

**Women's Stories of Home:
Meanings of Home for Ethnic Women Living
in Established Migrant Communities**

Volume Two

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AHRC	Australian Housing Research Council
AMCORD	Australian Model Code of Residential Development
BBC	Building Better Cities
BCA	Building Code of Australia
BIMPR	The Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research
CBD	Central Business District
CSHA	Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement
DUAP	Department of Urban Affairs and Planning
EAPS	Ethnic Affairs Policy Statements
EPA Act	Environmental and Planning Assessment Act, 1979
EPIs	Environmental Planning Instruments
LGA	Local Government Area
NES	non-English speaking
NESB	non-English speaking background
NHS	National Housing Strategy
NSW	New South Wales
OMA	Office of Multicultural Affairs
SORA	Summary Oral Reflective Analysis
SSD	Sydney Statistical Division
UNSW	University of New South Wales
UWS	University of Western Sydney

ERRATA

p3, footnote 4: "NSW State Government Election" should read "NSW state government election"

p62, para 3, 12: "...the latter is expensive..." should read "...the latter is generally expensive..."

p92, para 2, 15: "...(Reinharz, 1992b: 428), but in terms..." should read "...(Reinharz, 1992b: 428). In terms..."

p98, para 4, 14: "...women in their home." should read "...women in their homes."

p148, para 2, point 3: "disciple" should read "discipline"

p161, para 1, 11: "women" should read "woman"

p246, para 2, 11: **so big** should read so big

p311, para 3, 15: "Fraser government" should read "Fraser Government"

p423, para 2, point 2: "...to emerge (in coming..." should read "...to emerge. (In coming..."

p431, para 2, 18: "...to hear." should read "...to be heard."

Part Two

The Women's Stories

Part Two of this thesis is the women's stories of home and represents the phenomenological component of the research. The women's "...intuitive and empirical knowledge of their own individual experience" (Levesque-Lopman, 1988: xiii) is presented. I highlight the principle issues that emerged in the stories told to me, which illuminate meanings of home.

Each ethnic group is dealt with in a separate chapter, focussing on three main areas - the childhood experience of home, the migration process and the adult home in the new country. For the younger women who grew up in Australia, I discuss the role of their parents' migration in their lives and how this has influenced their meanings of home.

The women's reflections on home come from their lived experiences, although a few volunteered broader observations of the communities with which they interact. Some women were able to reflect more readily than others and after the first few interviews, I asked about issues that had emerged earlier. In this way, themes were interrogated and investigated as I systematically returned to ideas generated in the data. The reader will notice that some women are quoted more frequently than others. In some cases, this represents differences in the depth of explanations, as well as an ability to communicate the ideas of other women clearly and usefully.¹

In deciding to let the women speak as much as possible in these chapters², I have been influenced by Krieger's (1991: 4) discussion on the power of the personal. "...the strongest statement is always the direct personal one". I am also guided by

¹ I do not use percentages or numbers of women in quoting excerpts from the interviews. This would give the wrong impression about the nature of the data, especially its rich contextuality. It might also encourage misleading generalisations to be made.

² I quote extensively from the women's stories, privileging their voices over mine. This approach is consistent with my theoretical position as a feminist researcher. I am aware that some readers may criticise my inclusionary style, preferring a more succinct account. I have anguished over this, particularly in relation to the length of the thesis, but concluded that this is the only way I can let the women speak.

the feminist theoretical notion that the personal is political. "...the point of sharing information about personal life and personal experience is to connect these to something that can transcend the personal" (Levesque-Lopman, 1988: 47). In this way, the material in Part Two lays the foundation for the interpretive work in Part Three.

It is important to acknowledge that I have chosen the issues to highlight and the quotes to illustrate the points that I am making. I have tried to honour the contextuality of the stories, as well as their richness and individuality. But inevitably, there is tension between these objectives and the search for unifying themes across the data. As much as possible, I have identified differences in major patterns. In part this approach helps to overcome the problem of using quotes selectively to highlight a point that is contradicted elsewhere (Silverman, 1993: ix). It is also a way of acknowledging individual variations in the women's lived experience, which contributes "...to the comprehension of the phenomenon under consideration" (Korosec-Serfaty, 1984: 308).

A WORD ABOUT THE WOMEN

In order to honour confidentiality assurances, I use pseudonyms throughout the thesis. When a family member is named, I omit the reference. The woman's age is at the time of the interview. In three cases, mother and daughter were interviewed together, although the latter were not considered to be principle participants. I use quotes from the daughters, but have not compiled comprehensive bibliographic notes on them.

A WORD ABOUT THE QUOTES

In communicating the women's stories, I have not altered phrasing or grammar in an attempt to be true to them. I am aware however, that some readers could interpret this as patronising given that the respondents' use of English does not always fit within traditional grammatical constructions. This clearly is not my intention. As Krieger (1991: 36) affirms, "We are encouraged to speak in generally acceptable styles, rather than to speak in ways that are our own. The ability to speak from within takes nurturance. It requires the use of one's own words...". I also use the women's voices in an attempt to avoid the inherent dangers of outsider representations (Bottomley, de Lepervanche and Martin, 1991: ix).

Notations for quotes

[] Square brackets are included around a word which I have included in a woman's quote if an idea is not immediately obvious to the reader.

{ } Curly brackets denote an emotion such as laughing or crying at that point

... Dots are used to indicate that expressions such as "umm" and "you know", have been omitted if they do not contribute meaning, as well as to reduce the length of the quote.³

 Underlining denotes emphasis in the original interview.

³ In deciding to omit such words, I have used caution (Riessman, 1993: 12). De Vault (1987: 34) has alerted us to the importance of "halting, hesitant, tentative talk... [reflecting] not quite articulated experiences".

(Katina, p3; l22) This indicates the location of the quote in the interview transcript. "p" denotes page number; "l" denotes the line number. There is no punctuation after the bracket, differentiating these quotes with those from the literature.

Bolding is used for my voice as interviewer.

Chapter Five

Greek Stories of Home

Well this is my life I spend in here. I love my family. I love my home. This means everything to me, this is the roots of my life because here lives my son, my husband, my whole life is here.
(Margarita, p32; 144)

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I discuss the meanings of home for the Greek women. After putting Greek migration to Australia in an historical context, I give an overview of the personal characteristics of those interviewed. The chapter then explores childhood meanings of home. For the older women this was in Greece, while the younger women's dominant memories of this period are growing up in Australia. In the final part of the chapter I turn to an exploration of contemporary meanings of home. Childhood and adult meanings are linked by the migration experience, either directly experienced, or indirectly as young girls growing up in Greek households in Australia.

THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

Greek settlement in Australia started as early as 1829 and continued throughout the 19th century. A process of chain migration was set in place as some married and settled in the colony. Experiences were taken back home, which encouraged others to seek the adventure out for themselves (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1995: 20).

By 1921, 1500 Greeks were officially recorded as resident in NSW. Regional associations were formed, Greek newspapers published and Greek plays performed (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1995: 25). An Orthodox Church and associated community centre were established during this phase of migration, which contributed to the initial settlement of Greeks (Burnley, 1980: 133). Many found employment in Greek food businesses concentrated in the CBD or on the seaboard. Gradually the former expanded into the inner city suburbs of Redfern, Newtown, Paddington and Balmain, as well as seaside Manly. Union restrictions prohibited foreign labour from undertaking factory work (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1995: 21). During the First

World War xenophobic feelings towards Sydney's Greeks were heightened and rioting occurred (Janiszewski and Alexakis, 1995: 28).

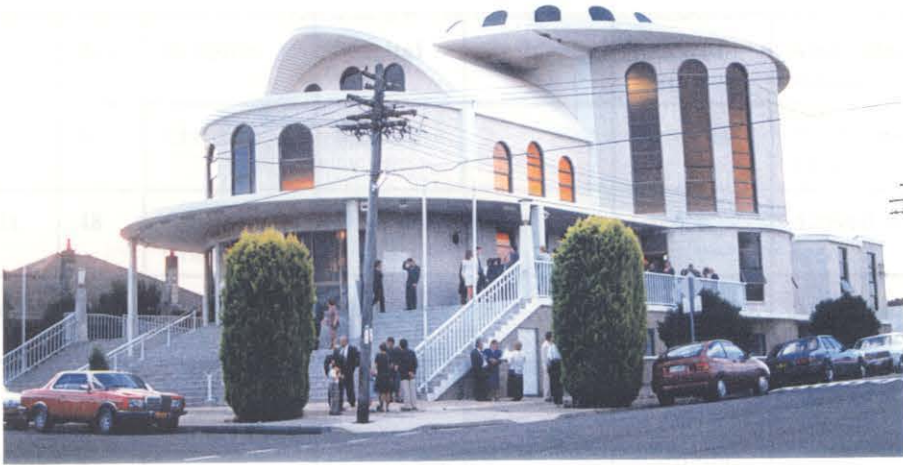
Australia's post World War II mass migration policy resulted in thousands of Greeks migrating here (Burnley, 1995: 182). Both Sydney and Melbourne became home to the majority of these settlers. It is frequently claimed that Melbourne is the third largest Greek city in the world, although Jupp (1991: 79-80) suggests that this may not be true. Nevertheless, Melbourne is "the most Greek city in Australia" (Jupp, 1991: 80). Greeks have also settled in other major urban centres such as Brisbane and Adelaide, but unlike the Italians, have not formed major rural communities (Jupp, 1991: 80). With unionised labour loosening its attitude to foreign workers, large numbers of new Greek arrivals became part of the factory work force.

There was a tendency for the Greeks to settle in the inner areas of Sydney and by 1971 there were approximately 30,000 Greek-born residents in this region (Burnley, 1995: 183). In Marrickville alone there were 13,000 Greeks (Burnley, 1980: 127). Relocation from these "core concentrations" started to occur in the 1970s as larger and detached homes were sought further away from the city (Burnley, 1995: 183). South western and southern suburbs such as Canterbury, Kogarah and Hurstville became popular and experienced an influx of Greek settlers.

The Greeks have been long time residents of the suburban municipality of Canterbury, which is at the centre of my study area. Canterbury is a second settlement destination for the Greeks, who moved from the inner city suburbs of Redfern and Surry Hills (Burnley, 1980: 129). The most significant physical changes occurred in the 1970s following the establishment of major religious centres. The Greeks built an Orthodox Church in the suburb of Belmore (Larcombe, 1979: 314-317).

The following photographs show a Greek bakery, the Orthodox Church and a tavern in the women's community.





THE WOMEN

In Table Ten, I provide brief demographic characteristics of each women.

Table Ten
Demographic Characteristics of the Greek Women

Name	Age	Religion	Marital Status	Children	Place of Birth	Australian Status
Rosa	36	Christian	Married	2	Australia	Parents arrived in 1959
Petroula	48	Greek Orthodox	Divorced	2	Greece	Arrived in 1966 aged 22
Evangelia	25	Greek Orthodox	Married	2	Greece	Arrived in 1970 aged 3
Akrivi & Antigone	50 26	Greek Orthodox	Married	2	Greece Australia	Arrived in 1962 aged 20
Dora & Georgina	52 26	Greek Orthodox	Married Single	2	Greece Australia	Arrived in 1962 aged 22
Athina	52	Greek Orthodox	Married	2	Greece	Arrived in 1965 aged 24
Katina	61	Greek Orthodox	Widow	3	Cyprus	Arrived in 1955 aged 21
Margarita	45	Greek Orthodox	Married	1	Greece	Arrived 1970 aged 22
Nina	36	Greek Orthodox	Single	none	Greece	Arrived in 1957 aged 1
Anna	27	Greek Orthodox	Married	1	Australia	Her father arrived here in 1956
Cassie	27	Greek Orthodox	Married	1	Australia	Her parents arrived in 1956
Vasiliki	64	Greek Orthodox	Married	3	Russia (of Greek parents)	Arrived in 1956 aged 28
Doris	51	Greek Orthodox	Widow	3	Cyprus	Arrived in 1958 aged 16

See Appendix Fourteen for an overview of each woman's history.

THE CHILDHOOD HOME: MAJOR THEMES**The home as physical dwelling**

The majority of the older women came from villages in Greece where they lived in freestanding houses. Conditions were poor and often primitive. Many of them were from farming families, although this work was not always sufficient to feed a growing family.

... very poor, not like here, no... (Dora, p4; 133)

And my mother said, "If you finish your school, I don't think we can afford to send you to high school. I think it better if you go to learn something else, hairdresser or dressmaker". And I remember I cry that time. I say, "Mama I want to go to school." (Vasiliki, p9; 114)

Others were more fortunate.

...we had a very big farm... we produce... cotton, tobacco, olives, carob... (Doris, p4; 17)

Internal bathrooms were rare and houses were often without power. Living spaces were not spacious and their stories emphasise sharing with siblings and use of outdoor spaces for playing. Animals were a part of daily life and as young girls, they participated in farming activities as part of their play.

...we used to sleep actually in the big bed... like king size... we sleep three, four, five... brothers and sisters, it doesn't matter. {laughs} We don't mind. We feel all... comfortable. (Athina, p5; 14)

...on one side was our garden... a lot of trees... apple trees, peaches, some peaches, blackberries. (Athina, p10; 157)

...we play a lot. Play outside. (Athina, p5; 148)

Despite these hardships, the women have happy memories of their childhood houses. There was no sense of missing out at this time.

I was a very happy child... (Doris, p3; 132)

The life was very good for me. I remember when I was young... (Athina, p3; 118)

I love it... we had nice warm house for people and I have good memories (Vasiliki, p14; 124)

One of the women came from the city, where living in a flat was the only option. She describes the dwelling as spacious and physically beautiful. It had a formal lounge and dining room as well as an informal family area and large kitchen.

For the young Greek women who grew up in Australia, the physical dwelling was initially associated with hardship, struggle and sacrifice. Two of the women spent their early childhood years living in flats above shops that their parents owned and operated. They both experienced new freedoms when they eventually moved to a house. This often meant a room of one's own and a backyard to play in and share with friends and relatives.

...I think the most important thing about my room is that - yeah it was my room and I had my privacy... (Anna, p7; 122)

So to me it was great, we had a whole house to ourselves... I loved it, having a yard to run around in. (Nina, p10; 142)

Prior to this her life had been one of making sure that she was not encroaching on territory that belonged to someone else. Life was full of restrictions to this growing child.

I remember what it was like opening the fridge and saying, "Mum, which shelf is ours - is that ours, is that ours?" And taking turns to use the cooking facilities and taking turns to sit at the table and entertaining people in the bedroom... that was your living room, your sleeping area, that was your working area. (Nina, p3; 122)

Sharing her childhood house continued for Nina in the dwelling that her family owned. In fact, the choice of a suitable residence took into account the need to accommodate relatives and friends. Rather than looking at the size of sunrooms or kitchens, the number of potential bedrooms was the all important factor.

In those years when you moved in to find a house, you looked into how you could divide it up into bedrooms. ...you wanted to have boarders because you needed money to help pay [the house] off and there were extended families that you could rent out to... (Nina, p16; 19)

Whether it was moving to a new house or renovating an old house, living in a physical space that enabled personalisation was important. The presence of a back yard not only meant space to play and entertain, it also facilitated extensions and other changes to the built form.

...they put a double garage one behind the other, so that got rid of some of the back... made the back yard smaller. And then behind that they put... a rumpus room. And that got rid of a lot of the back yard. But even so, it's still very big... (Anna, p14; 16)

Memories of entertaining extended from the exterior to the interior spaces of the dwelling.

Because our yard was so big, we're the ones that would have everybody over for Easter and Christmas and all that, and the lamb on the spit and stuff like that. (Anna, p13; 136)

Formal living rooms were used at Christmas, Easter and special family occasions. They were also the rooms where important visitors were entertained. The best furniture and decorations were displayed here. Children were only allowed to enter under adult supervision. The child's territory was the bedroom, kitchen and family or informal living room. Several of the young women talked about the formal rooms in their childhood homes as being for show.

We never used the formal dining room [as a family]. It was just to have to show. We have houses to show people, not to live in. And we'd decorate - we'd decorate them to show people. (Anna, p14; 126)

The home as family

Notions of family within the dwelling and the broader community, dominated the older women's home life in Greece. They lived in nuclear families, with the exception of two interviewees, whose grandparents were a part of the household.

Families were close, loving and supportive.

I loved my parents very much and my family. We're close... We loved talking to each other. ... So we feel happy whatever we have... (Athina, p5; 113)

...we were very close... one felt for the other... (Doris, p6; 135)

For those who were poor, there were few creature comforts, but this was not a hardship to these women as young girls. They spent a lot of time together as a family, especially in the cold winter months.

...we haven't TV or radio, nothing else, we talk a lot. {laughs} Actually winter time was very nice, because everybody - we sit down and the fire place around and my father told us a lot of stories. (Athina, p3; 156)

Mothers and fathers played an important role in bringing up their children, not only teaching them special skills and helping them with school work, but also imparting moral values for living.

...my father was very strict, but he had high morals, and looked after us, and we learn a lot from my father... (Athina, p3; 122)

Children usually had to help in the house and even though they found these tasks burdensome at times, they obeyed their parents and undertook chores as required. Even for Margarita whose wealthy family employed a maid, there was work to be done.

Yes, yes, I dust our furniture and I wash dishes sometimes, I make a cup of coffee for my mother's friends... I set the table and we have dinner... I clean the house, nothing major, I fix my bed, dust my mother's bedroom and I put the lipsticks and things away... I was happy. (Margarita, p11; 128)

Relatives lived close together so that they saw each other regularly. Friends also dropped by to play and in some cases, were a part of the family's activities outside the dwelling. If a parent was particularly popular in the local community, then there would be even more visitors. Margarita's father's kindness, generosity and sensitivity drew people to him and as a result, the flat was constantly filled.

Every day we have visitors, every day we have visitors, all day long, cup of coffee, talks and laughs and jokes and things like that. (Margarita, p13; 110)

Because of their closeness with neighbours and the role of the extended family in daily life, when these women left Greece to come to Australia, there was often a great deal of sadness about their departure.

When we came to Australia, everybody cry. (Katina, p4; 116)

For the young women, the family's attainment of a house heralded the end of their most difficult period as new migrants. Spending some time together became a reality as parents were freed from working incessantly. For Anna, this meant finally having a "real family".

Yeah, oh, it was nice ... and on the weekend, we'd always go somewhere. ... take a drive down to the Rocks or out to the country or, you know, nice stuff like that. Yeah we spent more time together. Our family was real family, family. We did stuff together. (Anna, p16; 146)

This situation contrasts markedly with family life in the first home above her parent's shop. The one day when her parents did take her out, is still a dominant memory.

I remember one day they'd shut the shop down - well they closed the shop because it was so hot - one day they just couldn't take it any more and they came and they picked us up from school and we went to the beach. And my brother and I just thought that was the biggest deal out. (Anna, p3; 148)

For one of the women, her parent's unrelenting hard work did continue after moving into better accommodation. Family life was disappointing and unsupportive. As compensation, she formed a strong bond with an Anglo family, which was unusual for a Greek girl. Rosa believes that her childhood would have been very different if she had not had this connection. This family filled many of the gaps left by parents always working and never able to come to after-school activities or special

events. Rosa valued the freedom to stay over at her friend's house, an opportunity that other Greek girls would not have been afforded.

It was more common for members of the extended family to step in and take on the parental role. As well as emotional support, family members were also called upon to help in times of financial crisis. In this way, the extended family played an important role in the initial settling-in period for the migrants. Only one woman, Evangelia, did not have any extended family in Australia. Even for the others, it was rare to have all relatives. Visits to Greece reinforced in two women's lives the sense of loss at not having family members living close by.

