Women’s stories

An intergenerational dialogue with immigrant and refugee women

A project of the Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA)

“We feel stronger because we are determined to do something now. In the past, we were unable to come out of the situation we were in because it was beyond our control. But when you come on the other side you want to make it. You have no choice and you have no time for tears.”

The stories of...

Rosemary Kariuki Fyfe and Najeeba Wazefadost

Rosemary ran away from the tribal clashes in her country and arrived in Australia in 1999 at the age of 39. She came from Kenya, from a small town called Eldoret. “That is how I found myself here, in Australia”, she says.

Najeeba is from Afghanistan. She came to Australia in 2000 at the age of 11. Like many other refugees, Najeeba escaped her country due to persecution and war. “I am from the Hazara ethnic minority, which basically put me and my family at great risk, not only at the hands of the Taliban, but also from other ethnic minorities”.

Najeeba explains, however, that one of the main reasons behind her decision to leave her country was the lack of rights for women and girls. She and her family’s decision to take the terrifying journey by boat to come to Australia was because, “in Afghanistan, women and girls have no access to education, employment or freedom of speech. As a young girl, I always wanted to go to school, but I was abandoned and imprisoned in my own house. In other words, I was the prisoner of my own sex.”

Do you want to share your experience or do you know someone who has an interesting story to tell, please contact the FECCA Office at admin@fecca.org.au or call (02) 6282 5755 for more information.
Najeeba noted that Rosemary looked very young for a mother of three adult children. “What is with refugee women that they look so young, even if they went through so much torture and trauma?”

“We live each day as it is” Rosemary responded laughingly.

“We are used to it. We eat well, we are happy and we look after our souls. Because what is here (pointing to her face), is what comes from the inside. We went through a lot of problems which only made us stronger”, she continued.

“Here in Australia, once they have to face some serious problems, people tend to end up with mental health issues, such as depression, and need professional help. We didn’t have access to those services and we had to learn how to deal with our problems on our own. We feel stronger because we are determined to do something now. In the past, we were unable to come out of the situation we were in because it was beyond our control. But when you come on the other side, you want to make it and you have no time for tears. You have no choice.”

“I came here on my own, without my children, but the moment I arrived in Australia, my first thoughts were directed to them, and to make sure they came here. That was my first objective. I wasn’t even jet-lagged because my mind was set on that objective and the only thing I was thinking about was, “where do I start?”

“My children are here with me now and I even have grandchildren. I love them very much and I am such a happy woman now, thanks to God.”

What are your most special memories of your homeland?

Najeeba said that sadly she didn’t have any happy memories from home.

“I always dreamed about a very colourful childhood. But unfortunately, unlike other children here in Australia, who, when they talk about their childhood, they all remember kindergarten, pens, books, their families, their relatives, grandmothers, grandfathers and all the joyful times, I cannot recall any colour or joy.”

“Afghanistan has been in war for so many decades that there is no real sign of justice or humanity left. Literally, the only things I remember when I think about my childhood, are killings, bombs and guns. In fact, every time I have a flashback to my childhood I can remember the loneliness, the lack of friends because I didn’t go to any school, and the constant fear. I remember that every time my mother or my father stepped out to go and get some bread or to do something, we used to say goodbye to my father like he would never return home. We would also be saying goodbye to my mother in a way that we were expecting her to get raped on the way. That trauma did not leave room for any colour in my life.”

“In fact, my good memories only started in Australia, after the first years here, when I finally started to settle in. The good memories started after spending time in detention, after being released on a temporary protection visa and gaining permanent residency. That is the time when I started to realise what my interests were and what good memories meant. Until then, I thought that everyone was the same and was suffering the way I was suffering.”

“It took me and my family a long time to get to Australia because we had to travel through different countries. We were in the big Pacific Ocean for ten nights. After that, we arrived in Darwin and from there, we were transferred to the Curtin Immigration Detention Centre. We were in there for about three months.”

“My first impression of Australia was very disappointing. We came here with so many dreams about finally having safety for our family and building a better future. We didn’t expect to have big houses, be rich or settle in school straight away. All we wanted was to have that right to seek asylum and to have the right to gain the citizenship of a country again.”

