own culture, characteristics and identity while developing

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<sup>20</sup> John W. Berry, “Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation,” *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 46:1 (1997): 5.

<sup>21</sup> Berry, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Zetter, David Griffiths, Nando Sigona, and Margaret Hauser, “Survey on Policy and Practice Related to Refugee Integration,” (Oxford: School of Planning, Oxford Brookes University, European Refugee Fund Community Action, European Commission, 2002): 130

<sup>23</sup> Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, “Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21:2 (2008): 166-191; Maja Korac, “Dilemmas of Integration: Two Policy Contexts and Refugee Strategies for Integration” (Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, Queen Elisabeth House, University of Oxford, 2001); Vasta; Zetter, Griffiths, Sigona, and Hauser.



relations with, and a sense of belonging to ‘the established society.’<sup>24</sup>

I argue that a starting point for understanding this multicultural integration process is to look at belonging and what this might represent for newcomers settling in Australia. In this, I argue for a necessary focus on agency. According to Giddens, agency “refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place.”<sup>25</sup> In order to understand how, why and when refugees act, one must also understand the barriers in society that may hinder or encourage action. I base my understanding of agency on similar work on refugees, immigration and integration that consider agency as vital in the process of feeling settled. According to Korac, when there is a space for agency to develop and when agency is acknowledged, people will feel respected and willing to be part of the society.<sup>26</sup> As noted by Castles, Korac, Vasta, and Vertovec:

Developing the human agency needed to function effectively in a new environment requires the individual and collective initiative of the newcomers. Where restrictive rules and rigid systems confine them to a passive role, integration may be slow and incomplete.<sup>27</sup>

I look at both agency and belonging and analyse to what degree there is a link between them in an integration process based on former refugees’ own understandings and experiences. To what degree is a sense of belonging dependent on the opportunity to exercise agency as participants in social life?

### **Multicultural Integration and the Role of Belonging**

The notion of belonging is an often-used yet ill-defined concept. While referred to within contexts such as integration, social cohesion, and community harmony, there is a need to clarify the concept. According to Vasta and Hamaz, it is “widely agreed upon that belonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling ‘at home’ and [...] about feeling

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<sup>24</sup> Definition based on work by Ager and Strang; Stephen Castles, Maja Korac, Ellie Vasta, and Steven Vertovec, “Integration: Mapping the Field,” (Oxford: University of Oxford Centre for Migration and Policy Research and Refugee Studies Centre, 2002); Korac; Vasta.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984): 9

<sup>26</sup> Korac.

<sup>27</sup> Castles, Korac, Vasta, and Vertovec : 114.

safe.”<sup>28</sup> Prevailing views on belonging however, where citizenship or cultural integration is deemed necessary, or where “membership and acceptance within a collective” is considered vital for a sense of belonging, are today being challenged by new theories.<sup>29</sup> Recent theories analyse power structures “that socially locate people as belonging or not belonging.”<sup>30</sup> These theories move away from understandings of belonging as “a zero-sum process of being and belonging either ‘here’ or ‘there.’”<sup>31</sup> Rather, people’s own constructions of belonging are in focus. Relating back to the understanding and acknowledgment of the vital role of agency I will here base my work on belonging on the work by Hamaz and Vasta.<sup>32</sup> They note how “people construct their own definitions of citizenship, identity and belonging” and emphasise how “belonging is formed through the interplay of the subjective self, individual agency and structural positioning.”<sup>33</sup> By looking at Southern Sudanese former refugees’ experiences of belonging, I question to what degree the definition by Hamaz and Vasta plays a part in the former refugees’ definitions and experiences of belonging. In doing this I argue for an understanding of belonging from the refugees’ or newcomers’ own perspectives. The focus on agency is necessary in order to understand the forces that impact on the development of belonging.