You don't tend to feel it until you go back to visit... I went back to Greece for a holiday for the first time and all of a sudden you're surrounded by aunts, uncles, cousins, they're everywhere. That's when you feel like you've missed out on a lot... you suddenly realise how isolated you are and how far away your family is and how big your family is and you're not a part of their lives day-to-day. (Nina, p17; 110)

The strength and quality of internal family relationships varied across the younger women. The reality and diversity of these women's lives challenges the stereotype of the always close-knit ethnic family. This is not to say that conflictual relationships dominated family life. Rather, their honesty about inter-personal difficulties reveals a complex picture of family life, which is often hidden.

As girls, the younger women in my study did not all enjoy supportive and encouraging relationships with their mothers.¹ For Rosa, the times when her mother was around were overshadowed by issues of control.

¹ It is interesting to note that the older women did not go into as much detail about the relationship that they had with their mothers. Rather, their sense of loss following migration was emphasised.

...I remember now I'd tidy up my room, and then she'd come in and tidy it... I used to go crazy. And I said..."Why can't I be responsible for my own room? Why can't you leave it as it is? This is how I want it". So we used to have fights about that. (Rosa, p7; 153)

Rosa talks very frankly here about difficult situations that embody painful memories. She is honest and open, willing to share intimate and negative details.²

Anna had a different experience with her mother, who did not expect help with the house work if this interfered with study or a well earned break from her school work. The other younger women had to contribute to the domestic chores, including caring for junior siblings. Despite the difficulties within their families, childhood memories of doing things together as a family include recreational outings, religious occasions and cultural events.

The home as suburb

Villages provided the predominant physical backdrop for childhood. The older interviewees told me that they felt safe and secure in these settings and went about the streets, playing with, and meeting relatives and friends. Schools were within walking distance.

The church provided a focal point for both families and friends to get together.

Every Sunday we go to church... And then our relatives that was in the church... we invite them to come for the coffee... And the Sundays in the afternoon we go to play altogether. ...from all the village. Was playground at school and church. (Athina, p7; 139)

² Her willingness to share these details is indicative of the rapport established in the interview.

Even though she felt safe in the city, Margarita's experience of neighbours differed from the women who were brought up in villages. A distance was maintained between neighbours, who only visited occasionally for a cup of coffee with her mother.

... we was friendly with everybody, but we keep a little bit distance between us. (Margarita, p10; 121)

The suburb provided the setting for most of the younger women's childhood day-to-day activities. Not surprisingly, English and Greek schools, churches and friends' houses were within walking distance. Proximity to family was important but not always a reality. For Cassie, her rural home in country New South Wales, was isolated from relatives, but involvement in the local Greek community compensated for this. Her family's move to the city when she was a teenager, meant locating in the same suburb as relatives. Nina's family initially chose their first Sydney home in an inner city suburb because of the proximity of family and other Greeks. The issue of feeling comfortable in the area was an important factor. Marrickville, with its large population of Greeks, acted as a magnet for new settlers.

...all the shops were Greek, you felt fine, you could go down to the corner shop and you could speak your language and get what you wanted... You felt better if you knew there were Greeks that you could communicate with. (Nina, p4; 132)

Once they had established themselves, Nina's family chose to move to Belmore, an area where, at that time, there were few Greeks. Housing costs and the availability of employment were the motivating factors behind this decision. Hearing another Greek on the street one day was big news for the family.

I do remember moving in here and dad coming here after work one afternoon and saying, "I heard a Greek on the street the other day, I wonder where he lives?" It was like big news. They'd heard another Greek. There must be another Greek somewhere living in this area. (Nina, p9; 140)

It is interesting to note that the proximity of Greeks was not always wholeheartedly welcomed. It was one thing to be near relatives who could offer support and companionship, but for Cassie, there was concern about the demands which could ensue from having a Greek neighbour.

...that was a big shock to us actually, having a Greek family living right next door, and straight from Greece, they were fresh off the boat... And Mum was thinking, "Oh no, we don't really want a Greek person living next to us because she'll be in our house all the time, back and forth". And Mum didn't like too much of that and I thought the same thing... (Cassie, p23; 136)

The childhood suburb provides a constant comparison for Evangelia who longs for the familiarity, sense of belonging and companionship that she no longer enjoys. Her dream is to one day return to such a neighbourhood.

...it's a homey area down there. ...neighbours would... meet each other outside and they'd go on forever talking, whereas here you don't have that. ... I was brought up in an area like that, and that's what I wanted here, but I can't have that here... (Evangelia, p6; 146)

Other issues are mentioned in their stories of the childhood suburb. Pleasant environmental surroundings and feeling safe and secure were discussed. The notion of change over time forms part of these concepts, as the women reflect on how different their lives are today compared to their childhood.

DECIDING TO MIGRATE TO AUSTRALIA: DREAMING OF A BETTER LIFE**Reasons behind the decision**

The older women left their homeland and migrated to Australia for a variety of reasons. Post war economic difficulties facing Greece and government encouragement to migrate, meant that many people came to Australia in search of work. For the majority of the older women, this was the principle reason behind their decision to migrate.

...my parents they don't have anything to give me, say for instance a house or work... We can't stay there [in Greece] because we can't survive. [My husband] and I, we feel this is not enough, we have to try, we have to do something for us and for our child. (Margarita, p17; 112)

News came back from Australia that jobs were plentiful and well paid. Having a friend or relative already here was a further incentive to come.

...Dad decided they [my brothers] needed a sister to come out here and look after them... my single brother... he kept writing to my dad that he wanted... someone else to come out here. And of course the decision was made that I had to come out here. (Doris, p9; 18)

There was also the sense of adventure in seeing another country and experiencing something different. The trip was never intended to be forever. It was a temporary stay to earn money so that one's prospects back in Greece were substantially improved.

...she [my mother] wanted to make some money and then go back. She had no intention of staying. (Antigone, p7; 135)

I said to Mum, "I'm going for three years, make some money and come back and get married here..." (Dora, p12; 159)

It was also common practice that those who did leave Greece would send money back home to help their families.

It was accepted that someone would come here and make money and send it back to support the rest of the family. (Antigone, p7; 18)

It was very very hard, leaving them [my parents] and always thinking of them... I started work, I had to send them some money... to support them... (Doris, p17; 111)

Unlike the others, Petroula came to Australia to marry. She followed her fiancée, against her parent's wishes.

... my mother cry and say, "Australia is too far away, you be alone there, nobody there, all your family here". But I want my husband at that time. And because he was leaving, I have to follow him. (Petroula, p2; 113)

Other parents were concerned about their daughters going to a different part of the world, so far away. In Athina's case this had a lot to do with her father's difficult experience as an immigrant in Eastern Europe. Conversely, Margarita's mother who had migrated from Russia to Greece, encouraged her daughter to seek a better life in Australia.

And she say to me, "Look darling, you see I come from Russia, I'm doing alright here". (Margarita, p17; 137)

Concept of Australia before arriving

Their decision to come to a place that they had never seen was made on the basis of stories about what this new country had to offer. There was no point in embarking on a long sea voyage, leaving friends and family for an extended period of time if there were not significant rewards to be gained. Accordingly, the women came here

with high hopes, having heard stories about plentiful, well paid jobs, opportunities to make money easily and luxuries that were out of their reach in Greece. Dora's uncle told stories of machines that did the work for everyone. Katina believed that she would earn a lot of money and live like a rich person.

...The way he told us about Australia was really paradise... (Dora, p13; 145)

When we dream to come to Australia we dream to find the house like the rich people. (Katina, p11; 142)

They used to believe that money grew on the trees here. (Georgina, p13; 148)³

The mythology about a land of bountiful opportunity and wealth that was theirs to be had on migrating, is a consistent theme in all the women's stories. Of course the reality was quite different.

... He [my uncle] said they pick up money with the shovel... he said a lot of lies, I don't know why... (Dora, p13; 150)

Reluctant parents sometimes tried to dissuade their offspring from leaving, but to no avail.

She [my mother] say, "Why you want to go there - so far?" They thought this Australia was bush...snakes and wild animals... I explain to her..."I hear they have big cities, nice cities, good people." (Vasiliki, p18; 114)

For Athina, there was a sense of looming disaster before she even arrived in Australia. The sea journey was long and arduous, with every passing day, a painful reminder that her homeland was getting further and further away.

³ This tree analogy is found in other migrant narratives (Thompson, Liz, 1993: 33).

I leave my family, my parents, and then I discover how far was Australia from Greece... I come by ship - 22 days in the ship, and I was very sick in the ship... and think a lot. ...we only see sea and sky and nothing else. (Athina, p13; 126)

SETTLING IN: DREAMS, REALITY, NIGHTMARE

Arriving

Their memories of first arriving in Australia and beginning the task of settling are predominantly painful. There is a sense of being conned about this supposed land of riches, opportunity and ease. Many of the women started life in Australia with very ambivalent feelings.

Oh boy, what a time I have here.... (Margarita, p17; 146)

... very difficult the first years, very, very difficult. (Petroula, p3; 15)

I got here and start, we got hard life here, very hard. (Dora, p3; 126)

Yes, its very hard. Then you start building... a new life and a new you... its a... completely different country, completely different culture... you've got to adjust to it, you know you've got to make a go of it... (Doris, p23; 14)

Even today, these memories still bring up a great deal of pain for the older women who had to learn to cope with life in a new land without the support of family and a cultural tradition that they valued and respected.

... I don't want to remember this. (Petroula, p3; 131)

And I back home from work, and I leave my bag and I'm going straight to bed with my clothes on and my shoes on, and start to cry. And say why come here... and decided to go back to Greece... (Athina, p13; 157)

The harsh reality of their new life quickly emerged for these women. They had left so much behind to come so far and there was no immediate prospect of turning back. Their families' disbelief about the hardships of this new life further reinforced feelings of isolation and despondency. Dora sent money home and some parcels of clothing, but her family would not believe that she had to work and sacrifice so much to be able to do this.

...they expect me to send money because I come here to paradise, the money you pick it up with a shovel. I told them [the truth] and they don't believe me... (Dora, p38; 135)

Their sense of difference was keenly felt, further reinforcing feelings of not belonging, hardship and loss.

I can remember walking in the street or going to work and I kept my mouth shut all day long because you were told off, you were called names. You were frightened to open your mouth to speak because if you had an accent or if you couldn't pronounce the word right or if you couldn't speak English, you were always picked on. (Doris, Greek Focus Group, p16; 154)

Accommodation

All the women shared houses with either relatives or strangers in the initial settling-in phase, which for some went on for a number of years. This was necessary in order to save money. A room was rented and common facilities, such as kitchens and bathrooms, were shared. Domestic activities were difficult to co-ordinate when everyone wanted to cook and wash at the same time. There was the added problem of living with people that held disparate values and ways of doing things. Even though the house was occupied by Greeks, they were from different regions, cities

and villages. For Margarita, her shared accommodation became intolerable with people fighting, saying bad things to each other and hitting children.

...they fighting, they talking bad to one another, they hit the child. I say, "[My husband], please we have to leave from here, I don't want to stay..." (Margarita, p18; 14)

Hard work

All the women had very little English when they arrived in Australia. This restricted employment opportunities and meant that most initially worked in factories.

Could you speak English then? No, only a few words, hello, good morning, good night, that was it. And how was that...? Very hard. (Athina, p13; 118)

Their lives were ruled with hard work, both inside and outside the home.

I lift so many baskets and things, it was a very hard job. I have to work very fast because we have to make the production... every time they want more and more. They are never satisfied, believe me. I'm not a bad person but this time I don't understand... in the end I feel they really used us... they look at me like a number, like a robot, like a machine, when broke, throw them away in the rubbish. (Margarita, p2; 147)

I didn't like to work in the factory. ...I didn't know before what it was to work in the factory, and was a lot of strange people, you know, and I don't like at all. (Athina, p13; 152)

I take...three transport from my house to Canterbury station, from Canterbury station... to Central, from Central, bus up to Oxford Street and come back again. Work all day and come back again... (Vasiliki, p20; 141)

Hard work in the factory was often fuelled by a fear of being sacked. This put these women in situations where they were easily exploited. If they experienced an injury,

they were reluctant to complain. Poor English language competency meant that they were even more vulnerable.

I don't want to lose my job, so I stay there and I do my best... I push myself to do more and more so they can be happy, so they don't fire me. (Margarita, p3; 139)

There was the compensation of meeting other Greek women in the factories. Together, they shared a common history and understood the need to work hard. Although this was comforting, it did have a negative side, further inhibiting the women's attempts at learning English. There were no classes at the time and even if they had been available, there was insufficient time to attend.

Childcare

Childcare was difficult for those women without family support. Athina felt that she was being a bad mother by going out to work and leaving her child. However, the family's survival depended on her earning money.

*... babies need the mother, not somebody else to look after - to fill the child's every necessity. Couldn't do anything else. **So you felt bad about it?** Yes that's right. Yes a lot. ...actually the first day, when I leave her, I catch a taxi to work and on the way I started crying. And the taxi driver said to me, "Why you crying lady?" And I couldn't talk to him to say why. I couldn't say anything. He said, "Something happened to you?". I said, "No, because first day I leave my baby with somebody else and I go to work." ...then I'm thinking I have to work and have someone to look after my daughter... Couldn't change anything. ...I couldn't stay home to look after only my daughter. (Athina, p18; 111)*

For Margarita the hardest thing during this settling-in phase was finding someone suitable to look after her son while she and her husband were working.

The hardest thing was when we try to find a woman to look after our son. (Margarita, p18; 159)

In her desperation, she left her little boy with a woman who had ten other children to mind. This was not satisfactory and the baby was very unhappy. Her frustration and despair as an inexperienced mother was compounded because she had no-one to turn to for support or advice about child rearing. This incident served to reinforce her sense of isolation and her inadequacy as a mother.

She decided to leave her job to look after the baby, but the family did not have enough to live on. Eventually, she realised that the only option was to send her son back to her mother in Greece.

...when I couldn't find the right woman I decide to send my son to Greece to my mother. And my mother looked after him. ...I send him there for four years... {crying} this is the most hard thing I done in my life. (Margarita, p20; 17)

There was no point in coming to Australia if they could not make a better life for themselves. This was the reason that they migrated.

What's the use I come to Australia if I don't have a little bit money to live on the side. I better go to my country, my husband can labour somewhere and I can stay my mother's place... (Margarita, p20; 139)

The situation was different for Katina who decided to stay home and look after her children. Her husband took on two jobs so that she could do this. He worked in a factory during the day and at a Greek restaurant at night.

... because I like to raise my kids with mother, always I was home. (Katina, p9; 133)

Adjusting

The comforting presence of family helped some of the women to adjust initially.

When I come here my sister does make me happy... (Athina, p13; 132)

*I used to go out all the time with my single brother... we were very close...
I had a quite exciting life actually when I come out here... (Doris, p24; 125)*

Katina found that having her family here made a great difference. This was very important in helping her to feel at home relatively quickly.

In spite of the enormous difficulties she faced, Margarita clung to her dream of a better life in the new country.

I work there, I was young, strong, I have a dream in my mind so I say to myself, "I'm going to do it". (Margarita, p18; 141)

GROWING UP IN A NEW LAND: THE YOUNGER WOMEN**Role in white Australian society**

With the exception of Evangelia, the younger women in this study identify strongly with their Greek backgrounds. The cultural and linguistic heritage with which they grew up, played an important part in shaping this adult pride. However, as children, it was not always easy being perceived as different. They all experienced embarrassment and discrimination to some extent.

Embarrassment came in a variety of forms. The contents of her lunch box and desperate attempts to enjoy a meat pie, underscored Nina's longing to belong.

It was just... the lunches... that I remember as a little kid... trying to get used to eating a meat pie... I had to train myself to like it... because I wanted to feel part of the group... (Nina, p8; 19)

Food was also the source of Rosa's embarrassment when her Anglo friend came to visit.

I remember Julie coming to my place for dinner one night... Mum had Greek food and she had... a Greek salad... in those days we weren't very multicultural, were we? And I remember seeing Julie's face..., "Oh what's this?". I'll never forget that expression... the way she looked at it... (Rosa, p10; 16)

Participation in public cultural festivals was difficult for Cassie, who was relieved that the special Greek marches were held late at night, when her school friends were most likely to be at home.

...[going in the procession] was always fairly embarrassing. We were always hoping that nobody saw us or we'd never tell anybody at school that we used to [go in the procession]... (Cassie, p7; 126)

Cassie was also reluctant to speak Greek in public and even at home, she would often answer her parents in English. Surprisingly, this did not extend to attending Greek School, which she did not feel necessary to hide from her non-Greek friends.

Although Nina was acutely conscious of food differences, she was happy to participate in cultural events.

...I don't remember feeling embarrassed as a child about my background. I went to festivals and we went to Greek dances and we did Greek plays... my social life as a child revolved around my Greek school... (Nina, p7; 143)

She did however, feel different and apart from other children, although there was never any teasing or name calling.

I don't remember ever being teased or called names, I just remember feeling different... apart from the other children. (Nina, p6; 118)

Feelings of difference were reinforced by their parents' heavy accents and punishing work commitments. Rosa was acutely aware that her parents' hard work meant that they had little time to spend with her. Unlike her non-Greek friends, her mother and father could not attend school functions and there were few family outings. In addition, her freedom to go to her Australian friend's house marked her out as different from other Greek girls. So for her, there were two levels of difference.

In the same way, Evangelia perceives her childhood as contrasting with her Greek contemporaries. She sees herself as Australian and her "Greekness" related only to the fact that she was born in Greece. Nothing more, nothing less. Unlike her Greek friends, Evangelia's parents were not authoritarian and gave her the autonomy to make up her own mind. It is this quality that marks her apart from the other Greek women here.

I've got girlfriends that are Greek... I can see in them that they're more Greek than what I am... it's harder for them to blend in with other people... It's easy for me to blend in with other people. (Evangelia, p22; 124)

For Anna, her feelings of difference led her to make friends with Greek children in similar circumstances.

And we ended up making friends with the local Greeks who... were in a similar situation. (Anna, p6; 142)

Parental expectations

Parental expectations were grounded in hard work and sacrifice for their children. This was often burdensome for the younger generation, particularly if they were constantly reminded about these difficulties and what was being done for them.

You had to do well because... you're responsible for your parents being here. They would have been back home with their families... there's always, "I'm here for you, or I'm doing this, it's for you". (Nina, p67; 141)

Children were expected to appreciate the sacrifices involved in coming to a different country, living in poor accommodation and working incessantly. There were responsibilities that had to be taken on, as well as the achievement of success in the new world. This was manifested in a variety of ways.

Housework and child minding had to be done. Girls had specific jobs to do while their parents were away working long hours in shops or factories. For both Cassie and Rosa, this was the reality.

And because they worked long hours, I had to be responsible for my brother, who was six years younger. We'd go to Greek school and I had to sort of look after him - make sure that he crossed the road - I held his hand and things like that... (Rosa, p6; 15)

There were expectations that children would do well academically. For parents who missed out on an education, the children's success helped to make up for their loss. It was also a sign that the struggles of making a new life away from all that was familiar, safe and comforting, had been worthwhile.

...the education becomes a big thing... It's their pride and joy for their children to be university graduates... If you get the Greek papers, you will see photographs with such and such... bachelor of this and that, congratulations from mother and father and uncles and aunts... Virtually

to a lot of people if you don't have a tertiary education... they tend to look down on you... (Nina, p13; 143)

I think it's to show your level of success over the years, your reason for being here... (Nina, p67; 133)

Role of parents' migration in their lives

As children, the younger women were influenced by their parents' migration experience. This took a variety of forms, but one of the most significant was the way in which mothers and fathers related to their country of origin. Stories were told about the nation that had been left behind and photographs served to bring these memories to life. Connections were maintained through family, unsold property and the hope, that one day, they would return. Stories were also related about the hardships of migration. They served to reinforce connections with Greece, their cultural heritage and family members who stayed behind.