“But unfortunately, that was not the case, as we ended up
in detention. We found ourselves locked up with no access to the outer world and other people, we had no visitors, we couldn’t talk to anybody, it was hot and it was in the middle of nowhere. The first Australians that we got to see were the security guards from the detention centre. The trauma we had from before built up because of the environment we were in—there was constant surveillance and checking and we had snakes and a lot of flies everywhere in the detention centre. The only good thing was that my mother and father were next to me. That was the only thing that mattered.

“Literally, the only things I remember when I think about my childhood are killings, bombs and guns. In fact, every time I have a flashback to my childhood, I can remember the loneliness, the lack of friends because I didn’t go to any school, and the constant fear.”

“For me, it was really hard to understand why all that was happening and why we were kept in detention. Back in 2000, when we arrived in Australia, there was very little knowledge about the immigration detention centres. Nobody knew what was happening in Australia—what the policy and the government’s attitude was to the refugees and asylum seekers who were coming here. We thought that what we heard outside of Australia was true.”

“We were told that as soon as we would get to Australia, we would be welcomed and would be treated at least as human beings. But unfortunately, that wasn’t the case, and we were disappointed. I remember that I used to keep asking my father whether the smuggler had actually tricked us and sent us to another country. I thought that maybe the country we were in was not Australia. It was very disappointing but things changed as we were released.”

Rosemary said that she had a lot of good memories from home.

“Some of my best memories are about growing up in a big family with my two mothers—I was lucky enough to have two—my father, brothers and sisters, the animals, the rain and the firewood. Even today, I love that smell of firewood! I go back home every year to see my mother. From the city that I first arrive in when I reach Kenya, there is another 600km drive before I reach my village. Despite being in my home country, I still feel like I haven’t reached home until I get to my village and I smell the firewood and see the pot of food cooking. That is what I like to remember the most.”

“The strongest memories I have are about my family. Here in Australia, I don’t have anyone apart from my children. There, everyone was around me. All my family is from one place. They all got married in the same town and nobody went far away.”

“I think that is part of our culture, to stay together”, Najeeba added. “In Australia, we tend to go away as soon as we grow up. There is that shifting culture that makes you go away and follow your own path in life. But over there, you are all together.”

“And it means a lot to us”, Rosemary continued. “There you just marry the neighbour”, she says, laughing. “If there is an event like a christening or a wedding, we are all there, always celebrating together and always helping each other. That has a transformative effect on us. I believe that is why we are happy people, because if something small like a christening happens, we are all extremely happy about that event in our community. When we cry, we cry together. Everything you do, you do together. That is the beauty I remember about home.”

“It is real happiness. There is poverty, there is war, but everything is real”, Najeeba added.

Rosemary continued, “Exactly. Your neighbour is like your own family.

“Here, even after a couple of years living in the same place, your neighbour still doesn’t know you. Even after 10 to 20 years, they still look at you as a refugee. They don’t make you part of them. You still feel like an outsider because they don’t give you that sense of belonging. But Australia is so

“The strongest memories that I have are about my family […] There, everyone was around me […] When we cry, we cry together. Everything you do, you do together. That is the beauty I remember about home.”
beautiful and I am so glad I came here and that my children also came, that they are now educated and have the opportunity of a better future. I am happy about that.

What is your homeland?

“I think that is a very difficult question for me to answer”, Najeeba responded.

“I am here, and I call Australia my home, but at the same time, I miss my own country. However, I could never say that I would be able to leave Australia.”

“This is part of me now and I truly and honestly call Australia my home. Regardless of the negative experiences that occur, the racism and the stigma around asylum seekers and refugees, I still love it. When you have an appearance like mine, it is very easy to be a target, but I had to learn to accept the fact that some people have different and limited views on the world and that I need to not let myself get too affected by it.”

I haven’t been back to my home country yet as I still don’t feel confident that it will be safe and secure enough for me. But if, in many years from now, Afghanistan ever becomes fully secure and peace returns there, I think I will go back temporarily, just to visit and have some closure. Some of my future goals are to help Afghanistan to grow by making use of the opportunities that Australia has provided me with—the skills, the life experience and the education I have received here. I would like to not only give back to Australia, but to also give something back to Afghanistan.”