### **Participants and Study Design**

Participants for this research were 21 Southern Sudanese men and women living in Canberra, 10 men and 11 women. All were recruited through participating in church services, women’s meetings, ‘hanging out’ at the university and through the use of a snowball method. While looking at the development of belonging, I wanted to talk to people in different phases of their ‘settlement’ period and spoke to people who lived in Australia from around two years and up to nine years. The age of the men discussed in this article ranged from 25 to 38 and most were single. The age of the women ranged from 25 to 54 years. The women discussed were all mothers; one was divorced, while the rest were married. Of the 21 participants, six women did not speak adequate English and required the use of an interpreter.

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<sup>28</sup> Sofia Hamaz and Ellie Vasta, “‘To Belong or Not to Belong’: Is That the Question? Negotiating Belonging in Multi-Ethnic London,” (University of Oxford: Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), 2009): 5

<sup>29</sup> Hamaz and Vasta, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Yuval-Davis, et al. 2006 cited in Hamaz and Vasta, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Hamaz and Vasta, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Hamaz and Vasta, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Hamaz and Vasta, 7.

The 15 face-to-face interviews, as well as two focus groups, were in-depth and open-ended with the intent of letting the respondents tell their stories on settling and living in Australia. The young men discussed in this article were all students at the university and were familiar with the concept and debates involving integration. The women on the other hand, needed some background explanation about integration, but had a deep understanding of my main focus, the issue of belonging. While conducting the interviews, it became obvious that I was dealing with two different groups among the participants. The first group consisted of young men, currently studying or recently finished at university, who held a generally positive outlook on their life in and experiences with Australia. The second group consisted of women without adequate knowledge of English. They were all studying English or had just completed their Adult Migration English Program (AMEP) course, but, as one of them said, still did not speak it properly due to their age and difficulties in learning a new language.

I analysed the data firstly by identifying themes considered important for all participants.<sup>34</sup> These were themes related to employment, opportunities, education, secure housing and parent-child conflicts. Through coding these themes and identifying similarities and differences in content, I identified emergent themes that could then be related to theories on belonging and integration. These emergent themes included participation, recognition, the importance of everyday life activities, as well as a need to be welcomed on the same level as other Australians. As demonstrated in the findings sections below, people had different experiences of belonging as well as different understandings of settlement and integration in a new country.

### **Southern Sudanese Perspectives: Participation, Opportunities and Belonging**

*...it is very hard sometimes to explain yourself in a simple term and forget about the past...not because you don't want to let*

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<sup>34</sup> The methodology was based on the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as explained and used by, among others, Robert Schweitzer and Zachary Steel, "Researching Refugees: Methodological and Ethical Considerations," in *Doing Cross-Cultural Research: Ethical and Methodological Perspectives*, ed. Pranee Liamputtong (Springer, Netherlands: Social Indicators Research Series, 2008); Jane Shakespeare-Finch and Kylie Wickham, "Adaptation of Sudanese Refugees in an Australian Context: Investigating Helps and Hindrances," *International Migration*, 48: 1 (2009): 23-46.

*people know where you come from but you are trying to tell people you also belong to this place, you know (Ater, male).*<sup>35</sup>

The development of a sense of belonging in a new country is dependent on numerous of factors in the receiving society as well as with the people themselves. While the participants in my research expressed a desire to settle and to be part of the social fabric in Australia, there were still concerns related to the integration process and especially to the development of a sense of belonging. When asked a direct question on whether the participants felt at home in Australia, felt that they belong; the initial answer was in most cases, yes. Reasons for this were many, from safety and being able to sleep at night to opportunities and participation in the receiving society. The women without English acknowledged that life was good in Australia and that there were opportunities here:

*Everything is good, there are differences from the way Australians do their things and from what we do back home but it is good here...like schools now, if you wanted to study, although you are not a child you are an adult, you can follow your studies and you can do something, which is a good thing... (Women's group)*

The women also highlighted safety reasons and feelings of security in Australia, especially when compared to their lives during flight and in refugee camps:

*...since coming to Australia you just have to settle at one place, you don't hear any bombs, you sleep at night and don't think whatever is going to happen, because always in Africa you have to sleep thinking that something is going to happen tonight and I might run from this place...so this is what you are thinking in your mind, but it has settled since you came to Australia so that a good settling, your brain is settling down. (Women's group)*

Also many of the men noted the importance of feeling safe and secure when resettling and starting a new life.