...the majority [of memories] are the stories that Mum and Dad tell me of different things that happened... the struggles that they had and what it was like being a migrant... what it was like living in a house with another four or five families... (Nina, p2; 152)

Family relationships were affected by the experience of leaving Greece and the settling-in period. I have already discussed how the hard work of their parents impacted on daily life for these young women. For some, the legacy continues today. In Rosa's case, she sees the now distant relationship with her mother as a direct consequence of migration. Feelings of sadness, homesickness and loss had to be subjugated in the battle to survive day-to-day. As Rosa says,

She [my mother] couldn't share those feelings with people because if she did, she was scared of being reprimanded... you know, "Grow up", or "You're out here now, you're in the big wide world". She had a tough time herself, so she hardened I guess. (Rosa, p28; 152)

The loss of a rich and full life was another consequence of this hard work. There was no time to develop interests outside the family, nor were there opportunities to go to English classes or pursue hobbies and recreation. This has implications for adult children as their families are now the constant focus of attention.

Return

For many of the women, their childhood in Australia was dominated by the intention to return to Greece. Migration was seen as a temporary stay, in order to earn money. Families would "make-do" with old domestic equipment, furnishings and clothes. Accommodation was maintained in Greece, often for many years, in case the family returned.

Cassie, Nina and Rosa lived with the constant dream of going back to a wonderful country, an idealised notion of belonging and continuity. It was their fathers who clung consistently to this hope, whereas mothers were more content to stay in Australia.

...my father since the day he was here, always wanted... to return to Greece. He loved his homeland greatly. And unfortunately that never eventuated - he never went back to live. And I can remember as a child my father... used to teach us mythology... He just loved everything about what Greece was, you know, he loved the land... he was very sensitive to those sort of things, you know the sea... he could describe to you... how the sea smelt... (Rosa, p4; 126)

...Mum used to say, "Oh, we need new curtains". [Dad would say], "Oh, what do we need new curtains for, we're going to be moving, we'll be going back". (Nina, p13; 123)

For the three women who actually went back to stay, the reality was different to their hopes and dreams. It was difficult to find employment, accommodation and to relate to a lifestyle that had changed in their absence.

...in Greece we spent a lot of money and we don't have money and he [my husband] didn't find the job over there... he works only for a few months... (Athina, p22; 140)

...when we tried to live there [in Greece], I felt very displaced. I feel this [Australia] is where I belong and unless there was something there [in Greece] for me, I wouldn't go back to live. (Georgina, p43; 147)

...we been there to try to stay about 12 years ago. We like strangers there, we haven't got nothing there... no house and stay nine months and better come back. The kids go to school there but there was bit hard... my husband couldn't find a good job there... I said, "Better go back again... and start again from the start". (Dora, p11; 144)

Cultural continuation

Learning the fundamentals of Greek culture formed a large part of growing up in Australia. As girls, the younger women were taught the Greek language, its history and mythology, cultural values and customs, traditional cooking skills and theology. As well as their homes, Greek school and the Greek Orthodox Church, were important centres of learning and community involvement.

... every Saturday morning we'd be at Greek school. ...from there we... were more involved with the Greek community - the local Greek community. We'd go to the Greek dances. The whole family, yeah, always. (Anna, p8; 137)

Parents' efforts to continue their culture were met with varying degrees of acceptance. Cassie refused to speak Greek, either at home or in public. Anna would not continue Greek school because of the demands of secondary education and her desire to do well. Today there is some regret that they did not continue with their studies. This has resulted in a new-found determination to pass their cultural and linguistic heritage onto their children.

In telling me their stories about childhood cultural experiences, the women reflected on why their parents wanted to maintain the Greek traditions so fiercely. There was fear of diluting the culture or even losing it altogether in a new and alien land. Children had to be educated in the old traditions and mix socially with Greeks. Permanent relationships were ideally within this community. Cultural traditions and values remained static because of the focus on maintaining the culture at all costs. External forces of change and modernity were resisted because they were viewed as destructive. The result is an unnatural situation where the culture has not moved with the times, unlike what has occurred back in Greece.

...they've stayed the same compared to the people in Greece. They've gone with the times and they've tried to become more westernised... the people that came here in the '50s and '60s, they've tried to keep their old traditions, as they remembered it... (Cassie, p43; 150)

Food and language are two of the most important ways of continuing the culture. And yet, for the young Greek child, they were potentially the two greatest "liabilities" within a milieu of intolerance for public displays of difference. Along with their olive skin and dark hair, the food they ate and the language they spoke became markers of difference. It was safe to display these things within the private sphere of the home, but often became problematic in public. This caused conflict as the young Greek railed against displays of difference and tried to be like the "Aussie", although their physical difference was not easy to hide. Those who challenged the culture were a disappointment to their families.

MEANINGS OF HOME

I will now turn to the meanings of home that emerged from the interviews with the Greek women. The centrality of family, cultural continuation and being in control of the physical dwelling emerged as the most important themes. As well as

focussing on commonalities across the women, I highlight areas of difference and contention, particularly between the generations as younger women question some of the values held by their mothers and fathers.

Home as family

The family is highly valued by the women. There is a focus on enriching daily life and spending time together so that children have happy memories of growing up.

I feel happy to cook for my family, to clean the house, to clear the clothes, everything ... because we are always close. (Katina, p16; 152)

Our family is very family oriented. That's the way my parents have brought us up, especially my Mum. The family being together is something that is really important to her... Togetherness is the famous motto, togetherness, she always says it! (Georgina, p36; 150)

Well this is my life I spend in here. I love my family. I love my home. This means everything to me, this is the roots of my life because here lives my son, my husband, my whole life is here. (Margarita, p32; 144)

For some of the younger women, there is an attempt to make up for losses in their early life when parents were preoccupied with work, seven days a week. In this way, the value of home as family is reinforced and passed onto the next generation.

...well I mean if you haven't got your family, it's like having nothing, you know. You've got to work on your family, making sure that, you know, it's always your family first, and everything else comes second sort of thing, you know. (Evangelia, p19; 144)

I guess the entertainment that we've been having has been centred round... the kids more with time. Because I feel it's important. ... in my childhood I can remember significant good times and I want my children to remember them too - significant times in their lives... (Rosa, p15; 151)

The extended family

Even though they live in nuclear families, there is an emphasis on the extended family and the practical and emotional support that it provides. For some of the older women, the presence of family helped them to settle and adjust to life in a new country. The absence of relatives invoked a variety of responses from the women who did not have the benefit of this support.

Ongoing tension in her family means that Dora does not regret their absence. However, when her mother came to visit, her decision to return greatly saddened Dora. Similar feelings emerged when Margarita had her parents-in-law for a long visit. She understood the reasons why they had to go back, but she had hoped they would stay.

Their whole life is there [in Greece], they don't know anybody here... I understand that [why they did not want to stay]. We have a hard time, we come young and still we have some hard time, imagine how they feel. (Margarita, p23; 114)

Even though she has adjusted to not having her family close by, it is still a painful issue.

I don't have a family here at all... always the pain is inside me. (Margarita, p41; 150)

Athina initially had her sister in Australia, but when she went back to Greece, there was no-one for her here. She envied the support that this sibling got from her mother.

You know in Greece my sister went - she married and have kids - when she back home. My mother there to help her. (Athina, p17; 160)

She continues to feel the loss of family today, even though there is regular communication between Greece and Australia. The inadequacies of this are glaringly obvious.

We exchange letters, Christmas cards, Easter cards, that's it. Sometimes we talk on the phone, but it's not very easy because to say, "Hello, how are you?", takes a lot of money. (Athina, p29; 18)

Young mothers can call on their parents for help and value being geographically close to them. Proximity to the family is a priority and can be an important consideration in deciding where to live. For those who cannot be close, phone calls are made each day, maintaining connections and closeness within the family.

Geographic proximity is not always easy to negotiate when parents and parents-in-law both place demands on their children to live nearby. Anna resolved this dilemma by buying a house between the two. A future move will be difficult because of these extended family responsibilities.

The concept of the extended family living together under one roof is losing favour according to these women. Rosa reflects that this is a change from previous practice, due to a number of factors. These include the pressures of modern-day living, inadequate dwelling space to accommodate relatives, loss of personal freedom, interference with domestic and family matters as well as becoming more acculturated into the Anglo-Celtic way of doing things. Increasingly, more frail aged Europeans are being cared for in nursing homes and in Sydney, the number of ethno-specific nursing homes is growing.

...at one stage the grandma used to mind the kids while the parents went to work. (Rosa, p27; 125)

Ambivalence about the extended family is often expressed in terms of being responsible for challenging traditional values and practices. Cassie's guilt stems from a sense of obligation to her parents and the sacrifices that they made to bring her up. This is linked to generational change.

...I'm not really for that sort of thing, I know that sounds terrible... (Cassie, p64; 111)

In Anna's case, there is a similar attitude, but it is motivated out of concern for her mother-in-law being left out.

I don't think they'd [my parents] live with us. ... only 'cause I think it's a bit too unfair... on the mother-in-law - I don't know. She might get really upset if we do that. Um, but near us. They [my parents] got really excited when I said that to them. (Anna, p39; 149)

Nevertheless, a duty of care continues to drive other women. Rosa would look after her mother if she was in need, even though she knows that this would be difficult because of the ongoing tension in their relationship.

...they've given so much to me... I'd look after my mother as long as I could. (Rosa, p27; 149)

Family loyalty was behind Dora's support for her brother even though he was a gambler and brought a great deal of tension into the household. Eventually, she asked him to leave, but even after his abusive behaviour, she found it difficult to reject a relative.

... [she said] "I can't live with you any more. You find your own room and go..." I'm very sorry about that but I couldn't do anything else. (Dora, p18; 126)

The presence of the extended family has important implications for remaining in Australia. As their children establish themselves in adult roles and relationships, there is no question that the older women will stay here. The birth of grandchildren further reinforces the family's presence in the "new" country and the notion that Australia is more home than Greece.

*If my daughters doesn't stay here, no reason to stay here. **So the main reason to stay here is your daughters?** Yeah. Yeah and still my husband go to work... Yes, cause my own family is here, my daughters. That is my family. (Athina, p36; 127)*

Because my son's country Australia, and where is my son, I'm going to be there. (Margarita, p42; 18)

Changing roles

Family roles are changing, affecting relationships between younger and older women, and across the gender divide. There is potential conflict for daughters who have been brought up to value both family and high academic achievement. Mothers provide support for these offspring trying to juggle both roles.

Well, they have a good support system, their mothers. ...they will be baby sitting... preparing a meal half done so when they [the daughters] get home they just finish it off... (Nina, p36; 154)

I thought it was very important for my daughter to get educated because I was determined. I didn't have the chance, as I said. It was always the boys that would have the education... (Doris, p29; 149)

Nina compares this support system with that of their mothers.

I think we're spoilt in many ways because our mothers came out here with no knowledge of language, no support systems, no mothers or sisters... They

had to cope with working, keeping a household, having children... (Nina, p37; 14)

Changing attitudes to male and female roles are causing some people to experience marriage difficulties. Patriarchal values are still prevalent, which means that boys can grow up expecting to be looked after by their wives. Girls are well educated, influenced by liberation type philosophies and frequently pursue a career.

... they [Greek men] expect a girl to be a certain way and she's got no time for this funny business. You get all sorts of conflicts... (Nina, p42; 122)

Older women are also questioning the traditional male role in the Greek family. Petroula is unhappy about her adult sons who still live with her and contribute marginally to the domestic scene. She feels oppressed and downtrodden. When she does ask for help with cleaning or shopping, they retort by accusing her of being too fussy. In spite of their current attitudes, she hopes that her sons will help their future wives.

Petroula comments that the Greek family is changing. Women do not stay at home all the time now. They are working and should not be expected to take on full responsibility for the house and family. Many husbands are helping their working wives. If they are retired, men frequently take on a domestic role, sometimes doing the shopping or specific cleaning jobs. This represents a considerable change from her parents' generation, as well as her own.

Like my brother [in Greece] helps his wife... My father never helping my mother, never, but my mother not working. ...because the husband working outside the house, say, this is women's job, and this is men's job. But now it's everything different to before. That's why some husbands help their wives here too. Yes, many husbands helping now. My husband never... That's why I'm teaching my sons to help their wives when married. (Petroula, p11; 110)

From the other interviews, it appears that there is more sharing of the domestic work, although the responsibility of organising tasks and asking for help is primarily the woman's.

Woman's central place in the family and the changing roles of men and women are revealed in these stories. Mothers play a significant part in family life, often supporting decision making to attain special goals. Anna comments that the Greek woman has the power to influence family members make important changes.

And so she [my mother] was kind of behind him [my father] to change professions and all of that. (Anna, p6; 115)

Not only did Anna's mother influence her father's career change, she had an important influence in her daughter's life. She encouraged Anna's independence through supporting her education and the financial autonomy that she believed this would bring (see page 165 "Childhood Home as Family").

Mothers provide support for their adult daughters in a variety of ways. They undertake domestic work and child minding.

...when Mum's here, she'll cook. Like tonight. I had to go to training all day and I was home at 6.30, so it was good she was here... she had the meal prepared... (Rosa, p17; 157)

Generally, this is appreciated, although different standards can result in conflict. Mothers can be critical of daughters and the way in which they do their housework.

For the unmarried woman, living at home with her parents remains the norm. Nina has thought of leaving, but has rejected the idea because she thinks that this will be

too lonely. Her parents would also find it hard to accept, even though other young women have taken such a step.⁴

I know they wouldn't really like it but I think they'd accept it, eventually accept it. Probably, maybe the younger generation might find it easier... (Nina, p29; 17)

Spending time together

The family is a vehicle for cultural continuation in both the public and private spheres. The women talk about attending religious functions as an extended family, particularly if relatives are geographically close. In the suburbs at the centre of my study area, established ethnic communities have built religious and cultural facilities which attract the women. The Greek Orthodox Church in Belmore is one such facility.

For the older women, the absence of relatives at important occasions is a constant reminder of their loss of both a loving family and cultural links.

How did you feel about your parents not being able to be at your wedding?
Oh, me - I can't watch. I don't look around in the church, because I don't see anybody. Only my sister. When I remember, I sad. Wasn't a lot of people - we haven't a lot of friends or relatives here. (Athina, p15; 119)

⁴ In discussions at the general focus group, one young Greek woman (a friend of one of my interviewees) talked about her decision to leave home.

I decided to move out on my own. It was a massive shock to my parents but it was just something that I... felt I had to do... I was always scared of my parents' reaction, but the strange thing is, is that the day that I was moving out, my father even offered to help. But it was killing him inside. It was killing him. But he thought... I mean it was almost like he was scared and thought, if I make it worse for her, she might close off altogether. And he always had the hope that I would return home.

Family gatherings are an important way of keeping families in touch and ensuring the maintenance of traditional customs. Formal occasions such as name days, Christmas and Easter and christenings will usually involve preparing and eating traditional food.

Nina, who works as a residential designer, comments that there is a strong emphasis on having a large dining room. There is often a request for a formal eating area to accommodate 15 to 20 people. This facilitates regular family entertaining on a large scale. In this way, the theme of home as family is closely linked to that of home as physical dwelling.

Exploding the myth: tensions within the family

Like all families, there are daily tensions that have to be dealt with as they arise. Sometimes this is related to interpersonal relationships and the difficulties accommodating individual needs in a confined, communal space. Nevertheless, the women spoke about significant conflict, particularly associated with clashes across the generations as values and loyalties are contested and remade. This is a painful issue for many of my interviewees, who nevertheless, spoke candidly about the darker side of their families.

...people see us Greeks as close-knit. But within my experience... we might go to each other's places, and we might help each other. We're close in that way, we're there for each other, but I mean - this is generally speaking of course. But we're not - the generations aren't able to talk to each other... in depth. I could never - and I still don't - tell my mother my personal problems or if I've got any hassles with my husband or anything like that, never. And I never will and I never have. And that's the same with a lot of my friends. (Rosa, p28; 123)

From the outside, the family may appear close and connected, but in practice, this is not necessarily the case. Relationships are often superficial as indepth sharing

between parent and child does not automatically happen. In thinking about the reasons for this, Rosa considers the central role of her parent's migration experience.

I guess it's because they came out here when they were young... she [my mother] had to learn the hard way and if she came across things like feeling sad... because she wanted to go back to Greece or she missed [her family] - she had to... cover those things up. (Rosa, p28; 143)

Maintaining the mythology of a perfect and connected family is paramount.

...what are the people going to say, that's a big thing in the Greek community. What [are] the neighbours going to say... (Cassie, p54; 136)

...if your kids are doing something wrong it's a very big secret, nobody can know. (Cassie, p55; 14)

For many of the younger women, compliance is no longer possible. Cassie perceives a lack of trust in Greek families, which means that children have to be controlled and watched so that they do the right thing. There are double standards for men and women, reflecting outmoded values, many of which no longer exist in Greece today.

The Greek family becomes a show piece, that must be maintained at all costs. In much the same way as the physical dwelling, it is another marker of success, but as the younger women reveal, the family is increasingly difficult to manipulate as traditional values are questioned and ignored. Disobedience can bring into play guilt inducing tactics. Children are reminded of parental sacrifices made for their benefit, including financial assistance to buy a house. For the women in my study, this is not common, but they know of instances where it happens.

Home as cultural continuation

Culture can be continued through a variety of mechanisms. Some of these are actualised in the private sphere of the home, some in the public arena and some in both. The women talk about the ways in which they celebrate their culture and the mechanisms that they use to maintain it. There is a strong desire to pass on cultural traditions and values that they have inherited.

It's also important to pass on the language, the religion, the customs, the beliefs. (Georgina, p30; 126)

Margarita's pride in being Greek fuels her desire to instil the same feelings in her son and eventually, her grandchildren. She also wants to pass on her migration experience as a significant force in shaping her life and determination to succeed.

I pray to God one day I'm going to be grandmother and I like to teach my grandchildren some things that I know from my country. I want them to know how we come here, {voice trembles} how hard we work, things like that. (Margarita, p33; 153)

As migrants to Australia, the Greeks have tended to keep the customs, values and beliefs that they grew up with, rather than modernising them in the way that their contemporaries who stayed behind have done. This is keenly felt by many of the younger women with whom I spoke.

I find that Greeks who migrated here... have kept a lot of the same beliefs they had when they were growing up. The customs, the way of life, the values... You find that the Greeks in Greece have progressed and are more modernised. That causes a lot of cultural conflict between kids and parents here... (Georgina p30; 140)

... She's [my friend] gone and she's set up an apartment in Greece, she's teaching English, she's living with friends, she's got freedom, is her own

person. And that's what she has always had trouble with here because our parents really try to hold onto you. So she has kind of got a different life that suits her and that's more accepted in Greece. (Antigone, p28; 111)

Language

Language is an important way of continuing the culture and keeping the family together. If children cannot speak Greek, they may not be able to communicate with older relatives whose English is poor or who feel more comfortable speaking their mother tongue. All the women interviewed speak Greek and, with the exception of Evangelia, want the next generation to be fluent. They believe that language will maintain both their culture and identity.

It's a way of keeping the customs alive... passing to generation to generation. (Georgina, p30; 19)

...you really need to tie up the language to kind of make a person feel that they're Greek. (Antigone, p32; 156)

I think... if a child knows the language, then the child might be more interested in the culture, the music, the history... then the other things like the Greek standard, moral standards, the church... and hopefully the child will see things the way we see things... (Anna, p10; 127)

...when they speak the language, they know their background. They know their culture. They know where they come from... if they don't know the language, like it's sort of losing... touch from where you come... (Doris, p61; 145)

Many of the women also see that in a multicultural society it is useful to have two languages. This can open up job opportunities. Children's high levels of competency in the Greek language is a source of pride for older women.