“Where is home?”, Rosemary asked herself. “I found the answer to this question when I went back to Kenya for the first time in 2004. I went there to bring my youngest son over to Australia. I was so excited about going and I was telling everyone that I was going home. Once back in Kenya, I was so happy about being there during the first and second weeks, but during the third week, as my departure date was approaching, I started to get excited again about going back home. But then I asked myself where was home for me? I think it was then that I realised that Australia was my home. Yes, I know there is something about my country that will always make it my homeland, but this is my home now.”

“Back in Kenya, there is always something bad happening. I would like to go back there, but I wouldn’t feel safe. There is a lot of crime because there is a lot of poverty. Even now, when I go to visit my family, I always pray for my safety. I only go to see my mother who has a lot of problems and we don’t know how long we will have her for.”

“But every time I go back to Kenya I like to give something back to my country. I normally volunteer and work with the orphanages. It feels good to do something small for my village and the place I come from. But home is here.”

First impressions of Australia

For Najeeba, the first positive impressions she had about Australia were the schools. “I was amazed that I was able to go in a mixed classroom with boys and girls without having that fear that the boys will attack me, smash me or kill me. I think that was amazing, even if it took me some time to stay relaxed and calm in the classroom. In my opinion that was an immediate indication that Australia was a country that had equal respect for men and women, so I think that was one of the most positive and amazing impressions that I first had, just by attending the school.”

“I know there is something about my country that will always make it my homeland, but this is my home now.”

“For me”, Rosemary responded, “it was so lovely because I came by plane and I arrived in Australia at night when all the lights over the city were on. It was so beautiful. That beauty is still present in front of my eyes as a nice memory. I try not to think about the negative experiences. I think everyone
can have racist attitudes, not only some Australians, and I would rather not remember or focus on that.”

“The positive impression that I first got was that here, I can do everything I want to make a livelihood. You can do everything you believe you can do. You can start at any age you want. You can do any job you want. If you want it, you’ll do it. If I want to be a teacher today, I’ll just go and re-educate myself and become a teacher. It is not hard. Here you can do whatever you want to do but you have to be active and work hard to succeed. Social benefits don’t give you much and relying on them will not help you fulfil your dream or even help those left behind back home. Only if you work hard, you can get what you love. You can make your dream come true.”

“The most fulfilling experience I have had since being in Australia is being a woman activist. I don’t like seeing people suffer and I’ve seen too many people suffer back home and I can see many people suffering here. Before I started working on the African Women’s Group, I went to this career expo where I noticed only a couple of Africans attending. Back then, in 2003 when most of the Africans started coming to Australia, most of them didn’t have jobs. So I was wondering why they were not interested in attending the expo and why they didn’t attend in big numbers. I thought it was because they didn’t know about it and because they tend not to access the information and services available to them, so I decided I wanted to do something to help. I believed that engaging with men would be very hard, while the youth were already receiving the information at school. So I thought about starting to work with women because if you get to women then you get to the whole community. If you give information to women, you put that information on the table and whoever has ears to hear will definitely hear it. Men do not share information in the same way. They will judge for their wives and the others and will not pass it on further.”

“Here, I can do everything I want to make a livelihood. You can do everything you believe you can do. You can start at any age you want. You can do any job you want. If you want it, you’ll do it. […] You can make your dream come true.”

“That is why I chose to work with women and my happiest moments are when I see the women that I work with smile.”

“Through the women’s group, I run a cultural exchange program whereby we go away with a group of women from different cultures for a whole weekend and we stay with host families. The purpose of the project is to help the Australian families and the women to learn from each other about their different cultures. We even had Afghan women. But the first were the Chinese. They taught us how to do Tai chi! It is so beautiful. We do so many activities.”

“Those are the happiest moments for me—when I see a woman coming out of bed to do something for herself. There was a woman from Pakistan who was very shy, she didn’t feel confident enough to speak and she kept her head down all the time. After three days in this program, she was speaking like a typewriter! One of the women there even asked her, “Does this mean that you learned English in three days?” she laughs again.