*...one of the most important things is security, once you lead your life you don't know what is going to happen to yourself to your life, to other people that are surrounding you so the important thing is you feel secure, that is the number one thing. (Garang, male)*

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<sup>35</sup> All names of the participants are fictive to secure the anonymity of the participants.

Additionally, the men noted a great freedom with regard to opportunities and being able to plan a future in Australia and the positive impact this had on their sense of belonging, as well as how important this was for a successful integration process.

*Coming here I have an opportunity to you know...have a vision of what I want to become in the future. (Garang, male)*

*...the opportunities here, the opportunities to study and make something out of yourself, and...and build a career, there is great potential for that here. There are two opportunities here in Canberra that really makes me want to stay and that is employment and education. (Majier, male)*

In addition to safety, security, opportunities and being able to envisage a positive future, all participants noted the role of having family in Australia as vital for belonging and integration. While many of the men were young and arrived in Australia alone, they noted how their own sense of belonging would develop further once they had a wife and children in Australia. These positive thoughts suggested a hope and willingness to settle and create a life in Australia. The eagerness to participate, contribute and understand the new society was palpable. However, after more detailed discussion about integration and belonging, the differences between men and women became apparent. At the same time all participants expressed a more complex picture of the process.

### **Integration as a mutual process – “a tree is not a tree without the leaves”**

While discussing integration and belonging with the participants, it became apparent that the men who studied and spoke fluent English had a clear view on issues of settlement and integration. The men identified settlement as the first step towards belonging, involving obtaining a house, getting a job, and knowing the language. Integration, on the other hand, was a step beyond this, involving being part of the society, knowing your neighbours, and being accepted in the community. All participants considered being an active part of the receiving community as essential for belonging, although they expressed their level of activity in different ways. Reflecting back on integration as a two-way process the men in particular had strong views on this.

*...integration I think is a two-way process, sometimes you might want so much to be integrated but you know, the other communities are not receptive of you, you know, that cannot be integration completely, so it has to be both ways you know... if*

*people are as receptive as others you know, it is easy to try, so it is a two-way process from the Australians and from the refugees themselves. (Garang, male)*

Furthermore, the men noted how important it was for the Australian society to get to know the Southern Sudanese as well as the other way around. By learning to know each other, a two-way integration a common belonging may develop where all members of the society acknowledge and see the need for each other.

*...if you talk about integration, it is where...where people have trust, you will get friends that are Australians and they will learn to know you better, like other people, you seem not to be so strange to them and the same things to your neighbours, they will know you and you will have contact with them. So that is in that regard integration...the longer time you spend in Australia you become to know every system, the more time you will say that I am really part of Australia. (Yong, male)*

There was an acknowledgement among men of the need for a two-way integration process as they recognised the opportunities afforded to them by Australian society. They acknowledged their responsibility to give something back by studying hard and later working hard, or doing both at the same time:

*...you feel you are settled at home because you have a kind of a contributing to the community. If you work with people you are kind of integrating with them because you have a duty of task, someone who needs you and someone depending on you to do...if I work I help myself and I help the nation because I pay the taxes and obviously this tax will help others...people trying to talk about Sudanese [but the Sudanese] may not be the problem, it might be a problem with the whole thing, the whole system you know, if we have a tree, it is not a tree without the leaves, no tree without the branches, and there is no tree without the wood, so they are all kind of supporting each other despite of what...despite of the function of each and every one... (Ater, male)*

### ***Belonging and a sense of self***

The women provided some contrasting and similar perspectives and considered belonging and integration as related to a sense of feeling part of society at the same level as others in the community. They also

acknowledged that in order to do so, they wanted to contribute on the same level as others.