My [daughter]... she speaks Greek better than me... Every year she going to Greek school and high school, learn Greek, and after university too. (Athina, p32; 143)

As a young Greek woman, Georgina will give her future children the opportunity to learn Greek, but will not insist. Other young women will encourage their children to learn. In order to facilitate this learning, children will be sent to Greek School and in some cases, English may be banned at home to maximise exposure to the language at a time when the child is most receptive.

But we hope that we'll be able to teach the kids Greek... one way is to speak Greek amongst ourselves and to the child right from the start. (Anna, p9; 154)

There is encouragement from the older women for their children to teach the next generation.

I don't want my son to forget that he's Greek and I like my son to be able to teach his children. I want my grandchildren to know they are Greeks... (Margarita, p33; 140)

Others would prefer the language to be passed on but will not insist.

If they like, why not... If they doesn't like, then I don't like to push them. (Athina, p32; 126)

For Katina, having grandchildren speaking Greek would make it easier for her to communicate with them. For those older women who will be minding their daughter's young children, this will provide an excellent opportunity for tuition.

...my Mum intends to help me look after the baby - like when I go to work and stuff, so she'll be speaking Greek. ... that's their first language. (Anna, p10; 16)

Language can be used in the public sphere to maintain privacy. Margarita remembers how her mother used to do this in Greece with her mother tongue of Russian. Anna does this with her husband.

But when we're out... if there's English speaking people around, it's instant privacy just to start speaking in Greek. It's not that you're talking about anyone around you, it's just that... if you don't want people to hear what you're saying, you just speak Greek. (Anna, p9; 147)

Nevertheless, some of the women perceive that less Greek is being spoken. This is Antigone's experience, although for her personally, passing on the language remains a priority.

I've met other children, women and men that have not kept their Greek - have not gone to Greek School and they don't even know a few words because their parents' language was English, they have lost the Greek language. And you ask them do they feel Greek or Australian and they will say Australian. (Antigone, p32; 158)

Doris has serious doubts about the future continuation of fluent Greek in the community.

I am talking with my little grandson, he is only two... I talk to him in Greek but that little boy, you can talk to him in Greek and he answers you straight out in English. ...While we are around, they will speak Greek but the second and the third generation, I don't think that it is going to continue because it would be very hard. (Doris, Greek Focus Group, p16; 131)

Cooking

For many of the women, particularly the older interviewees, cooking traditional food is very important. At every interview I was presented with Greek biscuits and other delicacies. Doris showed me how she dries herbs and preserves tomatoes and olives for the dishes she lovingly cooks. See the following photographs.



Greek cooking comes in because you were brought up with all the Greek cooking... that comes to you naturally... I like to keep it up... (Doris, p54; 157)

The younger women are conscious of cooking the traditional way. There is a desire to learn the skills, even though for some, they are complicated.

My Mum mainly cooked Greek - Greek dishes... like lentil soup and ... cabbage rolls... the Greek lasagne... but that's all harder to do. ... I still haven't learnt how to do that - how to make that up. ... I wouldn't say my cooking is really Greek Greek - no not yet. It'll get there. It's too complicated. (Anna, p36; 153)

...whenever I think of a party... those foods always come up... the pasta with the cream and the minced meat... chicken that's cooked in a Greek way or potatoes, lemon potatoes, lemon chicken, all that sort of stuff. It's just standard, I don't think of anything else. ...I try to... look for something a little bit different, but the Greek dishes are very easy to cook and that's why we always go for those I suppose. And ...you can make big quantities of them in big dishes... that's what you need at a party. (Cassie, p46; 137)

Petroula and Dora dream of having better facilities so that they can enjoy cooking even more. Katina is happy with the streamlined kitchen that has recently been installed in her house. Margarita shops for special Greek ingredients in her local area.

A greater awareness of healthy eating is a motivating factor behind changing traditional cooking practices and shopping habits.

Yes we buy the Greek food, we eat cheese... but not very much. (Dora, p28; 118)

Interior decoration

Decorating the dwelling in a certain style is also related to cultural continuation. Women talked of a "Greek style" of decorating, which is associated with having ornaments on display, embroidered and crocheted items on furniture and pictures on the walls. Patterned carpets, curtains and other soft furnishings also feature in this "style", as do protective plastic covers over furniture.

...it doesn't look like a Greek house... if you take my mother's house ... or the other Greek houses that I've been to - they're very busy. They've got a lot of things around that they have to dust... (Anna, p41; 145)

Petroula says that Greek women always like to have a luxurious house with beautiful furniture, nice carpets, lighting and curtains. She says that Greek women spend a lot of time doing housework.

... they like the house to look nice and clean and presentable... it's very important for the Greek woman. (Petroula, p7; 145)

...they are proud of the house and they want things to look nice and to look - you know not to have cheap things because, you know, it's a big stigma to be called a miser or something like this, so... in Greek culture you're not supposed to have a lot of money and not spend it. (Anna, p18; 124)

There may well be generational and class issues here. As younger women are going out to work more and more, there is less time to devote to housework, to having the presentable and beautiful home. The "busy" style of decorating is being rejected by some of the younger Greek women.

I don't think I'm really too typical in the Greek way of setting up a house, maybe our generation is different... (Cassie, p33; 148)

Marriage

Young women talk of the pressure to marry within the Greek community and while older women acknowledge that this is the preferred option, their principle aim is that their daughters marry and have happy lives. Nevertheless, the costs of not marrying a Greek are considerable and have lasting implications for the loss of culture and close family relationships.

I do prefer marrying a Greek... religion is very important too... I wouldn't want to marry someone who was a non-Greek who wasn't of the same religion. ...later on when you have kids you want them to be christened... and the customs are really important... (Georgina, p29; 133)

... you find if their sons or daughters marry anyone other than Greek, that would be the main issue, the language. Because they [the older generation] can't speak English, I think they feel, or they will find it very hard to accept it because of the language. (Doris, Greek Focus Group, p15; 148)

So we've all been influenced... to marry someone with a Greek background... it's not because of the children marrying someone from a Greek background, but it's for our parents' sake, because... of this extended family business, they would like to be able to keep company with... the son-in-law's parents. (Rosa, p30; 130)

For those women who reach their mid-twenties without marrying, there is concern from family and friends.

...it's time [for my daughter] to get married. But not the wrong person, I don't say get married to anybody. Only you get married. (Dora, p31; 127)

But some families do you see, they put a lot of pressure on their daughters, they say you must get married. (Georgina p31; 131)

In turn this can cause considerable tension across the generations as marriage is increasingly questioned as the only path for the contemporary woman. Travel and career mean that marriage may be delayed and the issue of divorce cannot be ignored. Some younger women are concerned about marrying Greek men who have been reared in the patriarchal tradition of the Greek traditional family.

I think... a lot of people want to be independent or can find happiness from being independent, rather than... getting married young. They don't want to be tied down young, they want to travel or... get a career going, or whatever, and they don't want to make a commitment too young. And also the divorce rate is very high too, in the Greek community as well. A lot of couples, you hear about it every day, friends of friends getting divorced. (Georgina, p32; 14)

Traditional values

The women talk about traditional values associated with being Greek and the ways in which these can be used to maintain their culture. Interestingly, across all the stories there are strong indications that some of these values are being questioned.

The emphasis on patriarchy and the manner in which males are reared, compared to females, is being challenged. Petroula does not want her sons to grow up with these traditional values and not help their wives in the domestic setting.

The older women admit, sometimes with embarrassment, that their husbands do not assist them at home. This behaviour is socially sanctioned.

Did you do all the housework? Yes... What about your husband? He go to work and back home, to smoke, to read the papers {laughs}, and help some, not a lot. Because he feel ashamed to help me in front of his brother... (Athina, p17; 121)

Margarita sees her responsibility for domestic duties as natural.

Do you do most of the things in the house? Not most - all of that. You do all the cooking and cleaning? Oh yes of course... (Margarita, p31; 118)

She informs me that her husband can do the domestic chores if she is sick. She thinks it is fair that she does all the work because her husband works full time.

Well I think it is fair, he's working all day and it's not good when he come home and I tell him come and cook... I don't know how you think, but I think it's stupid. After all the men all day they work... (Margarita, p31; 131)

I agree with her and then ask what happened when she worked full time.

...did he help then? {laughs} This is embarrassing. Oh [my husband]? Dear me no! No he not help me - Well do you think that's fair? No, but he's Greek, that's it. (Margarita, p31; 137)

Anna is glad that she is not subjected to this attitude.

...one good thing I can say about my mother-in-law is that she didn't teach them the 'I'm a man business' and 'I'm supposed to not do this', ... he doesn't sit there and say bring me a glass of water, ... so you could say he's not a typical, typical Greek. (Anna, p32; 124)

Leaving the parental home before marriage is still frowned upon, even in the case of a daughter who is fully independent and responsible.

...they would be worried about what I'd be doing, things like that. It is their protectiveness coming out. Also I think part of it is, what will other people think - shame... (Georgina, p33; 154)

Contrasting the two very different cultures, Georgina says:

{Jokingly} ...Australian parents... if their kids are staying at home, they get them to pay board... or they prefer them to leave home ...Greek parents pay

their kids to stay at home by giving them free food and free laundry service... they [Greek parents] do prefer kids to stay at home until they get married. (Georgina, p34; 110)

The hard working ethic has been passed from parents to children.

I work really hard in my present job. I feel it has a lot to do with what my parents are like and how they were brought up as well... I think a lot of the beliefs have been passed over... (Georgina, p33; 119)

Rosa questions this value because of the high cost that her father paid for his incessant work.

Because in the end what did they gain, you know, my father had just retired a couple of years before he died. (Rosa, p22; 148)

Religious practice

At the very least, the women attend the Greek Orthodox Church for special festivals and celebrations. Some of the women go regularly and for Margarita, her volunteer work with the Greek community is based at the church.

The Church is at the centre of community activities

...most social functions are organised through churches. I don't know of... any kind of function or organisation that's not somehow connected either to the Archdiocese or the community... (Anna, p13; 15)

There is however, concern about fewer young people attending church.

...it's a worry to the older generation in the church, they tend to think there's not many young people really going to church as much as they used to, so that's always an issue... (Nina, p57; 16)

Nevertheless, Greek school has grown enormously and there are day schools run by the community. Other customs and ways of doing things are being increasingly challenged and questioned. I have discussed these in relation to the physical form of the house and its decoration.

Family gatherings and traditional celebrations

The celebration of special family and religious occasions is an important way of continuing the culture, as well as an opportunity for family and friends to get together.

...we've been to Greek functions... weddings and baptisms and it's good for the kids because they've seen... a Greek wedding and they've seen an Anglo-Saxon wedding, so they're able to see the difference. (Rosa, p19; 149)

Easter time, Greek Easter, we invite them [family and friends] to come here for lunch... Actually 26 people with us. And sometimes we go to other places for lunch or dinner, and then it's our turn to invite them. {laughs} (Athina, p29; 151)

Outdoor entertaining is also popular and when the family is involved, guests will often contribute a dish.

...we stay outside. My husband puts a lamb on the spit, you know and barbe-ques it - really nice. And I make something else - salads and potatoes. And people arrive at about 12 o'clock and then 6 or 7 o'clock we eat. To talk to laugh... We put music on - play the Greek music. (Athina, p30; 14)

Entertaining can be very structured, with special foods served in a particular order.

...you bring that [sugared sultanas] out first with maybe a glass of water, it's very sweet and maybe liqueur or something like that and [then] the coffee comes. It's very formal, the Greek way of entertaining... (Cassie, p45; 135)

Entertaining is also related to life cycle issues. Families with young children are home bound and generally entertain there, whereas young people tend to go out more.

...your social life tends to change a bit with age... a lot of my friends, now that they are married with children... can't go out as much as they used to...
(Nina, p51; 145)

Home as suburb

The broader context of home is the suburb. I have already discussed the tendency for many of the women to live near their extended families. There are other reasons for locating in the suburbs where they live, which I outline below.

Public transport availability

Proximity to public transport is important for the women, especially those who do not own a vehicle. Even for those who do, the economical nature of public transport is recognised.

It's more economic. If I'm going by myself, it's necessary to have a car - otherwise I can go from here to Bankstown... I go by train... Actually one bus here down the street, goes to Strathfield and Hurstville. Bus from Roselands, it's very easy. (Athina, p31; 16)

Akrivi suffers because it is difficult for her to get about with the poor public transport in her local area. For her there is a sense of entrapment at home.

I can't drive, I can't go anywhere and I can't feel good... Stay at home all day makes me crazy... (Akrivi, p18; 131)

The younger women are also conscious of the availability of public transport, however, having access to a car makes travelling across the city easier. Anna and her husband both have vehicles, though the environmental cost of pollution does trouble her.

It's not close to public transport here. It's very out of the way from the public transport, so that's not so good... It doesn't really worry me because I've got a car, but then again you know when you think about the environment and pollution and stuff like that, yes, you know, I would probably catch a train if I went down to the city if it was closer. (Anna, p28; 112)

Physical attributes of the suburban environment are another determining factor in where to live. Anna finds the area where she resides pleasant and comfortable. The fact that it looks attractive is important to her.

But the nice thing is that here everybody's really house-proud and it looks really neat outside. I like that. Oh, I was just going to say you know how people like living in the inner city and stuff like that, I don't because they all look really run down those houses and stuff. (Anna, p23; 114)

Being well serviced by facilities such as a shopping centre is critical. For a few, the proximity of parks was mentioned as a feature of their area.

...we like that too because it's a gigantic park - we don't go there often, but you know, we can go... (Anna, p27; 162)

Safety

Personal safety is consistently mentioned by all the women. It is a concern given the perception that a lot has changed and the suburb is not as safe as it once was. Evangelia's childhood neighbourhood is remembered as safe and secure compared with where she lives now. This belief fuels her dream to eventually return.

... there's more unemployed people here, there's more fights going on here, there's more robberies, there's more of everything out here in the west, whereas in the St George area it is not like that at all. You know, it is a homey area down there. ...people, like [on] "Neighbours"⁵, would sort of meet each other outside and they would go on forever talking, whereas here, you don't have that... (Evangelia, p6; 142)

Many of the women do not feel completely comfortable on their own.

Do you feel safe living here in your house? Not really, no... {laughs} If my husband is here, it's okay, but if he go somewhere in the night time I don't feel safe because if somebody comes and knocks on the door or to break the windows, I do not feel safe. We have no security or... alarm. (Athina, p40; 161)

Anna's sense of security is enhanced by the bars on her windows.

...did you notice all the bars everywhere? ...the bars weren't there - that's another thing that we added on. Um, but the way we've got it now, when I'm by myself, I close everything up and I can feel quite safe. But I have to do that to feel safe. I don't feel safe if the back door's open. If you weren't here, I'd close it - that's the same for any woman I think. Yeah, and now I realise that actually in the baby's room, one of the windows - you know you can easily get into it from the - from the front porch there. I want a bar on that now. I've never realised before, but now that I'm going to put a baby in there, I don't know. (Anna, p29; 149)

As a long term resident in her suburb, Nina believes that it is not as safe as it was once, but acknowledges this is symptomatic of the modern city. She feels safe in her house and street, but is cautious further afield. As a consequence, she drives everywhere, which has implications for her sense of neighbourhood and community.

So that's the only thing really that's changed... you don't feel safe any more. (Nina, p31; 123)

⁵ "Neighbours" is an Australian television drama.

That's the only bad thing about it, you lose contact. (Nina, p32; 14)

In contrast with the other women, Cassie feels safe where she lives. She does not lock doors or windows, attributing this practice to growing up in the country. She is not concerned about anyone coming in the house, although she thinks that she should be more conscious of locking up with a small baby.

Proximity of other Greeks

Living in a suburb where there are a lot of Greeks is valued by most of the women, especially the older ones who grew up in Greece.

...it's many years in Earlwood. We know everybody now. If we go far out we feel like we change another country again, we start from the start. (Dora, p26; 116)

...my husband's parents live close by and he wanted to be close to his family... (Doris, p41; 17)

Katina wants to stay in the area where she knows many Greeks. She regularly has coffee with them and shares memories of the old times. The lifestyle she enjoys in Australia is typical of the Greek village where she grew up.

Like in back home, and here too. (Katina, p13; 114)

Cassie and her husband would not move from Earlwood now. She is comfortable here, but says that it is not a priority for her living in an area where there are a lot of Greeks. Her husband's family lives in a nearby suburb where there are a lot of Lebanese people. The proximity of her family is the most critical issue. Cassie knows some of the Greek families in the neighbourhood, but not that well.

He [my husband] wouldn't go and live in Lakemba where his parents are, because there are too many Lebanese as far as he is concerned. So you've got the Lebanese there and the Greeks here. (Cassie, p26; 128)

Although Anna's immediate neighbourhood is not heavily populated with Greeks, there are many in surrounding suburbs. For her, it is not important to live in an area where there are a lot of Greeks, although she would feel uncomfortable residing in some parts of Sydney.

I like the idea [of living near other Greeks]... I think it feels more comfortable... I don't think I could live in the north shore - that's another country there. (Anna, p36; 19)

Greek facilities

The Greek Orthodox Church is a focal point for many religious and social functions in my study area. This is where community activities also happen.

...the Greek school functions from the church... you get a lot of things happening in the Greek churches, school functions... they seem to be like a central part of the community. They play quite a big role. (Nina, p57; 110)

A lot of the senior citizens like to go there. They have different functions, talks or take them on picnics or organise different things for them. It's important for, at least, older people to be near the church. They tend to get drawn to it a lot more as they get older than what younger people like myself do. (Nina, p56; 135)

Even though the church may not be full at every service, its presence is vital. The church also provides an important avenue for socialising and maintaining the community.

Maybe not that many people go there but everyone takes comfort that it's there. You take it for granted that it's there. (Nina, p57; 130)

...it's a social thing too, everyone goes there on Sunday and everyone sees each other... (Nina, p56; 129)

Shopping for special Greek ingredients is not as difficult as it was some years ago because many stores, including supermarkets, carry these goods.

...years ago you'd have to exclusively go to a Greek delicatessen to get certain things. Now it's different. You can get all your various continental meats... pastas and sauces, at all supermarkets. Food trends have changed... We don't have to exclusively go to a Greek shop now to get either fetta cheese or olives, you can get them anywhere now... (Nina, p55; 154)

Nevertheless, for some of the women, the local Greek delicatessen is an important place to go.

Home as physical dwelling

The physical dwelling is an important component of these women's concept of home. In telling me about the houses where they have lived and reside now, a variety of issues emerge about the importance of physical spaces.

The house and garden

Every Greek person prefers a house with a backyard. (Petroula, p9; 111)

The advantages of a house and garden over other forms of residential accommodation are repeated throughout these women's stories. There is privacy, freedom and a backyard for children's play, gardening, having animals and entertaining.

...we've got flowers and vegetables and trees, lemon, mandarin... (Nina, p53; 14)

And I enjoy doing the garden - mowing the lawns - that gives me a sense of achievement. I just like it. (Rosa, p14; 128)

Well I think it's logical. The house with the backyard... you have your own freedom your privacy, ... you can use the area for flowers, for vegetables, for everything. I think it's just logical. (Petroula, p8; 145)

The backyard is also important for keeping the family together. It can provide recreational activities that will ensure children stay at home. This is central to Rosa's ideal home.

...it's got to have a pool... we all like swimming - the kids love swimming... a friend of mine takes his daughter and my two to the swimming pool every Saturday afternoon, so it's a good entertainment for them. (Rosa, p26; 152)

The majority of Greeks who migrated to Australia 20 or 30 years ago, came from rural areas where they lived in houses with backyards and farms. It is understandable that they have established vegetable gardens and enjoy meeting with friends and family in their own private spacious outdoor area (see photograph over the page). For those who came from the cities of Greece, where they lived in units, the reasons are more complex and are explored in Chapter Nine.