“But the problem was her confidence. She had been abused at home and she had been made to believe that she was useless. All of the women there used to behave in the same way. You would think they were all born of the same mother. They are happy now and they sing and dance and laugh. That experience changed the lady from Pakistan. I met her a while after she’d been in the program and she told me that she was happy, that she left the previous abusive relationship and remarried. It makes me so happy to be able to see someone like her, previously crying and unhappy, now with a big smile upon her face.”

“You don’t have to give people money, but you need to be there, with and for them, and put a smile on their faces. Through this program we help women connect with other women and help them to engage outside their families. That is enough to empower them. I love people.”

“I am proud when I see women like you, Najeeba. I admire what you can do in your community and in this country. I like young people and their power. They don’t fight as much as older adults. If you give a job to a young person, they will do it and they won’t ask you where you come from. But we are more judgmental.”

Najeeba said, “I’ve had so many happy experiences in Australia. My first was when I became a citizen. I always wanted to have
a place that I could truly and honestly call home. When I became an Australian citizen, I felt like all my pain and suffering went away. I felt like I finally belonged to a place."

“But soon after that, my second happiest moment was when I went to the election polls and I had the right to vote. As a woman, I would have never had that opportunity in Afghanistan. I thought it was a huge privilege to be able to walk to an election poll and to get the chance to choose my country’s Prime Minister. It was even more amazing than gaining my citizenship."

“Then I never forget the day when I graduated with my Bachelor of Medical Science degree, when I put on my gown, wore my hat, and walked on stage. I never thought I would finish a degree. I am now educated and I have something to offer others."

“Another happy moment was when I established the Hazara Women Association of Australia, as the first national initiative bringing together ethnic Hazara women. I established it in 2007 and it was very difficult to face all of the challenges put forward by my own community members within Australia. It was, however, a big achievement for me, to be able to bring together, in a network, women working and collaborating on the things they wanted to see happen in their community."

“A recent happy moment was when I established my own family day care centre. When I first thought about setting it up, everyone was telling me how difficult it would be and how many requirements I would need to comply with, how hard it would be to train the staff properly and that there were a lot of risks."

“But I did some research about the opportunities available for women who couldn’t speak or write in English and those women who were very isolated within their own homes. I also talked to these women to find out what they wanted for themselves, and they told me that they wanted to do something to earn money. They wanted their children to look at them and say, “my mother is also bringing money into the house”. They wanted to be able to depend on their own earnings instead of their husbands’. They needed something to boost their self-esteem. I then looked at my own mother who had no job, no responsibilities. She was going to bed at night and, in the morning, she had nothing else to do other than cooking and cleaning. She didn’t have anything to look forward to. By establishing my own business, I felt that I could actually create business and employment opportunities for other women in my community. Now I can see the difference that it has brought to these women’s lives. They are so happy! They are earning money, they are studying, they are planning for trips, they have dreams and something to look forward to. It opened a door to a new world. I initially only thought about the day-care business as an opportunity for myself, and I didn’t really gauge the impact and the difference it could bring to these women’s lives. I have more than 100 women working for the centre, all Hazaras, and they come to work with so much joy. This means a lot to me. It is a great achievement."

“My next goal is to extend this success to Afghanistan. I am currently fundraising to build the first orphan girls high school in my hometown in Afghanistan. I am planning to raise the necessary funds by International Women’s Day in 2015."

“After that, I will be looking forward to my next happy moment, which I hope will be my marriage”, Najeeba concludes laughingly.

Talking about the challenges faced in settling in Australia, Rosemary highlights that she
encountered some issues related to racial, ethnic and linguistic discrimination.

“But it never pushed me back. My accent is sometimes an issue, as people tell me that I don’t pronounce things correctly. And I tell them that it depends on who taught them English!”, she laughs again.

“I tease them by saying that everyone has an accent, including Americans and Australians, and that my English had been taught by the British because we were colonised by them, so my accent must be the right one!”