*...I think we do have half of the settlement because...like if you compare yourself with the others...if you compare yourself with the neighbour, they can wake up in the morning, jump in the car and then go to their workplace and work and then later on come back and just come to the house whereas we can jump on the bus and then another bus and we can take three buses just to go to school and then when we comes back there is another bus...I guess that is not integration, it is still, we are still, we haven't settled if I can put it that way. Because settlement in this country means that you have something you do...you don't settle with the government money, I don't think so because, they are good for you to survive but then you don't get more out of it so...  
(Women's group)*

This reflection on the importance of everyday activities and a wish to participate in these reveals a need to exercise agency, to feel needed as well as a need to feel a sense of self. This is in many ways similar to the ideas of the men on integration and belonging but, I will argue, with a more emotional expression of agency with a strong focus on the subjective self, a wish to have something in common with others and it this way a sense of belonging.

*...when you get here it is like emotional so...emotional and psychological and... if you work then instead of staying in a Government house you can do work and build...make money and you can buy yourself a home or somewhere where you can settle you know...settle with money to buy your own place in stead of renting for years. But because there is no chance of getting a job because of the English you can not work, you can not change your life and it is not settlement...we are still receiving the government assistance and we still live in government houses but in Africa or in Sudan you would be an Australian or a Sudanese person if you had your own house and that will make you an Australian if you buy your own house in Australia but without that there is no meaning of you being an Australian. (Women's group)*

With different experiences and understandings of belonging, there were also numerous ways in which this sense of belonging developed. A common theme was the importance of encouraging and recognising agency – acknowledging refugees as persons with an important past and

people capable of meaningful participation in civil society. Acknowledgement and appreciation of refugees and their attributes, together with appreciation by the refugees of the receiving society, appear to be the forces behind a two-way integration process which also impacts upon the development of belonging. People are not passive victims in the integration process but rather actively develop their own integration experience as well as a sense of belonging if given enough space in the receiving society.

These sentiments resonated strongest among the men, while the women expressed a more emotional approach in relation to developing a sense of belonging. The women emphasised the importance of participation and contribution, but the value of being acknowledged as human beings accepted by the community was more palpable. This acceptance involved greetings from neighbours, and being acknowledged as mothers, as people who could still work and were capable, especially since they had executed many of these roles back in Sudan. Noting how things were different in Sudan and expressing a feeling of longing for aspects of their former lives in Sudan, was more evident among the women, as will be demonstrated in the next section.

### **Longing and Belonging: language, participation and understanding**

For the women, especially the ones with little or no education and only basic knowledge of English, the issues of emotional attachment, feeling at home and feeling safe were vital in the process towards belonging. Most women considered safety as essential in the resettlement process and for many, the main reason why they couldn't go back to Sudan. Still, among these women there was a general sense of a lack of belonging in the Australian society. Feelings of isolation, a sense of frustration due to difficulties of getting a job, lack of relations to other Australians, and a lack of understanding of the Australian social services and institutions, were all issues brought up by the women. However, when asked directly whether they considered Canberra as a home, whether they felt a sense of belonging in Australia, the women said yes:

*Yes, it is our country because we don't have anywhere else to go to. (Women's group)*

This quote articulates a sense of having no choice in coming to Australia, but once here they accept that this is how it is. In their research on Somali women in Melbourne, McMichael and Manderson, noted how the women's memories of Somalia "involved nostalgic recollections of their homelands configured as a place where dominant norms and values



provided an environment of trust and social support that suffused everyday life and social relations”.<sup>36</sup> Sitting at home without a job and without adequate English to be able to communicate with other Australians can have an extremely isolating impact on the women and as a result, the dreams of Sudan, or Africa, become stronger.