The women talk about the house and garden in terms of its appropriateness for children. This form is also the most flexible as it can be changed and controlled. For these women, this contrasts markedly with medium density accommodation.

Flats

Even though many of the women had never lived in flats, their rejection of this type of accommodation is resounding. Flats are seen as physically constraining, without privacy and definitely unsuitable for children. One is not only physically confined, but emotionally and spiritually. Behaviour has to be constantly monitored so that neighbours are not disturbed or inconvenienced. There are issues of powerlessness if washing can only be put out on particular days and children are excused from making a mess in exchange for their promises of quiet play. A flat does not provide

sufficient physical separation from others. There is the risk that you will hear the conversations and arguments of adjoining residents and that they will be privy to your private concerns.

I mean if you wanted to scream, everybody would hear it sort of thing... no I have never wanted a flat, no. (Evangelia, p11; 146)

I don't like much to live in the flat, because I am not free to go out in the back yard or the front. Stay in bedroom or in the verandah. (Athina, p40; 151)

The women perceive their husbands as particularly opposed to unit living.

"Margarita what you think I am a bird? Go in the cage." That's the way he [my husband] sees it. (Margarita, p31; 110)

...actually my husband likes to do something in the back yard. It keeps him busy. He can't stay inside all the time, we start to have a fight after {laughs}. (Athina, p40; 131)

Flats do not accord with the perception that Australia is a big country.

No room. That's why I don't like units. I feel sure that now in Australia they start to build units and units. It's a big country - should be everybody have their own house. (Petroula, p9; 136)

Evangelia automatically equates living in a flat with renting. She sees such accommodation as inferior, whereas a house equates with ownership and personal autonomy.

You can basically do your own thing in your own house. (Evangelia, p12; 149)

Only one woman said that she would not object to living in a flat, provided that it had a sunny outdoor space.

I could live in a flat if it had a garden table and chair out on a large enough balcony... I don't think my parents could live in flat though... Dad loves to have his vegetable garden and they spend a lot of time out in the garden, so I think they would feel too confined, too restricted. (Nina, p52; 138)

For another woman, this type of accommodation would only be considered if there were no other options.

...if we had to - yeah okay I'd live in a flat, but if I didn't have to, no I wouldn't. I don't like the idea of a flat... 'cause you don't have the space, you don't have your back yard. I feel very claustrophobic and you don't have as much privacy and you hear, you know, everybody coming and going. (Anna, p26; 150)

Changing lifestyles may mean that some women will contemplate unit living when backyard maintenance becomes too physically demanding or the house, too expensive to run. But even here there is a sense of being forced to consider such an option. The house and garden are still preferred.

...as I get older, my husband retired, better, because a yard, it needs a lot of work... (Athina, p40; 154)

Spend a lot of money (on a house) all the time, and if it's more economic, why not? (Athina, p40; 157)

The women talk about flats in Greece as being different to the Australian situation. Margarita, who grew up in a unit, told me that they have formal lounge and dining rooms as well as the informal family rooms and large kitchens. The perception is that the unit in the original country is very different to the majority of units available on the market in Australia.

[My unit in Greece] was three bedrooms, [we had] a nice lunch room and dining room... We have bathroom and we have a nice big kitchen with a table in it... We had lots of space... (Margarita, p8; 121)

Akrivi and Antigone talk about Greek flats having much better sound insulation than Australian flats. There are other important differences.

... It's still different to flats in Australia. Because it's more like group homes in Greece. It is not like a flat because you know your neighbour, you are probably related to your neighbours. And if you aren't related to your neighbours, then you become like a part of that family. It's a sense of family in a flat environment ...I mean you really know what is happening in the community if you live in a flat and that's not really been addressed here. (Antigone, 25; 148)

Arrangement of internal spaces

For most of the older women and some of the younger women, the formal and informal rooms are a critical part of their dwelling. For those who currently do not have this type of spatial arrangement, an ideal house would. A formal room is always kept tidy, thereby containing the household's messiness to the rest of the dwelling.

I like to have the TV room. This is very important for me. Because my sons [are] very untidy, I always like to have a TV room for them and the rest of the house to stay clean and tidy, it's very important for me. And of course the kitchen, I like big kitchen. (Petroula, p14; 17)

A formal living area is often achieved through renovations. Margarita's lounge and dining room were created this way (see photographs below).

I invite people, I make beautiful dinner there [in the formal dining room]... (Margarita, p26; 150)





The formal room is filled with attractive furniture and ornaments, the best that the woman owns. Family and images of Greece feature, as well as heirlooms handed from mother to daughter. These rooms are where they entertain special guests and hold celebrations during the year. Examples of decor are shown in the following photographs.







The desire to have formal rooms is not universal.

...we tried not to have that [a formal room] in this house. Because it is a waste of a room in a way, but that's what they have in Greece and that's what they have here... very expensive room, basically. It is just meant to be used only when someone is getting married, very special occasions... (Antigone, p21; 133)

...it's nice of course, if you have the money to have a formal dining room and the lounge... but it's not that important to me. (Doris, p46; 119)

Anna is not interested in having a formal dining room. However, she does want a large and spacious house to facilitate entertaining. She comments generally that "Greeks are used to big houses". (Anna, p22; 142)

I don't particularly want a formal dining room, as long as the dining room, the one that's there, is pretty big. (Anna, p38; 140)

I wish the bedrooms were a bit bigger. Especially now, the baby's room... doesn't seem to be big enough. I'd like to have a bigger kitchen - everything bigger, bigger, bigger. Bigger. Big houses, yeah. Lots of room, you know. (Anna, p29; 132)

Small internal spaces inhibit entertaining, although having a garden does alleviate this to a certain extent.

Well I like big gatherings, but in this house it's a bit difficult because it is a bit small. (Anna, p32; 156)

In their vision of the ideal house, many of the women mention light and airy rooms. This quality often defines favourite spaces in the houses where they live now.

...there's one thing that I don't like and that's the study... 'Cause it's dark. I've got this thing about light and dark. No, I like all the rooms equally - even the kitchen, believe it or not. (Anna, p26; 137)

Clean house

The clean house is highly valued by the older women.

... they like the house to look nice and clean and presentable... it's very important for the Greek woman. (Petroula, p7; 145)

...her house even today is spotless, like all European women, generally speaking. I mean you can eat off my mother's floor... (Rosa, p7; 152)

They always seem to be scrubbing, cleaning and polishing and shining. (Nina, p35; 153)

However, a large house can also be a burden when it comes to cleaning. Margarita contrasts the ease with which she cleans her small holiday abode with the family residence.

I love this place [the holiday house] because I can clean it easier than this one [the Sydney house]. This is a big house and extra work. After all we live every day here of course and we have more work to do, but the other one is more easy to clean... I can clean it straight away and it is beautiful. Small and tidy. (Margarita, p27; 142)

Slavish adherence to such high standards of domestic order is not filtering through the generations, although most of the younger women acknowledge that tidiness is important.

...if it's [papers and filing] scattered all over the place, I find that's probably the state of my mind and I can't work. So I feel the same with the house, I

like the house to be neat and clean and tidy and things in order... (Nina, p35; 135)

...[my daughters] have to help me clean up, to keep the house clean. Because it's very important for all of us. (Athina, p34; 137)

Nina does acknowledge that housework can become a dominating force in one's life and this is not a healthy thing.

...sometimes you can get overly fussy, I'm not like that. Sometimes I just have to leave things because I have other things to do, priorities. But yes it's important. (Nina, p35; 142)

The new versus the old

The concept of the new house or renovating the old to become "new", are important themes in many of the women's stories. Over time, attitudes have changed as the old and traditional have become fashionable and sought after, particularly by the younger women. There is embarrassment about what their parents did to houses in order to create a distinctive "Greek" style.⁶

New is better. "Let's get rid of the old timber windows and put in the durable aluminium ones, get rid of the chimneys..." Fair enough, that's how they feel. My parents did it too. They destroyed the federation verandah and took out the timber windows... I suppose it was fashionable when it was done... (Nina, p46; 152)

⁶ There are some interesting perceptions of what constitutes a typical "Greek" house in the women's stories.

I remember as a teenager what stood out... is the gutters painted blue and white... a few of them with roses and grapevines. Because blue and white are the colours of the Greek flag. And you could always pick [a Greek house]... the Lebanese... they're more cement orientated... with the grapevines and the chairs in the front... we can always pick a Lebanese house... an Italian house too has got significant impressions... (Rosa, p24; 159)

...we like the Federation - the green - the typical Australian [house]... we're not into the blue or the cement. (Rosa, p25; 118)

Nevertheless, the frustrations and difficulties of undertaking renovations are recognised.

At times I say to myself, "Oh, I wish I had a new house, aluminium windows... all the stuff that a new house has because an old house tends to have a bit more maintenance", I guess. I don't know - initially anyway. It wouldn't be bad sometimes to knock this house down and have a concrete jungle. (Rosa, p25; 158)

Childhood experiences of renovations are relevant here, with one woman declaring her preference for the new as a result.

It's hard work, isn't it, because you have an idea of what you want to do, but then, you go to it and it's like ... a whole black hole that you've got to fix up. ... that's what I didn't like about when we were renovating Punchbowl - oh there were so many arguments and stuff - that was a difficult time, and I always thought, oh I don't want to really renovate... I want to be able to just move and no hassles, so I think preferably a new house. Or maybe we'll buy a block of land and build a new house the way that we want it. That would be the ideal. Hopefully we'll have enough money. We probably will, we'll see. (Anna, p40; 136)

The older women generally see the ideal home as new, spacious, containing formal and informal areas and being exquisitely decorated.

...a lovely new house... (Petroula, p13; 157)

For every Greek family, this was a dream house. (Katina, p25; 15)

In renovating, an old and unsuitable house can be re-shaped and made more desirable. In some cases, it can represent a particular style that marks it out as different.

But I pictured that we could do a lot with the inside and that it would eventually look nice. (Anna, p22; 130)

The front with the columns, you can't miss it. Definite Greek person's house... (Nina, p46; 128)

Home as ownership

Owning their house was a life long goal of the older women. The objective of their hard work was to buy a house so that they could move out of shared dwellings and have something tangible to show for the hardships they had endured.

We was anxious to buy house, just a house, doesn't matter where, anxious to buy a house... Something for ourselves... I was so anxious to get a house, I was so tired being with other people. Live with other people and so many problems. I say, "Oh God, just a house, doesn't matter how is". (Margarita, p24; 131)

I work very hard but I have something to call my own. (Athina, p20; 117)

...especially when you go from one country to another country... because you think, well I'm paying rent, I'm wasting my money. So I must save enough and get a deposit down instead of paying that rent... Then I can own my own house... it becomes much more important to you to have your own house because you think, well I left my own country. I come to this country. At least I'm achieving something. I'm doing something. I'm getting something. It's mine, it belongs to me. (Doris, p41; 137)

For the younger women, ownership is also very important. They saw their parents work very hard in order to be able to purchase a house. This remains a powerful

image for them and they continue the tradition. Their reasons for owning may differ, but they still perceive it as an expression of their success. It empowers them in terms of providing personal autonomy. The dwelling is theirs to alter. A place where they can be themselves. It is also linked to financial security, unlike renting. These women do not discuss any negativities associated with economic hardship in meeting mortgage repayments.

Parents helped the younger women to initially purchase their house. Financial assistance, advice with real estate, free accommodation and encouragement to buy were all instrumental in bringing ownership about. In Anna's and Cassie's case, the house was purchased before their marriage and rented out until they were ready to move in. Evangelia lived with her parents in order to save enough money for a deposit.

Sacrifices to own are not uncommon. For Evangelia this meant buying in an area she does not like, but where houses are affordable. In this way she has managed to get a foot on the first rung of the housing career ladder. She cannot wait to move to a more desirable area. Physically improving her investment and selling for a profit will allow this to happen. For Cassie, it is important to have the house fully paid for as soon as possible. Parents-in-law will assist by providing rent free accommodation while they lease their own house and pay off the mortgage.

Ownership means being in charge and having the freedom to change the physical structure of the dwelling. This was done by their parents as they renovated old houses. There are difficulties living in a house while it is being altered, but the women are willing to put up with this inconvenience. Even Evangelia, who wants desperately to move, is proud of the renovations that have been done.

You are the boss. (Katina, p24; l15)

Good thing is it's ours, we can make it how we want to make it. When we leave it we will be leaving something of us behind... because we made it into what it is... (Evangelia, p18; 132)

...it's my house and that's... the difference... [I'm] in charge of this house... (Doris, p51; 135)

Changing the physical structure means putting a part of yourself into the house, which in turn, further enhances the emotional attachment. It is the hard work which leads to the investment of emotional energy, responsibility and belonging.

...it took us two years and there was a lot of blood, sweat and tears, and a lot of fighting and a lot of carrying on... (Anna, p20; 128)

For all the women, owning is also about investing money, whereas renting is seen as a waste. Ownership can help to bring about a sense of belonging and eventually means that you have something tangible to show for your hard work.

... if we're going to rent, that money's going down the drain. You know what I mean, like that's dead money. (Evangelia, p11; 136)

...well I think owning is better 'cause... your money's going somewhere - yeah, more worthwhile. Whereas with renting, you're giving money away all the time, and that's it, you never see it again, you never get any value back from it. (Anna, p27; 122)

...when we own the house, we have something... if I sell the house, I have something for me... If I rent the house - it's different - someone else's house - not my house. (Athina, p20; 18)

In addition, renting is a disempowering process. As a renter you are at the mercy of the landlord, who may not care and refuse to maintain the property in a reasonable condition.

...you get the other problems that you've got to rely on the landlord to fix this and that and if they don't want to, or they won't and all that. (Anna, p27; 132)

If the renter undertakes improvements there is no guarantee that this action will be appreciated by the landlord.

...my husband did a lot of work inside to paint... when we rent. And they never say thanks or be happy. And after three months or six months, they say, "Oh, you have to pay me some more, because it's a big house". (Athina, p23; 131)

The powerlessness of the renter is in marked contrast to that of the owner, who can change the physical fabric of his/her dwelling.

...if you've got something that you don't like about the place that you're living in, if you own it, then you know, you're more willing to put the money into changing it, but if you're renting, you don't. (Anna, p27; 142)

For Evangelia, owning is synonymous with a house and garden; renting with living in a flat. This is not necessarily so for the other women, but the goal of owning a house and garden is highly prized.

As a single woman, Nina would not consider moving out of her parents' house to rent. It would only be to own. In terms of her financial contribution to the household, she does not pay board as such, but rather buys groceries and meets bill payments as necessary. In this way, the dwelling becomes more Nina's home rather than solely that of her parents. She is an equal partner in its ownership, day-to-day running and ongoing maintenance. Nina makes suggestions about changes to the physical fabric and actively undertakes renovations and major household purchases. The expenses are shared between the family members. At the same time, she is able to save towards a deposit for her own house.

In a way I feel that it's my home... I've invested a lot of time and money too. On the other hand, I have a roof to live under... saving money at the same time. Dad feels like he's contributing to us two [my brother and I], because we have a deposit for our place if we wanted to... (Nina, p53; 148)

CONCLUSION

The women's stories are dynamic and represent a diversity of individual opinion, as well as inter-connecting threads and themes. I have drawn on both the commonalities and differences in the interview material in presenting these Greek women's meanings of home.

Home is a multi-dimensional concept, derived from their childhood and adult experiences of dwelling. For the older women, there is the geographic separation of homes, whereas the younger women grew up in two worlds, separated by language and culture. The migration experience has shaped these women's meaning of home, both directly and indirectly.

There are some interesting patterns that emerge across the generations, as tradition inevitably clashes with modernity and change. Nevertheless, the family is central. This has implications for the physical form of the dwelling. So too does the migration process, especially the dominance of loss. Ownership of the physical house and garden is an important response. I develop my interpretation of this theme in Part Three. In the next chapter I turn to the Arabic women and their meanings of home.

Chapter Six

Arabic Stories of Home

*...there's nothing like home. It's a very big thing
in our culture... (Fatima, p24; 129)*

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I present major themes in the Arabic stories of home. I begin with a brief overview of the context of migration and a summary of the women's characteristics. Childhood and contemporary meanings of home are discussed. This is linked with migration narratives and the role that transition played in developing the women's meanings of home.

THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

The Lebanese first settled in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern (Burnley, 1985: 193) forming a community in Great Buckingham Street from the early 1890s.¹ This migration began with Lebanese men who jumped ship and became street hawkers and vendors in the southern parts of the CBD, Redfern and Surry Hills (Burnley, 1995: 178). By 1900 the Maronite and Melkite Churches were established in East Redfern (Burnley, 1985: 193). The community grew through chain migration as those already settled, financially assisted close relatives to come here (Burnley, 1995: 178). In the 1930s Lebanese people formed a new settlement in north-western Sydney, where they became market gardeners and rural labourers (Burnley, 1995: 178).

Although post World War II there was a policy of mass migration to create a large labour pool for expanding manufacturing industries (Jupp, 1991: 75), it was not until the mid '70s that Lebanese people migrated in large numbers. This was directly related to the White Australia Policy being abandoned in 1972 (Jones, 1993: 90), although it was not until 1976 that the policy finally broke down (Jupp, 1991: 87). Special concessions to settle in Australia were made for those escaping from the civil

¹ It is interesting to note that Buckingham Street is the "longest continuously occupied by an ethnic minority group in Sydney" (Burnley, 1995: 178). Few Lebanese people live there currently.

war in 1975 and subsequent conflict (Burnley, 1985: 193). Muslim Lebanese started to enter Australia in significant numbers for the first time (Jupp, 1991: 87).² Initially this was a result of Christian Lebanese businessmen sponsoring Muslims from neighbouring villages to come to Australia (Burnley, 1985: 193). Important "anchor points" were established by the Lebanese and other immigrant communities prior to the mass post war migration (Burnley, 1995: 179).

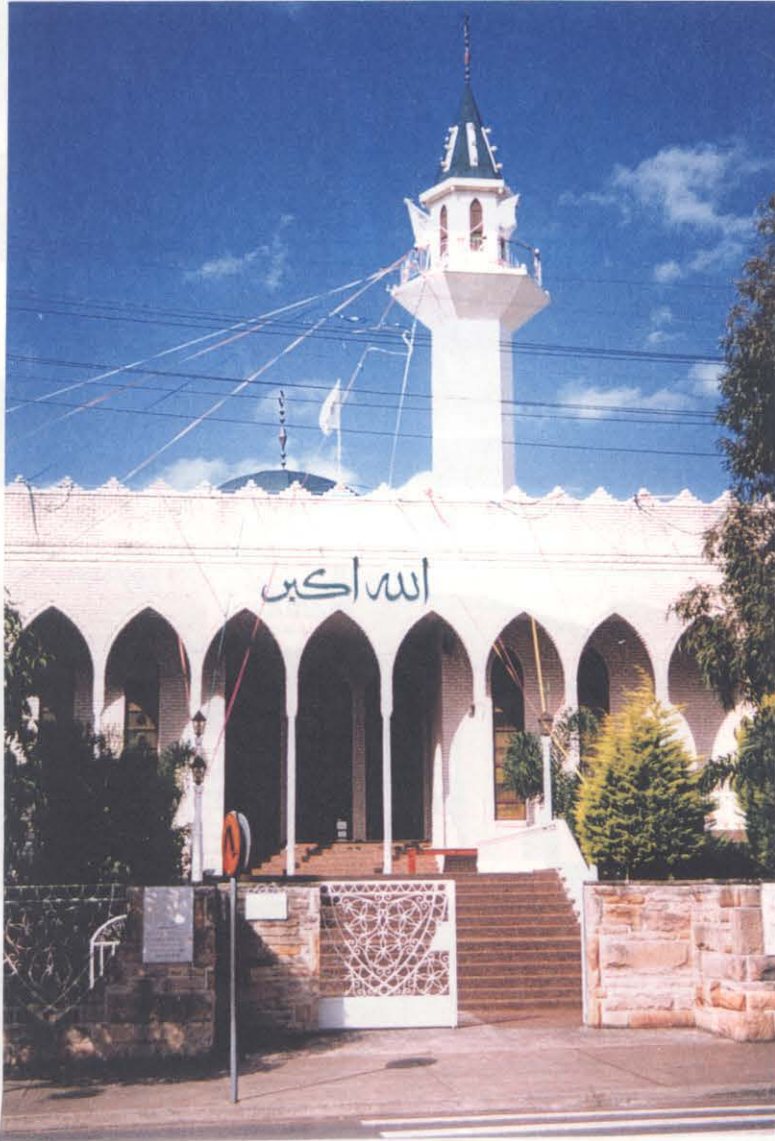
Early community leaders could give guidance to the initial post war migrants concerning work and housing, and relatives could obtain employment with kin who owned small businesses or market gardens... once relatives from specific localities had established themselves, kinsfolk from these localities could be sponsored and often financially assisted to migrate in the early postwar period... the revival and expansion of chain migrations resulted in postwar settlements having specific initial locations (Burnley, 1995: 179).