“Anyway, it is a matter of compromise and of meeting in the middle. Immigrants already speak two or more languages, and Australians should be more tolerant about their pronunciation. It is hard for non-English speakers to understand all of the pronunciation and grammar rules.”

“But I learnt not to take anything as a challenge, nor to get angry at anyone who makes impertinent comments about me. I will always turn it into something positive. It is a learning experience and I have come a long way.”

What has helped you the most in your settlement process?

Rosemary responds, “having a dream to pursue and having a goal—wanting to see my children and my grandchildren have a voice for themselves and others, and to see them integrate and succeed in this wonderful country. Also, to see women doing something with themselves and standing up for their rights. When I see someone smiling, it keeps me going because I know that on that day, one family is happy. Looking forward to the future has helped me the most.”

Any advice for other immigrant and refugee women

“I would advise them to move on”, says Rosemary.

“They come here with baggage, which is normal, but they will only succeed if they leave it behind and move on. When you feel very low, you have to carry on and think about that light at the end of the tunnel. I think that the problem with many immigrants is that they don’t ask for help or information. They think they are not able to do something, but it is often only because they don’t have the necessary information. The more you ask, the more you learn. Be flexible and find passion or interest. Don’t give up!”

Najeeba’s advice to refugee women coming to Australia is based on her own personal experiences and the challenges she had to face with her own family and community in the past.

“I would say the problem is the lack of participation and engagement within the community. I think that any girl like me should be able to have a civil conversation with another person. I took part in several community consultations trying to open a conversation with women from refugee backgrounds. They had no questions to ask and no interests. Their brains were blank because all they had seen in their lives was war, hatred and torture. Sometimes, when it came to what they liked, it was a big shock for them. They didn’t understand that they could like things and have interests. They had no clue about what they wanted.”

“A conversation needs to start, questions need to be raised and answers need to be found. That way, their interests can also be built up, networks can be made and relationships can be strengthened. I will always advise everyone to start a civil conversation with whoever it is—their husband, their children or the people around them.

“A second piece of advice is to blend in. People should not just stay and interact with the same community. One of the most amazing aspects of Australia is the diversity of cultures. I think

“Well they are earning money, they are studying, they are planning for trips, they have dreams and something to look forward to. It opened a door to new world.”
the sooner people mix, the more learning opportunities are opened to them. The more you stay with your own, I think the more doors are closed to you. Today, I met Rosemary, and I've already learnt a lot from her. If you are not going to share and blend in, then there is lack of ideas, the pace of settling in slows down, and you take away the growth factor from your life.”

“The third piece of advice that I would give is to go and get an education. Education opens the mind and it is the most important thing you can do for yourself.”

Some thoughts on the meaning of International Women’s Day

“Women have been put down for many years”, says Rosemary. “Even today, if you look at the statistics, you can tell women are still unable to achieve their best outcomes. I think that International Women’s Day is about being happy about who you are as a woman. It is about being there for the voice of your own, for your children, for the women in your community—it’s about standing up for the rights of all the women around the world. This includes the educated women who can still be supressed in their own homes or by their communities because of their cultures. Even a female lawyer can become a victim of domestic violence. For me, it’s about seeing women stop suffering.”

Najeeba adds, “coming from Afghanistan, I never knew that there was an International Day for Women until I turned 16. Then, I realised that there was actually one day in the calendar for me to celebrate the fact that I am a woman. I think the day is all about women being together. It is a call for women to get up. It doesn’t matter what you do. It doesn’t have to be about advocacy, politics or employment. You can be a mother of five children and be proud of yourself. International Women’s Day gives the opportunity to so many women around the world to come together and celebrate who they are, their own being and the enormous role that they play in the world.”

FECCA wishes to thank Rosemary and Najeeba for sharing their stories.

FECCA thanks the Community Migrant Resource Centre in Parramatta for providing a venue for the interview.

The views and opinions expressed by participants in the ‘Women’s Stories’ project do not necessarily reflect those of FECCA.

FECCA received verbal and written consent from participants to publish their stories.

Want to read more women’s stories? Please visit:


© 2014 Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA)

FECCA is the national peak body representing Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.