*I think this country is very stressful, like in Africa I never had the stress [...] I don't feel stressed, I don't feel pressured [...] life was easy, 'peasy' and you can just do whatever you can and if you don't have enough it doesn't matter you can just...your brain is free. (Women's group)*

This nostalgic recollection of life in Africa can be linked to a lack of participation in the social fabric followed by a lack of understanding of Australian laws and norms. All women mentioned growing concerns over their children as well as child-parent conflicts, as hindering a sense of belonging. One major reason for this was language and the inability to participate in their children's lives as well as misunderstandings when social services were involved. The important role of language in family relations as well as relations with Australian society was also noted by Atwell et al:

These language barriers made it difficult for some parents to acquire an understanding of the norms and values that make up the parenting environment in Australia.<sup>37</sup>

This lack of general understanding and the inability to take part in their children's education, resulted in parents feeling inhibited in “their ability to offer effective guidance to their children and [this] can diminish their sense of authority and confidence.”<sup>38</sup> All the women noted the difficulties with these changes in family structure.

*So the kids are higher than the parents nowadays, which is very wrong. (Women's group)*

Based on comments from the women, I argue that they felt a loss of self when they could not discipline and raise their children without fear of running into conflict with ‘Australian norms and laws’, even though they

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<sup>36</sup> Cellia McMichael and Lenore Manderson, “Somali Women and Well-Being: Social Networks and Social Capital among Immigrant Women in Australia,” *Human Organization*, 63: 1 (2004): 91.

<sup>37</sup> Rebecca Atwell, Sandra M. Gifford, and Brooke McDonald-Wilmsen, “Resettled Refugee Families and Their Children's Futures: Coherence, Hope and Support,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 40: 5 (2009): 683.

<sup>38</sup> Atwell, Gifford, and McDonald-Wilmsen, 684.

had experiences of raising children for many years before arriving in Australia. This loss of self was felt even stronger due to a lack of understanding of local laws and norms as well as a sense of not being acknowledged in the community.

While the men had a sense of belonging through their student status, taking part in reading groups, making friends among other Australians as well as other nationalities, the women did not share this same sense of belonging. Without adequate English there were fewer jobs available and the prospects of continuing studies after the compulsory English classes were limited due to lack of childcare, lack of family support and insufficient qualifications to study.<sup>39</sup> The women noted as above the value of language in their everyday life and the difficulties and frustrations of job seeking due to language barriers.

This lack of language and the impact on a general feeling of being part of the society was also noted by Atwell et al when observing how an exclusion from the language in the receiving country will in many ways symbolise an exclusion “from participation in its social, cultural and political life.”<sup>40</sup> An exclusion from social life impacted on a sense of belonging through lack of participation and lack of a sense of acknowledgment from the wider society. I argue here that the women in this study, especially women without employment and with limited English, experienced stronger barriers in expressing their agency. At the same time they articulated a more emotional sense of belonging. They noted isolation due to language issues, lack of participation in social life as well as a lack of understanding of Australian laws and norms.

Men on the other hand, generally related belonging more towards participating in the employment sector, or in student life and at the same time expressed their aspirations and willingness to contribute back to the society. While women may have expressed similar ideas, the fact that this was still far from reality, meant that other issues became more imperative.

### **Discussion: Belonging and Gender**

An obvious factor explaining the differences in experiences of belonging is the role of gender. A woman’s role in situations of flight, resettlement

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<sup>39</sup> The AMEP offers up to 510 hours of free English tuition to eligible adult migrants, including humanitarian entrants (<http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/help-with-english/amep/facts/facts-figures/amep-overview.htm>). AMEP provides childcare only during the period of undertaking language tuition.