Such was the case with the growth of Lebanese settlement in my study area. The suburb of Lakemba, at the centre of the Canterbury LGA, became a focus for Muslim people when a large Mosque (see photograph below) was constructed with aid from the government of Iraq (Burnley, 1985: 193). "By 1981, Australia had received around 16,500 Lebanese-born Muslims and today they form the largest group within the Australian Muslim community" (Jones, 1993: 94).

Christian Lebanese settlement also expanded with Maronite churches being established. In the influx after the civil war, the size of the main Lebanese settlements in Sydney doubled (Burnley, 1985: 193). At the 1986 Census there were 40,000 Lebanese born in Sydney and 65,000 of Lebanese ancestry (Burnley, 1995: 185).

² It is important to note that Muslims (as a religious group) have been settling in Australia since the white invasion. Indeed, fishermen from South Celebes were visiting the northern parts of Australia well before 1788 (Jones, 1993: 31). The Afghan camel drivers were the first Muslims to settle in Australia between 1867 and 1910 (Jones, 1993: 49).

As well as showing the Lakemba Mosque, the photographs below show Arabic food stores in the study area.





THE WOMEN

In the following table, I provide brief demographic characteristics of each woman.

Table Eleven
Demographic Characteristics of the Arabic Women

Name	Age	Religion	Marital Status	Children	Place of Birth	Australian Status
Fatima	36	Muslim	Divorced	2	Lebanon	Arrived with family as a child
Zekia	53	Muslim	Married	5	Lebanon	Arrived in 1963 aged 25
Nouha	60	Muslim	Married	5	Syria (of Lebanese parents)	Arrived in 1956 aged 24
Safie	32	Muslim	Married	3	Lebanon	Arrived in 1983 aged 25
Ihsan	37	Muslim	Married	5	Lebanon	Arrived as a young woman
Faiza	19	Muslim	Married	1	Lebanon	Arrived in 1973 as a baby
Claudia	25	Christian Maronite	Married	1	Lebanon	Arrived in 1977 aged 10
Waad	41	Muslim	Married	7	Lebanon	Arrived in 1976 aged 25
Naomi	27	Christian	Divorced	2	Kuwait (of Lebanese parents)	Arrived in 1970 aged 5
Sarah	31	Christian	Married	3	Lebanon	Arrived in 1973 aged 12
Asmahan	31	Muslim	Married	3	Lebanon	Arrived in 1976 aged 15
Yasmin	28	Christian	Married	2	Aust	Parents arrived in 1953
Samia	56	Christian	Widow	3	Lebanon	Arrived in 1953 aged 17

See Appendix Fifteen for an overview of each woman's history.

THE CHILDHOOD HOME: MAJOR THEMES
The home as family

The centrality of family life was established in the women's childhood homes. Although they lived in a variety of familial situations, the emphasis was on relationship, nurturing and being together. These memories are personally sustaining and indicate the strength of family in their lives.

If I felt sometimes that people are treating me not fairly, I used to say, "OK, I used to have beautiful times and I used to be the most loved girl in the whole world". So I'll be able to get over it. That's what's giving me more strength... (Safie, p7; 121)

I miss that type of home... all my family being there. I miss being... a young girl, because I liked when I was small. It was really happy and got no worries, and I miss my grandmother a lot... everything sort of in a circle, your parents are here, your auntie, grandmother... (Claudia, p9; 146)

I always remember the place when I grew. And when I have any dream, I dream of the place when I was born. (Zekia, p8, 139)

Well first of all, my parent's home... family, there was loving there was caring, there was everything... a child ever wanted - I know that I never used to go out and stuff like that but I think at home I used to have enough love and caring. (Faiza, p7; 130)

Different families

The women were reared in a variety of family situations, including being parented by different relatives.

My auntie took me - she asked my mother if she can look after me... (Nouha, p23; 131)

I remember myself when I used to come back home, find my grandma waiting for me, dinner is ready, lunch or whatever, sitting together, sharing our experience, what I have done during the day, what she did during the day... (Safie, p8; 135)

Others lived in large and sometimes, extended families.

We come from a big family - ten of us - five girls and five boys. (Sarah, p1; 141)

My uncles used to live up the top and we used to live down the bottom. ...my grandmother lived with us... downstairs. I was really close with my grandmother... she was really elderly. And I was always with her... (Claudia, p4; 152)

Both Ihsan and Zekia came from large families of ten children. They had happy lives characterised by togetherness, sharing meals, laughing, dancing and singing.

It was a very nice place, you know, not a big house, but beautiful, like house for whole family, not a flat. We've got our own building - we was renting it, we wasn't the owner for the house, but it was very nice life. (Ihsan, p2; 150)

Yes, my childhood was very, very happy. (Zekia, p9; 136)

A negative aspect of these large social homes was the enormous amount of work necessary to run a household of ten children and one husband. The responsibility was largely the mother's who had to wash clothes, cook meals and clean the house. In addition, she had to cater for visitors who frequently called by unannounced.

So my mother, she didn't have that much time to visit people, but all of them used to visit, they didn't care... they know she's busy and that's it. (Ihsan, p8; 17)

...my mother was very busy woman. ...every day have to cook a lot. For all of us and besides, some other guests. (Zekia, p9; 116)

...my mother struggle very, very hard to bring us up, because we big family. (Samia, p2; 140)

Disciplining children

Children were disciplined and expected to be obedient. The women do not speak of this as a hardship, but something they valued then, and have carried into their own homes today. There were lessons to be learned from households that did not restrict their children.

I think all parents think about that in our religion... (Faiza, p6; 136)

I have a friend, she was allowed to do everything. She was the only girl in the family. She was allowed to go to parties, discos, shopping by herself, anything she wanted... they can't control her any more... If she gets upset she just leaves the house... (Faiza, p6; 140)

For some women, household responsibilities extended to domestic chores and child minding. This often fell on the eldest daughter in the family.

I helped my mother a lot... to look after them [my brothers and sisters]... (Nouha, p4; 148)

Every week my mother go to her family and I cook for my sisters and brothers, I clean the house. (Waad, p4; 140)

Even though there was discipline, children were also indulged. Claudia is laughing and very happy as she tells me about how her father would spoil her with gifts from

his trips to Syria. There was some jealousy from her brothers who did not receive presents like she did.

...my father I think, used to spoil me 'cause my father used to work on a taxi and I used to remember ...he used to always go to Syria and come back, and he used to always buy me presents and things, and dresses and all that. (Claudia, p5; 117)

The home as physical dwelling

The physical dwelling is a much less dominating theme in these childhood stories. The older women easily recollect the dwellings in Lebanon where they spent their youth. The variety of housing forms experienced reflects the women's different backgrounds.

Safie lived with her grandparents in a lavish two storey home with a beautiful garden. In contrast, Naomi spent her early childhood years in a primitive dwelling, which had few rooms and no connecting hallways. Access was only possible by going outside, and bathing and cooking facilities were very basic. Zekia lived in a house above her father's cheese shop.

Living in a unit was common in the cities. As a physical space, this was not difficult. There was plenty of room and the extent of communality enhanced the sense of family.

...four bedrooms and lounge room and dining room, kitchen... family room... It was big apartment. We were very happy there. (Asmahan, p3; 19)

We used to live as one family. The same building, we used to call out... each other for a cup of coffee in the morning... We used to sit in together after we finish all our work... looking after each other. (Nouha, p24; 134)

Gardens

There is a focus on the importance of outdoor spaces in both rural and urban settings. Internal courtyards and roof top gardens feature in the women's stories.

No, no, no yard. It was other yard, one on the top of the house - it was a big, you know, big as the house, because it was on the top of the house. We used to use it for playing. (Ihsan, p3; 131)

Oh I used to like the garden, we had a beautiful garden. My Mum used to always grow flowers and roses... (Claudia, p6; 122)

Gardens also had utilitarian functions producing fruit and vegetables for consumption.

...upstairs we used to have big vine trees, you know where you get the grapes... and all the verandah was all just vines up the top... and all the grapes would be hanging down... it was really nice. (Claudia, p7; 154)

Australian dwellings

The younger women's stories are characterised by different experiences of flats and houses as their parents settled into the Australian environment. Naomi's initial memories are of hardship as the family saved enough to buy a dwelling. The contrast between cramped unit living and their own cottage and garden was considerable.

...moving to the house it was really great - it felt [like] real freedom... Every time you run around in a flat - Mum [would say] - be quiet because we're on the top floor and people were living down stairs... don't yell, don't shout, don't do this, don't do that, and being three children and one baby, it was really difficult... (Naomi, p7; 130)

Not only was there a large backyard, but Naomi had a room of her own. She had freedom to play, to have friends over and to make as much noise as she wanted. Her room afforded personal autonomy, privacy and an ability to express herself.

...we had a yard so big. ...that's what Dad really wanted, for us to have our freedom. Yeah, we used to play and it was really great - bar-be-ques which we never could do in a unit. And we used to invite more people over. Mum didn't worry... about making noise. We used to make as much noise as we wanted - it was really great, really great. (Naomi, p15; 137)

I had my own room... it was really great. I didn't have to sleep with my brothers any more... I could set up my room the way I wanted - my dressing table... there wasn't anyone allowed to touch my things - my books and that, and my desk and it was really great, having that responsibility of my own room, made me feel more mature and grown up. ...do what I wanted to do - read or lie on the bed...turn on the radio or whatever I wanted to do... (Naomi, p16, 110)

Faiza delighted in the big house and yard where she spent her childhood growing up in western Sydney.

It was three bedrooms, but really big, big bedrooms. We had a lounge room, we had another dining room ... a salon... it was so big... (Faiza, p9; 131)

The physical house was the focal point for her whole family and its gatherings. The size of the dwelling facilitated the expression of home as family.

...most of our family... whenever they wanted to go out, they'd come over to our place because we had a really nice balcony and a very nice view - you'd see all the city... It was very cool... - there was so many fun things about it. We used to enjoy it... we used to have so many people come over and we used to have parties... (Faiza, p10; 136)

The home as suburb

The women's childhood stories emphasise a strong sense of community within their neighbourhoods.

And something different too - our country [Lebanon] more social country... all the time they visit each other, or make the tea together... And all children play together. (Nouha, p25; 153)

...over there in Lebanon, when you're in the same village, you practically know each other... you're always over at each other's place... (Claudia, p2; 145)

...it's a small street where I lived. And we all remember each other, whenever we go say hello, you know, very friendly. (Zekia, p6; 118)

We knew every single one in the street; if she had a baby, if she is sick, what's happened to her, [why] she is not going to work today, [why] she is not going to school, what's going on; and we used to visit once every week. (Safie, p9; 140)

It was also appropriate to give advice and discipline to the neighbours' children. Many women were grateful for this assistance in parenting.

The whole street used to come to my father. He was the best friend to all of them. (Ihsan, p7; 147)

Local neighbourhoods were also the places where children played together. They gathered in each other's houses, in the yards and on the street.

And the kids - we used to play... sometimes in this house or sometimes this house - sometimes in front of the door... on the footpath, we used to do some lines... Draw lines and start [to] jump... we used to play in my house or my friend's house, or another friend's house. (Ihsan, p7; 112)

DECIDING TO MIGRATE TO AUSTRALIA: DREAMING OF A BETTER LIFE**Reason behind the decision**

The war in Lebanon, either directly or indirectly, was behind the decision to migrate to Australia. The combat violently and abruptly interrupted the routine of daily life and dramatically changed the course of these women's lives forever. Families were separated and dwellings destroyed. The extent of devastation meant that their childhood memories of home became even sweeter, in contrast with the tragedy of war that robbed them of that home.

'Till the trouble start... the life is all changed... (Ihsan, p1; 159)

We used to be all together... playing, laughing playing cards...and all this goes in one day, in one moment. (Ihsan, p4; 14)

...we were all one big happy family then, you know, but then the war broke us up... (Claudia, p6; 138)

Because of the war. For us, because of the war. Otherwise I wouldn't have come to Australia. (Safie, Focus Group, p6; 144)

...for seven days - we are in the mountains, we can hear the bombs - it was very, very scary. (Asmahan, p23; 15)

The experience of leaving Lebanon was traumatic for most of the women. Even as a young girl, Claudia found the parting with her grandmother profoundly emotional.

I was crying when we had to... leave. ... we had to leave our grandmother there by herself. (Claudia, p8; 157)

The promise of a better life in Australia encouraged some of the women to settle here. The presence of family was also a motivation.

...in Lebanon at that time, they thought if somebody come to Australia, they're going to get the gold from the beach... My sister-in-law, she told me that... She asked me, "Send out the gold from Australia". I said, "Oh, there's no gold, nothing, they work very, very hard to get the wages". (Nouha, p6; 149)

...he [my father] thought it [Australia] was fair - us being so young, he'd get a future for us out here, and we came out. (Naomi, p4; 123)

...my uncle made an application to sponsor us, and then we went to Cyprus. We stayed there for about a month to get our visas and then from Cyprus we came here. And we came in August 1977, I was 10 years old. (Claudia, p1; 150)

...many people immigrated to Australia at that time - 1976. (Asmahan, p14; 116)

Settling-in

There was considerable hardship for the older women who came to Australia to settle. Their stories focus on economic and physical hardship, non-acceptance by the dominant community and feelings of sadness and loss.

Nouha came to Australia in 1956 when there were very few Muslim women. She attracted a lot of attention because of her different appearance. People were rude to her and showed no respect.

When somebody talk to me a rude word, I take it very hard... I just don't like it. And that's why I wasn't happy at all, because I left my country, because I left my family. (Nouha, p4; 142)

Young women did not always find the process of settling-in problem free.

I came here when I was ten years old and I had already grown there and all my childhood was there. And when I came here straight away I went into school and it's not the same. ...I think from when you're a baby till you're ten years old, it's good... I enjoyed it a lot there [in Lebanon]... I was happy. (Claudia, p10; 137)

At the beginning I had a bit of problems - they used to... call me wog... (Sarah, p13; 124)

Initially, Safie tended to accept the difficulties because of similar experiences when she left Lebanon to live in Syria with her husband. Nevertheless, the racism and rejection she felt was painful and oppressive.

... that's why I didn't find it strange when I came to Australia and heard lots of abuse and people keeping away from us because again I am a stranger here, they don't know me, so they are treating me like that. I can't blame them 100 per cent because I felt like that in my husband's country before I came here. (Safie, p14; 142)

The presence of family did not guarantee an easy settling-in period. Even though Nouha's husband had relatives here, she desperately missed her own kin and wanted to return.

I missed all my family and get homesick... I was crying all the time. (Nouha, p4; 132)

English language competency was important in feeling at home. Its absence made life very difficult.

Because I could speak the language, I didn't have any - like people coming from overseas these days, they find it very hard because they don't speak the language - like the English language. (Zekia, p2; 130)

I didn't know any English or anything... I walked up and down the street and I didn't know which house my house is... I start to cry... it's not like your village - no number there, everybody knows everybody. (Samia, p11; 158)

For those who went to suburbs where Arabic speaking communities had established themselves, settling-in was much easier. Naomi recalls that the tradition of neighbourliness continued for her mother.

It was really good because Mum would be able to... go next door to a friend's, to the neighbour, and have a coffee and they'd converse about family or life or whatever, and she'd feel really comfortable. (Naomi, p18; 119)

Accommodation

At first, families helped each other with housing. This was often physically and emotionally difficult as conditions were cramped and clashes with relatives, inevitable. Nevertheless, this meant a start in the new country. Finding a job and renting their own dwelling usually followed.

When I came to Australia we lived with my uncle. He had a ...granny flat... but it was just sort of a room - it was one room, and a kitchen... And we used to have beds just next to each other when we first came out. (Claudia, p12; 130)

Ihsan lived with her sister and brother-in-law. Her sibling endured an unhappy marriage where there was domestic violence and emotional abuse. This was so alien as she had grown up in a happy household where her parents loved and respected each other.

It wasn't that happy house, my sister, you know. She had a very bad husband. (Ihsan, p13; 131)

Some families only needed minimal assistance and were soon in their own accommodation.

When we first came, we lived with the people that sponsored us for a month... they helped us to get around and for Dad to know what to do and things like that, and we rented a place in Campsie... (Naomi, p4; 151)

Hard work

Life in these early years was dominated by hard work as the migrants tried to establish themselves and their families. For the women, this often meant working long hours both inside and outside the home. It also meant learning new skills.

All the time I take them [the children] by myself and bring them [back from school] - go home, do washing, cooking for them, come back to the shop, work in the shop. (Nouha, p11; 113)

I used to work very, very hard really. ... We used to have... servants in the other house [in Lebanon] and used to go to work and come home. Everything is ready - nice and tidy... when I came over here I found it a bit hard at the beginning to start the house - do all the cooking, all the washing, all the ironing... (Zekia, p16; 119)³

Very, very hard years... I worked really hard and didn't buy anything - nothing. (Waad, p7; 111)

Children also helped their parents by working in their businesses.

³ When I first asked this question, Zekia responded that she did not work in Australia. When I probed about working in the domestic sphere, this was the response. Later in the interview she told me how she helped in the family's bakery as well as working at home. It is interesting how she perceived the notion of work and initially denied her enormous contribution at home.

... my Dad would go every day to work... on Saturdays and Sundays we'd help him if we didn't have anything. ...I would stay there all day by myself... taking care of the shop and customers and stuff like that... (Faiza, p11; 142)

The need to support family back in Lebanon further exacerbated the hardship that many experienced.

...I used to work and send some money for my parents to help, because even my father's business is bombed too. (Ihsan, p2; 128)

GROWING UP IN A NEW LAND: THE YOUNGER WOMEN

Unlike the younger Greek women who spent most of their childhood in Australia, the Arabic stories do not focus on growing up in the new country. Maintaining connections with Lebanon is the most significant theme to come out of these women's reflections of childhood in Australia.⁴ This continues to fuel their strong identification with Lebanon and the desire to return.

Other people's memories and experiences of Lebanon become their own and it is difficult to distinguish the reality of experience from the narratives.

Sometimes I think they have a point because I've never been to Lebanon - like I love it, because of the way people talk about [it] and I know it's my country and I know my family are all from Lebanon and the way they talk

⁴ Yasmin recalls being conscious of her difference as a child, which was reinforced by experiences of racism. There was embarrassment about teachers' inability to pronounce her name.

You used to die at school and think why haven't I got a name like Betty Taylor, because they'd always stop at you in the roll... sometimes it would be really traumatic... (Yasmin, p14; 149)

She learnt, early on, to deal with this and other discriminatory behaviour.

[We] learnt to be very diplomatic... (Yasmin, p3; 127)

about it and how they all like to go back if the war wasn't there... it just feels normal... (Faiza, p1; 122)

...having Mum and Dad talk about it all the time, I mean being five years old you don't really remember, but when they talk about it, you think that you remember, you know you get a feeling, you think, "Oh hang on, yeah, I remember that person and I did that", but you don't really, you know. (Naomi, p2; 127)

The notion of one day returning was something that the younger women recall from their childhood years. Return never became a reality for Faiza, but it was very close. The family house had been sold and her father purchased a business and residence in Lebanon, which was never occupied.

*...the house in Bankstown, we loved that house, but my father sold that one... and he took some money with him overseas to buy a house over there. **In Lebanon?** Yes, he bought a house and he bought a shop, you know under the house, like that's what they are over there - houses and a shop... He did that and everything, when he came back to take us all back, there was a bomb in the Beirut airport... and then my Mum said, "No, I am not going".* (Faiza, p9; 15)

For Naomi, return at the end of her schooling did happen. It was her intention to stay permanently.

We went and I got married - I met the right guy - well I thought I did anyway. And I got married over there - I remained there for ten months... (Naomi, p5; 143)

She enticed her parents to move back, but the reality was not the dream that she had envisaged.

...we went on the basis thinking that if... Mum and Dad liked... what it was like there, they'd... stay - actually build a home there and stay. But Dad hadn't been to his country, you could say for what nearly 25 years. I mean

even though he used to go for holidays, it's not like the same when you're living there. I mean because you go there on a holiday and everybody treats you as a guest. It's not like living there where you have to work... And he hated it. He didn't like it one bit. (Naomi, p6; 17)

Nevertheless, the return visit for Naomi greatly enhanced feelings of pride in her heritage and forged a much stronger link with her culture. Before the trip, she had not wanted to listen to her mother's Arabic music, but she came back to Australia with lots of tapes and now listens to nothing else.

MEANINGS OF HOME

I will now turn to the meanings of home that emerged from the interviews with the Arabic women. As with the Greek women, the centrality of family, cultural continuation and being in control of the physical dwelling emerged as the most important themes. Of course, there are differences in the way that these issues are expressed. The dominance of religion in the Muslim women's lives is another central force, and is particularly interesting in that its physical focus is the dwelling.

Home as family

The centrality of family to their meaning of home was established in the women's childhood. There are many aspects of relationships and togetherness that are played out within the dwelling and neighbourhood.

And this home, of course, brings all the family together... my husband and me and my children. We can talk [about] anything, we can cook anything we like and eat anything we like... (Nouha, p18; 152)

...they've always been around me... I'm always used to being around families... I don't know what I'll do without my family... Always been family, family all the time... (Claudia, p11; 151)

... in Lebanese culture families come first... (Claudia, p15; 141)

[Home] was like the centre of activity... you went away and you came back. ... you had lots of people visit and come over at different times, so things really revolved around that house. (Yasmin, p19; 151)

Mothers and daughters

Close relationships between mother and daughter are important to many of the women. Not only does this strengthen their bonds within the family, it helps with the settling-in process. When children are the only family in Australia, the intensity of the relationship is even greater.

...maybe two days I didn't see them, I miss them... I don't have any family here except my children. (Nouha, p30; 126)

...if I don't see my Mum every day I probably die - I'm used to her... she's not just a mother, she's a friend, we go out, we do things together, we go shopping together... my Mum's young - she's not old, she's not lazy, she's active, she's got her own car, we go out... it's just like I think I should see her every day. As if I owe her something... she's good to me and everything and sometimes she does my cooking... she'd think of me and she'd put a bowl for me, one of those containers and I bring that home instead of cooking... That's about twice a week or sometimes we go and eat over at her place... my parents' place. (Faiza, p13; 15)

...they [my parents] live just in the next [suburb] - in Yagoona and if I don't see my Mum every day, I go crazy. (Naomi, p13; 149)

Me, my sister, every day we... visit my mother... she doesn't ask us to come and visit her, but it's just a feeling from us that we must go and see my mother every day. (Asmahan, p32; 125)

Relationships within the dwelling

The women take the major responsibility for organising and running the domestic environment. Husbands and children are asked to assist and in many of the younger women's households, they are taking on responsibility for some tasks. Even though there is little change in the older women's homes, they are questioning traditional practices and urging their children to adopt a more equitable division of housework.⁵

...whatever I want he helps me with. If I ask him to do something he will. You know he's not that type of man, and he helps me a lot with my daughter. (Claudia, p19; 137)

It wasn't in the way of thinking that... "I'm home, I have to cook, I have to clean". No, he helped me quite a lot. But just his way of thinking separated us. He wanted to be very domineering... man over the woman sort of thing. (Naomi, p25; 132)

...we go shopping together sometimes... (Faiza, p30; 142)

In some cases, there can be a reluctance to let go of this work. These are valued skills that belong to the women.⁶

⁵ Her mother's expectation that women looked after men was met with defiance and refusal by Yasmin.

...when it was just him and I living here with my Mum, and he was 25, she would say to me, "Go and fix your brother's bed and stuff". And I'm saying no way. He's old enough to fix it up, you know, I'm not going to go cleaning up after him. So it was still that thing that you have to look after men. (Yasmin, p10; 139)

⁶ I am aware that the reluctance to let go of domestic work is not only about ownership of skills. Power plays an important role here, as does learned "helplessness" when men or other household members do not want to take on these chores.

I do the washing... I don't like anyone to touch the washing - I like to do it myself. Cooking too... very fussy with cooking - I don't like anyone to do. Sometimes if someone help me - I get big problem... (Nouha, p31; 149)

...he wouldn't know how to clean house - I wouldn't trust him with cleaning the house... And I don't like him to use my kitchen to cook, because he makes mess everywhere. (Asmahan, p48; 132)⁷

...if I want he can help me clean, but I don't like anybody helping me clean. I like to do my own cleaning... (Claudia, p19; 143)

I usually have the plan from the day before. ...start with my washing and then while the washing is done, I start with my cooking - get the food ready prepared - the item I want to cook for the day, and then send the children to school... (Zekia, p17; 145)

I don't think of it as a chore... I think of it as a something I like to do. I like to cook, I like to make cakes, I like to make biscuits... make something new... (Faiza, p30; 119)

It is Safie's responsibility to organise the domestic chores. The older daughters help, sometimes in response to their mother's request, but they have individual responsibilities in relation to their own rooms. Her husband will buy food if requested, but it is Safie's duty to organise what is to be purchased and when it will be needed.

...even if I send [my husband] he will do the meat for me which I tell him what I need, he will do the grocery for me... but I tell him what I need, but again it's my responsibility. (Safie, p41; 17)

⁷ Asmahan acknowledges here that she would not be able to do her husband's heavy work in the family's fruit and vegetable shop.

Ihsan does all the cooking, cleaning and washing. She used to do the shopping too but now her husband is retired, he does this. Sometimes her sons help, but they cannot do a great deal.

...after my husband stopped work... he do the shopping, but all the other work I do it. Sometimes my eldest son and the second one, they help me for a bit... (Ihsan, p22; 117)

Decision making about the house is frequently shared, although the extent and degree varies.

No, we help each other, you know, together. We discuss everything together. (Nouha, p31; 111)

...it's shareable but mainly mine because I don't know, but I think woman... has a better taste in setting up things... He might find it more interesting for him to put up the tape, the video tape in order. So I like things to be in order, I have to tell him, this need to be done and that need to be done... (Safie, p41; 135)

This is not always the case with bill paying. In some cases, it is related to convenience in terms of who actually pays the account.

...if I'm going to the bank today, I'll pay the electricity. If he is going to the post office he'll pay the telephone ...our income, it's gone to one budget to cover everything, mine and his and of course I'll take what I need, he takes what he needs and the others go in between food, clothes, rent, stuff like that, so this is shareable between me and him. (Safie, p41; 116)

...me and my husband go pay them... (Faiza, p30; 155)

Now that Nouha's husband is retired, he looks after the bill paying.

He does that [bill paying], yeah specially before when he was at work I used to do that, but now because he's home and he's very active... (Nouha, p31; 128)

Ihsan has never been interested in finances. Her husband is solely responsible.

About money, I can't think about it. I leave everything for him. I don't like money... I don't like to think about it. (Ihsan, p23; 131)

Challenging the stereotype of the dominated Muslim woman, Safie points out the difference between cultural and religious interpretations of the Muslim scriptures. As an educated and religious woman, she maintains that the Qur'an⁸ does not advocate women's subordination to men.⁹

Our prophet, he used to help his wife vacuuming and sweeping the floor... (Safie, p28; 140)

Islam never ever forced a woman to do exactly what the man say... she's a human being, he's a human being... [God asks men] to dress up reasonably, to not show his knee, he has to cover all this part from another man or another woman. So [the man] has his part to act in it too... so I never ever took my religion as a disadvantage, it is an advantage for me, that's what I am following in my life. It's never ever stopped me from doing anything. (Safie, p29; 15)

⁸ Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the word of God revealed to Muhammad in the early seventeenth century. It is the "ultimate source of every Muslim's faith and practice" (Kazi and Ayan, 1993: 2). My spelling of the word "Qur'an" is taken from Jones, 1993.

⁹ Patriarchal values still dominate in some households. Sarah, a Christian woman, sees her husband's contribution as much more worthy than her own.

I don't do anything. I'm just a housewife. He works, he gets the money. (Sarah, p25; 139)

Knowing the strength of her religious commitment, Safie's husband trusts her completely. He is happy for her to do as she wishes. She is able to go out at night; she is able to study.

Geographic proximity

Having family close by is absolutely vital. Even for those women who still yearn for the lost homeland, there would be no point in going back without their children.

I would... if it is safe. If my family was here [in Australia] I wouldn't. But if my family was there [in Lebanon] I would. (Claudia, p10; 161)

... I feel very, very, very much settled here in Australia. I like to go home, but for visit - because all my children here, they grow up, they're getting married... (Nouha, p12; 147)

... I have to be with my kids... This community is their community, not any more in Lebanon. (Ihsan, p4; 138)

Geographic proximity to relatives is valued as it enables families to see each other often.

...we always see each other... we have dinner there or lunch or whatever. ...we go every Sunday we have dinner there... (Claudia, p12; 19)

...they [my daughters] come to see me maybe twice a week, maybe three times a week, but they talk to me every day on the phone. And if they didn't, I talk to them on the phone. (Nouha, p30; 135)

...my Mum's cousin... the house just there next to the flats... I always go down and have a cup of coffee or something. You know, if I need something I ask her, like if she needs something she asks me for it. (Faiza, p18; 131)

...I've got lots of family here, my father's family... my husband's family... we usually go on weekends... My sister... she comes from work and she makes all this food...and she calls us [to] come over... (Faiza, p31; 129)

Responsibility to one's family

Because of the centrality of family in their lives, there is a strong sense of responsibility towards relatives. This takes a variety of forms. For those who still have family living in Lebanon, money is sent back to support them. Even in Australia, families provide financial assistance if it is required.

...I used to work and send some money for my parents to help, because even my father's business is bombed too. (Ihsan, p2; 128)

Sometimes my son works, sometimes he give us something. (Nouha, p14; 134)

The obligation to live close to the extended family may be put before housing affordability.

I'm half way sort of thing. ... if it was up to me I would have lived... sort of Liverpool... Because I was thinking of our financial... background. But then my husband was thinking about the family... I mean I was also thinking about the family, but I was also thinking more about [the financial situation]... (Claudia, p15; 149)

Looking after older parents is another area where family loyalty can be demonstrated.

If the need arises I will. Even also my parents-in-law. I don't mind having them later on... (Claudia, p24; 158)

I'm lucky, my children grow and they help me to buy the house...all my kids every week... give me money to live... (Samia, p21; 159)

Childcare

The women use different childcare options. Looking after youngsters themselves or having close family members mind children is preferred, but if this is impossible, culturally sensitive care is sought out.

I wish that I don't need to work so that I can stay with them, give them more time by looking after them, sharing with them every minute they are spending at home... (Safie, p8; 112)

I won't put her with any Australian, I need an Arabic speaking woman, I don't care what religion she is... as long as she does speak Arabic and she's from Lebanon. I need someone who can understand my culture so they can practise [it] with my daughter. (Safie, p24; 114)

Some of the younger women depend on their mothers for childcare, although they recognise that this can be difficult.

I see her every day still in the morning, because she takes care of my daughter... (Claudia, p12; 116)

...Mum can't look after the kids five days a week. I mean she's got her own life to live too. She can't be just tied down for my kids. (Naomi, p24; 117)

I don't think my Mum can take care of him because he's very hard with people. When I leave him at my Mum's right, he's there for about two hours crying... (Faiza, p19; 145)

The loss of family

The loss of family is keenly felt on returning to Lebanon for the first time and experiencing the warmth of the extended family. This is particularly so for the younger women who grew up in Australia.

Naomi went to Lebanon at the end of her schooling and was enthralled with her new-found relatives.

...that's what made me bond more because when I was over there, it was really exciting having everybody around... .. going from one auntie's place to another auntie's place, or to an uncle's place, or to a cousin's place and meeting their kids, and it was really great. It was really wonderful. (Naomi, p13; 127)

Back in Australia, the loss of an extended family is very hard at times.

I can see my Mum and Dad really hurt on Christmas or New Year or Easter or any time. ...if we're sitting down, we're just a small family having lunch. I know Mum would be thinking about her mother and my Dad would be thinking about his family. And you know you hurt. ...I'm sure I'd be hurt if I was so far away from my parents. (Naomi, p13; 140)

The process of migration has resulted in the loss of family in other less obvious ways. Safie must undertake tertiary study to get her qualifications recognised in Australia. She feels torn because the need to work takes her away from spending time with her children. Had she remained in Lebanon this would not have been necessary. Not having professional recognition compounds in further loss for the whole family.

Yasmin mourns the loss of extended family living.

...the extended family is really valuable, and that's what we lose in this society in Australia, and that isolates lots of people, especially women. (Yasmin, p54; 19)

Family gatherings

Family gatherings are an important component of the women's narratives of home. Regular times are set aside to share meals and be together in each other's houses. Sometimes these celebrations are linked with religious festivals. Different family members contribute in a variety of ways.

...each Sunday we do invite them to come over. So we do have his brother, mother, sister and kids and brother and kids, which we have a big backyard so we can do bar-be-que and have things together. And of course cleaning up afterwards it's our responsibility together, not me and him, even the visitors we work all together to make everything back in order. (Safie, p42; 18)

...sometimes my family... but his parents mainly come down... And we have lunch here on Sunday... (Claudia, p21; 14)

...on the first day of any feast we celebrate, I always ask my children to come. There I give them the priority. We gather as a family, and we all sit here... in the dining room, we open it, and I make so many kinds of food... (Zekia, p21; 15)

Home as cultural continuation*Language*

The link between language and the continuation of culture and religion is recognised by many of these women. Passing on Arabic to children is a priority in some homes. In fact, Safie and Asmahan do not permit English to be spoken at all.

That's why I'm trying to keep my home... only Arabic... they can speak English with me in the car because I might have others which don't like hearing Arabic or in the shopping centre we don't speak Arabic, but since we

are in [the house] it's a rule, no more English, Arabic, because that's the only way to keep our culture. (Safie, p32; 17)

I know they practise English outside very well. I want them to speak Arabic very well too. I... always tell them, "Talk in Arabic at home, outside you can talk English." (Asmahan, p53; 120)

Her regrets about not persevering with Arabic school motivate Naomi to teach her children the language.

I speak perfect Arabic. I don't know how to read and write though. I regret it, I wish I'd learnt. Mum and Dad did send us to [Arabic] school every Saturday... and at that time we said, "Oh this is too difficult". So we used to just go to please Mum and Dad... and now I regret it because I'd like to now pick up a newspaper and be able to read and write... to be able to read something... to get a letter from overseas or... write a letter to my grandmother... (Naomi, p8; 148)

***So do you want the children to learn Arabic?** Yes, yes... I'd love that... I keep talking to them and trying to tell them, and maybe when they start understanding that I regret it - not being able to... also for the future. I mean if I had that now, maybe in my job I'd be at a higher level - interpreter... with two languages. So I'd encourage them, yes very much. (Naomi, p9; 124)*

Religious practice

Religion plays a key role in the Muslim women's stories.¹⁰ Throughout her interview, Safie refers to the importance of God in her life by the expression, "Thanks God, with His help we are coping". The practice of her religion is woven into the fabric of everyday life, inside and outside the home.

¹⁰ This is not to say that the Christian women do not value their faith, as they attend church, celebrate major religious festivals and display pictures of Christ and the Virgin Mary in their houses. The interviews with Muslim women focus specifically on religion, which is why I am discussing it here.

...every one of us prays, every one of us do the right things because we are not waiting for award in this day, we are waiting for the award from God later on, so if we are being truthful, faithfully, and sincerely working or communicating with others, not because of any specific reason because we want to do it for God, He created us and He ask us to be a good human being, so we are, so we can get a reward later on. (Safie, p31; 155)

For women, the practice of Islam is centred in the domestic sphere, where they are able to pray and instruct their children. Attendance at the Mosque is only a requirement for Muslim men.

A woman doesn't really need to go to the mosque to pray because we pray at home ... we pray five times a day... I don't need to go the mosque... you can do it at home (Faiza, p26; 147)

***Do you go to the mosque in Lakemba?** Yes I do, but not so often because it's not for women, mainly for men. (Safie, p36; 152)*

I don't go much no. For women it's not really necessary for every woman to go... we can practice at home. Because we find it much easier for us and feel more at ease at home... (Zekia, p4; 137)¹¹

I can pray in my house... (Nouha, p19; 119)

As a young Muslim woman, Faiza's religion is very important to her. It is something that carries her from childhood into adulthood. She tells me about the major tenets of her faith, which she was taught as a child.

I think that's the most important thing in my life... I think there's so many religions and everyone's brought up differently and everyone knows their religion. Like since I was young I remember... we have to believe in God...

¹¹ During my visit to Zekia's house, she showed me how she prayed in the front hallway of her house, putting on a special outer garment and placing her prayer mat on the floor, facing in the direction of Mecca. She also went into considerable detail about the requirements for prayer and at what times a Muslim is directed to pray.

we have to pray to God to thank Him for the day and we have to fast to think of the poor people. We have to give money out to people who needs it and then once a lifetime you should go to the Hajj¹²... So we plan it, you know, well that's too soon for me now - I wish I could go now but I'm not really ready for it now. People get ready for it when they think it's time for them to go. (Faiza, p4; 113)

The dwelling is decorated in ways that invoke the women's religion. In Muslim homes I saw special verses from the Qur'an, framed and hanging in formal living rooms.

That [framed verse] means we believe only [in] Allah - only one God, and Muhammad is the messenger. We have to say that, to believe that and to say it. (Nouha, p21; 15)

Every Muslim home has a Qur'an kept in a special place. This physical presence reinforces the centrality of religion in the Muslim household.

The first thing you get into the house is a Qur'an... the reason is to bless the house and keep it happy... and safe. (Fatima, p40; 161)

Sometimes the Qur'an is displayed quite ornately, as the following photograph of Asmahan's formal living room shows.

¹² The Hajj is an annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Subject to physical fitness and financial ability, it is obligatory for every Muslim to make this journey at least once in his or her lifetime (Kazi and Ayan, 1993: 5).