<sup>40</sup> Atwell, Gifford, and McDonald-Wilmsen, 678.

and integration has been widely discussed.<sup>41</sup> There is no escaping that women experience the integration process differently from men – especially as they often have less education, if any, from their home country, followed by fewer employment opportunities in the receiving country and a lack of language. These factors, in addition to labelling refugee women as ‘vulnerable’ and different from Western women, as is the case in many countries’ policies, “denies refugee women agency.”<sup>42</sup> The discussions in this article emphasise the role of gender as vital in the process of developing a sense of belonging. As noted by Hatoss and Huijser, refugee women need “tools and support to shape their own space in the resettlement process, and define their own sense of belonging.”<sup>43</sup> As demonstrated in this article, acknowledging former refugees as agents and as equal, as part of ‘us’ without emphasising the refugee status and by letting people participate, may encourage a sense of belonging among newly arrived refugees in Australia. As noted by Hamaz and Vasta, by looking at room to exercise agency, a sense of self, as well as factors such as gender, employment, education and language knowledge, one might reach a better understanding of what belonging means for different people.<sup>44</sup>

For the men, the feeling of being able to be part of the society, to be able to participate as any other Australian, amounted to having their agency recognised. In addition to a sense of responsibility to fit in with Australian society, the Sudanese men saw integration in Australia as an opportunity to develop their life, start a family, and to give something back to Australia. By being part of the society through study and hopefully later work, men gained a sense of being recognised agents. Colic-Peisker and Tilbury noted how “...satisfactory employment is the crux of successful settlement for migrants generally, and refugees specifically”.<sup>45</sup> This positive outlook on their life in Australia – due to the opportunity to study and the feeling of a chance to change your life – was apparent in the majority of the interviews with the young men. Vasta notes how “structures and processes of equality need to provide the basis and resources for integration” in order for belonging to develop.<sup>46</sup> To be

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<sup>41</sup> Hatoss and Huijser; Bermúdez Torres; Eileen Pittaway and Emma Pittaway, “Refugee Woman: A Dangerous Label,” *The Australian Journal of Human Rights*, June (2004): 119-136.

<sup>42</sup> Hatoss and Huijser, 149.

<sup>43</sup> Hatoss and Huijser, 149.

<sup>44</sup> Hamaz and Vasta.

<sup>45</sup> Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Vasta, 25.

able to participate in all areas of social life, and to understand Australian laws and norms in order to be part of them, is imperative.

To acknowledge agency as well as the subjective self and to recognise and acknowledge the structural positioning of former refugees must be the starting point for understanding how a sense of belonging develops differently and independently for all newcomers. Hage notes the importance of “common belonging to a society committed to honouring its members” through emphasising how it is:

...when we have a society which, through the bodies that govern it, feels ‘obligated’ to offer spaces that ‘honour’ its members as ‘important’ human beings, and when these members, in turn, experience an ethical obligation towards it – which means nothing other than becoming practically and affectively committed to it, caring about it – that we have a structure of ‘mutual obligation.’<sup>47</sup>

Men and women in this study had different experiences with starting their lives in Australia recognising the considerations around gender, language, age, educational attainment, former migration experiences and the opportunities afforded to diversity within society. By acknowledging this and by looking at the development of a sense of belonging through analysing people’s sense of agency, one might move towards a development of a common belonging and a real two-way integration.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have looked at notions of belonging among Southern Sudanese former refugees resettling in Canberra, Australia. Through analysing the former refugees’ own ideas and experiences of belonging I have argued for a focus on agency as well as the subjective self in order to understand what belonging means for people. Furthermore, by noting how men and women experienced belonging in Australia in different ways, a look at people’s structural positioning is deemed necessary. This supports the work by Hamaz and Vasta on belonging where the focus is on people’s own development of a sense of belonging and where this sense of belonging develops in the interaction between agency, self and structure.

Emphasising how men and women develop and experience a sense of belonging differently, confirms the idea that belonging needs to be

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<sup>47</sup> Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism. Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (Annandale: Pluto Press Australia, 2003): 149.

analysed by focusing on the subjective self, structural positioning and in the end, on people's ability to express agency despite barriers in society. Only by recognising agency and participation as well as the emotional acknowledgment that people seek in the process of developing a sense of belonging, can we start to understand the complex process of belonging. As demonstrated in this article, Southern Sudanese former refugees experience limitations in expressing their agency often due to lack of language, employment and education. It is however, vital to acknowledge that former refugees are agents and capable of making meaningful contributions to civil society.

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