Cooking and eating

The traditional cooking skills are still practised by the women, although the younger generation has less time to perfect intricate recipes. I was offered many delicious dishes to try during the course of my interviews. Nouha had prepared special sweets for the end of Ramadan¹³, Fatima served fruits and coffee that are offered to guests and Zekia insisted I stay for a traditional Arabic lunch.

You like to try that food? ...That's what you call a flour and the other one semolina... And we make that sweet especially for... our festival after Ramadan... (Nouha, p2; 154)

¹³ Ramadan is a month of fasting from dawn to sunset, which allows Muslims to focus on spirituality. The end of Ramadan is celebrated by a special feast (called Eid al-Fitr) where traditional foods are served (Kazi and Ayan, 1993: 5-6).

Ihsan finds that cooking is onerous because of the large numbers for which she has to prepare. She cooks both Lebanese and Australian food, bridging the two cultures.

And the Lebanese food takes more time than the Australian... I make the Australian and the Lebanese... [my children] born here and they like this kind of food. (Ihsan, p22; 133)

Special rituals are followed when visitors call. It is vital to make them feel comfortable and welcomed. Fruit, nuts and coffee are traditionally served.

...when we have a guest, we tend to overdo it... We think we have to serve them everything in the house. It's the way we've been brought up, and that's the way our parents have been brought up. (Naomi, p29; 119)

...we have a lot of visitors... We talk, I bought some Coke or just a drink... or some tea and some biscuits or some fruit... (Faiza, p31; 18)

We only offer drink and the sweet and coffee... (Zekia, p21; 129)

The Arabic tradition of eating the main meal at lunch time is continued in some homes today. Safie leaves a prepared meal for the children to eat when they arrive home from school. Asmahan serves lunch when her family return mid-afternoon.

...they [my children] do have lunch but mainly it's fruit or something just to keep them going till they come back here. They have their proper lunch, they have their dessert, at 4.00 then they can stay till 8.00pm to have dinner... a sandwich, a cup of milk and then off to bed. That's what they follow in our culture. (Safie, p27; 149)

The kids have their lunch at 3.30... (Asmahan, p36; 152)

Particular food smells characterise the Arabic house.

And you can too tell its a Lebanese house too because of the food smell {laughter}... (Nouha, p21; 136)

For Safie, the home has a unique smell; an aroma that is evocative of "being at home"; a scent that is intimate and special.

...a specific smell actually, it will let you feel that this specific place have this specific memory... if you're going to take a deep breath you will feel something special about the place... (Safie, p40; 122)

Zekia's kitchen, illustrated below, is the central point in her house. Her domestic skills extend to bottling olives and drying herbs she grows.





Traditional dress

Muslim women traditionally wear the hijab.¹⁴ This custom has been brought to Australia. With the exception of two women, all the Muslims interviewed wore a scarf. This is a very visible way of denoting difference.

[Wearing the hijab] does cause you a lot of problems in a country like this, because once they see you wearing a scarf, they sort of label you... (Fatima, p44; 162)

From a western perspective, the hijab can be seen as oppressive. However, for some Muslim women it "liberates them because it hides their bodies from the stares of men and frees them from the dictates of fashion" (Jones, 1993: 118). It is also argued that the hijab facilitates the Qur'an's direction for equality, but not sameness, between men and women.

... I will show them that there is no difference between boys and girls. We are all human beings, we have to share our life, our responsibilities, so I think that all this is an advantage in my religion... if God asks me to put on the hijab or to cover myself when I am ready for it - why not? it's only for my protection, I can do anything else, I'm not a dummy if I'm wearing a scarf on my head... (Safie, p31; 17)

Yes, I wear the scarf. ...me and my daughter and my daughter-in-law, but not the other daughter... the one in school. She found it bit hard to wear it... And we don't force our children to do it. (Zekia, p4; 129)

Faiza does not wear the hijab as yet. For her it is a case of having to be ready to take on such a commitment. Her father has encouraged her to wear the scarf but has never insisted.

¹⁴ There are different forms of hijab, including the more moderate style commonly worn in Australia (Jones, 1993: 11). A long, loose dress ensures that the female body is covered, including the legs and arms. A scarf or veil is worn over the head, only partially obscuring the face from view.

That's the five things you need to do and you must have a scarf on your head, which I don't have yet, but hopefully I will one day. (Faiza, p4; 136)

Fatima's decision not to wear a scarf, even though she is a Muslim, is not a rejection of her faith. In fact, an Islamic scholar has disputed the religious merit of the hijab (Anon, 1993).

...as a Muslim woman, you need to cover most of your body, but that's not the main issue. The main thing is your faith, which is inside. (Fatima, p44; 153)

The immediate visibility of their religious affiliation has rendered Muslim women vulnerable to public verbal abuse. Safie's experience illustrates this forcefully.

...when I was going to the cashier [at the supermarket] I heard a gentlemen who was working there... telling a colleague of his, "Oh man she gave me a shit". So I look at him in a very strange look to see if he is talking about me. So he said to his friend, "Don't worry about her, she doesn't understand what we are saying".believe me I was going to cry because I understand what he was saying but I can't answer him back. And I swear to you that I didn't ask him for any assistance because I knew what I want, I went and I get what I want, it was a few dishes I bought from that shop and I was going to pay for them. And I pay for them and before I left the shop with my little English I said, "Please ask your workers to behave themselves because they were rude". (Safie, p31; 124)

It was even more difficult for women who came here many years ago. The sight of a Muslim woman wearing the hijab was rare.

When I came here they told me nobody have a scarf and I take it off... (Waad, p10; 150)¹⁵

¹⁵ Waad did not wear her scarf for nine years. As more and more Muslim women wore the hijab, she felt empowered and comfortable about putting it on again.

Faiza comments that today there is greater acceptance of women wearing the veil. In putting the scarf on, a Muslim woman draws attention to herself, but established Arabic areas make it feel more comfortable for her to contemplate this move.

...when people first started putting the scarf on... on TV and on radio there was lots of teasing... swearing, pulling the scarf off... It still goes on now but I don't think as much as it used to a couple of years ago. ... now if I put it on, I think it's normal to me - I don't think anyone is going to go, oh look, because there is so many of them now... the school I used to go to - now half of it have got a scarf on - seriously... (Faiza, p5; 136)

Marriage

In talking about their meanings of home and the centrality of family, marriage customs were inevitably raised. Fatima goes into considerable detail about the need to marry within the culture and the problems that can arise in a society where many of the traditional family supports are not available.

A lot of the girls get married here to someone who is new, who just came for a visit, someone who wants to stay in Australia. That doesn't happen back home. Marriages are much better there... (Fatima, p11; 127)

Parents' preference to have their daughters marry at an early age to a partner that they frequently choose and of whom they must approve, is not supported by the dominant Anglo culture.

...usually in the Arabic society they prefer to girls to be married at a younger age - young. ...what I mean by young is maximum early twenties. (Fatima, p3; 156)¹⁶

¹⁶ It is interesting that Fatima goes on to reflect that this custom is changing in Lebanon.

Back home it's changed - the people who migrated here are still thinking of 20 years ago... (Fatima, p3, 111)

I mean it wasn't arranged in that sense but they encouraged it because they liked him. (Fatima, p9; 131)

For two of the younger women, this has resulted in the failure of their marriages, whereas this may not have been the outcome in Lebanon.

... if we were back home, this [separation] would have never happened. There would have been someone that stand up to him. But I think here - because we're here, so much freedom and he can just walk out not having to worry, whereas if we were back home, there'd be his parents or older people standing in the way and trying to solve things. But there isn't that sort of thing here. (Naomi, p26; 129)

The reality of their single status is not an easy one for these women.

They think, oh gosh, she's coping with everything. But I am weak - I am a human being after all... my ex husband... he was dying to see me struggling, not managing, and I wouldn't show it to anybody... So if I have any finance problems, I don't like to say it to [my parents]... I hardly have anybody to talk to... But I come home and I say it to myself - I stand over there on the balcony and I talk to God. (Fatima, p57; 154)

Culturally [divorce] is accepted and religiously it is accepted, but because I'm a divorced woman and in my 30s and I have two kids now, and being in Australia, if I still want to marry someone from the same culture, I don't have many chances. (Fatima, p53; 154)

Several of the older women had arranged marriages, but there was time for the family to get to know the prospective husband. Often the men who married into the family had been visiting for many years.

Safie makes it clear that arranged marriages are not forced - the young woman must give her consent.

...if it is arranged marriage, but not forced marriage, I have to agree and to know that he is the right person for me... (Safie, p12; 129)

She carefully considered the educational and financial attributes of her suitor before agreeing to the marriage.

Traditional values

It is the responsibility of parents to teach their children appropriate values with which to lead their lives. The women talk about ways in which they do this to ensure the continuation of their cultural heritage.

In my opinion to contribute to society or to community you have to keep your own [cultural values] and try to adjust to the community, not change because you might have heaps of things which are much better than others... (Safie, p17; 135)

Safie perceives hers as a typical Arabic home. Rules, grounded in her interpretation of the Qur'an, are central to every thing the family does.

...It's a way of life... (Safie, p26; 150)

Nouha instils the value of respect in her children.

We love and respect... I tell them [the children] to respect very much the people, to respect other people as others will respect you. (Nouha, p27; 14)

Ihsan's religion is a big factor in determining her responsibilities as a parent. She must teach her children the values of Islam in order for them to grow up into decent adults. This is even more imperative today compared with her childhood.

I can't see much kids going to the church or to the mosque... (Ihsan, p25; 150)

Two of the women plan to take their children back to Lebanon so that they can experience, first-hand, the Muslim way of life. There is constant tension in these homes because the dominant Anglo culture does not support their religious values.¹⁷ The only way to overcome this is to return. Living in Australia disempowers these women. They cannot control the outside forces that confront their children, enticing them to question traditional customs. Even television, within the private sphere, is a potentially sinister influence.

... I'm trying to keep some of my culture and that's another aim of mine going overseas to let the kids feel it, to let them feel what the culture's like in our country... (Safie, p11; 132)

That's why I'm really finding it very hard with my daughter because she is catching things from all other places. (Safie, p39; 112)

I'm thinking of going back for our children, because I want them to be exactly like us in our habits... like the festivals we have, to practise them. To hear the examples for prayers... (Asmahan, p31; 112)

As a Christian, Claudia acknowledges the differences across a generation and the globe, but believes that she can bring her daughter up with the same values and in the same way as her mother did.

I have the values - well just the way my Mum used to bring me up, I'm bringing my daughter up. (Claudia, p11; 123)

¹⁷ Abraham (1993) reports that other ethnic groups find it difficult to keep all aspects of their religion in a nominally Christian, but essentially secular, Australia.

Appropriation of traditional values continues her sense of home and reinforces her connectedness to her own childhood.

Well I remember when I was young, my Mum used to always teach us how to pray... she used to teach us at home... (Claudia, p11; 129)

Although many of the women are questioning their traditional role as wives and mothers, they continue to acknowledge the value of domestic skills and teach their children, both boys and girls.

I want them to be... good ladies to look after house. Even now my daughter said, "Oh thanks to Mum, she teach me everything... the right way". (Nouha, p32; 113)

I want them to do their own work, for her to do her own work. I'm bringing her up this way. Not like... some of the Lebanese. They say, "They're boys, not working. Girls should work". No, I don't like that. No. (Ihsan, p19; 135)

Education

Religious schools play a key role in maintaining appropriate values. Safie contrasts her older children's experiences of education in Australian schools with one daughter who attends a Muslim school. She believes that the former emphasises the child's freedom and devalues the parent's role in leadership and direction. This is a further reason for wanting to return to Lebanon.

...Muslim school, which is giving them Islamic, a religious session plus the English curriculum, they start half hour earlier to have the religious instruction early in the morning and then the normal curriculum. So I'm quite happy with her... with her program and her way of learning because she's doing quite well... (Safie, p26; 126)

Faiza is concerned about her son receiving instruction that reinforces the values she holds.

...that's why I would like to send my son to a Muslim school because... if I'm not there all the time to remind him - there's a school that can remind him. In the school they're teaching them how to pray, how to fast... instead of reading stories about Hamlet or whatever - they're reading something about the messengers or Moses... About Jesus. (Faiza, p44; 134)

Claudia, a Christian, reflects on where she might send her daughter to be educated. There is the local Catholic school which will teach appropriate religious values. Another option is a private school at Bankstown where English and Arabic are taught. However, this is expensive and will depend on their financial situation.

Hospitality and valuing the family

Visitors to the household are very important. The Muslim religion directs that guests must be attended to even if they arrive unannounced.

...that's hospitality which is really important in our religion too. (Safie, p34; 142)

...we've had so much visitors. I mean we've been opening the door, answering phones, opening the door. We've had so many visitors. (Faiza, p21; 11)

...it was like a restaurant my house, always. (Samia, p21; 150)

Spontaneous visits put a lot of pressure on these Muslim women to attend to their guests and meet the needs of their children. It is particularly important that school work is not interrupted. The women have adopted various techniques to honour the

obligation that they have to the visitor, while insuring that their children are being nurtured.

So any time you would ask to come over I would say you're more than welcome, if I don't have any appointment of course... even if is daytime for me to be with them [the children], I will send them to do their work by themselves and I will be with the visitor... (Safie, p34; 137)

Home as physical dwelling

The house and garden

The house with its private garden is the most preferred dwelling form. Units or flats are rarely seen as a desirable long term accommodation option. There is insufficient space for large families that require areas for regular entertaining and children's play. Units per se, are not necessarily frowned upon, as many women lived in this type of dwelling in Lebanon. It is unit living in Australia that causes problems. Flats in Lebanon are larger¹⁸ and there is a strong sense of communality and neighbourliness that they have not found in Australia.

...it was a good relationship between neighbourhood [in Lebanon]. Like if I did feel that there is something wrong... I could just scream a bit or make my voice a bit higher... and I'll find that my next door neighbour just knocking on my door... because she thought I might be asking for some help. (Safie, p16, 155)

...most [people] - 99 per cent lives in a unit. But it's big units. And very hard to find anyone, you know, fight with other... (Nouha, p25; 138)

¹⁸ The women informed me that units have more rooms, including formal and informal spaces, in excess of three bedrooms, plenty of storage and much more balcony space than similar housing in Australia.

... it's the same size as my house here, just imagine, totally different and much better design than the houses here, like my unit here it was terrible, it was very bad. (Safie, p16; 111)

Large family gatherings are particularly problematic in the confined space of a unit. Alternative outdoor venues were sometimes found, although this was risky in bad weather. Others put up with overcrowding. Even as women age and children leave home, it is still necessary to have adequate space to accommodate family celebrations.

...that is another thing we missed in the unit, we couldn't have them [the family], we used always to contact them and go and have bar-be-que... in a park, that's where we used to go to because I don't like bothering others... (Safie, p42; 131)

...you can't have bar-be-ques [in a unit], you can't invite your whole family. 'Cause we have... a big family... we invite everyone... when they used to come over, all the kids, oh my God, the lounge room was filled... (Claudia, p17; 136)

...[my son's] birthday, I couldn't have it here [in my flat]... because it's too small... once I had 18 people in this room... people were kind of sitting all over each other... (Faiza, p34; 116)

I want big family room, because when my daughter coming to me with her children, you know, that is not enough [space] for them. (Nouha, p17; 158)

I wouldn't like a small house, even if I'm in my sixties or seventies or eighties, I'd still like a big house, and the children come to me. I'd love the children to come. (Zekia, p25; 110)

There are examples in the women's stories of how they adapted to a physically confined space and made the best of unit living. In an attempt to create a pleasant

view from her unit, Safie did not discard the much loved plants in her possession. Rather, she put them in the front yard of the building for her enjoyment.

... I couldn't even accommodate my plants which I am in love with... so I used to use the front yard because my balcony is straight to the front yard... (Safie, p18; 119)

Initial difficulties with neighbours were sometimes overcome and a strong sense of community developed.

...we [my neighbour and I] used to have a very nice [time]... talks and laughs together. Like eating together and having the coffee together, we used to have a very nice time together after the three years. The first three years we had a very hard time. She did not like me at all. (Ihsan, p15; 125)

...but the whole flats and units here - they're really nice people you know, if you don't talk to them, they don't talk to you. They don't butt in or say there's too much noise. (Faiza, p26; 131)

When personal relationships are poor, there are many potential problems in close living. Use of clothes lines, car parking spaces, internal stairwells and communal gardens all has to be negotiated. This can be formidable when there are language difficulties and racist attitudes.

... 'specially when you've got to hang your washing on the lines... somebody steal it... Like my daughter-in-law... she put things outside and she goes early, you know, she goes to hang her washing and she finds all of them full. (Nouha, p25; 120)

The advantages of a house in Australia over a unit are many. There is a perception of more privacy, personal autonomy and greater freedom for children to play outdoors and make a noise without disturbing close neighbours.¹⁹

...people complained about us in that unit... because my kids are screaming and shouting... I know in a unit you've got to keep quiet and less noise, but I mean they're only kids too. You can't keep hitting them and telling them [to] stop. (Sarah, p20; 131)

A house... you can have... more privacy... I mean I have my own privacy here [in a flat] but, say I want to scream or something or put the music on really, really loud... I always think about my neighbours. But when you get a house... no one can tell you... they can tell the agent, "Look - she's making too much noise", but when I've got my house and my neighbours going to complain, I'll say, "I bought this house and I'm allowed to make as much noise as I want..." (Faiza, p33; 131)

...[in a flat] you've got a wall between you and your neighbour and you could hear noises and things like that, and you're not comfortable. If you want to shout... you can't...I didn't feel comfortable... (Claudia, p17; 112)

...when I had the baby... we found out it's going to be very squeezey so we need a bigger place for her to play and grow up in, that's why we move to a house... (Safie p1; 131)

A back yard provides an ideal supervised play space. Parents can control their children's activities more readily and ensure that they are not on the public streets, vulnerable to unsuitable influences.

...if you plan to have a family, you can't live in a flat, you want a house for your family. ... you can't bring up your children with four walls around

¹⁹ It is important to note that Fatima considered her unit to be private because of its location in a high rise building. There were no neighbours who could look in from adjoining flats.

...it's privacy too, because I can hardly see any neighbour from nearby. (Fatima, p23, 142)

them. You want them to go out and play and... do whatever they want to do. Be free, you know, in their own house. (Claudia, p18; 153)

Even though I've got a little backyard here.. I can let them go out and I'll be in here [inside the house] and I know it's safe. I don't have to worry about them. Because children need their freedom, need to yell, need to scream, need to play... (Naomi, p15; 161)

I have to... to live in a house for them to play. Because I don't like kids in the street. ...never, never let my kids go. Not even to the footpath. ...I seen many kids walking - like they are very young kids having the cigarettes and smoking... (Ihsan, p15; 153)

Personal safety is one advantage of a unit over a house.

I felt more secure actually, because my husband worked at night. ...you have the people around you... your neighbour or anybody, but when you're in a house... you tend to hear more noises than there really are. "What's that noise? What's this? What's that?" So I felt more secure in a unit when I was on my own. (Naomi, p20; 142)

I prefer a unit for security reasons... a lot of the houses around this area are old houses and I mean, you can break into them easily and that's happening a lot. (Fatima, p23; 151)

Preference for the new

A majority of the Arabic women prefer new to old dwellings. For Claudia, this preference is related to the personal autonomy that a new house offers.

But I've always liked to have a new house... then you can do whatever you want to do. I even like to build my own house... from scratch. You can do whatever you want. You can put this here, put that there... But when you buy another people's house, it's there... you can't really change anything. If you want to change, you have to have the money... if you buy land out

somewhere and you build a house, then you can decide exactly where you want everything. (Claudia, p25; 132)

A new house is linked with ease of cleaning.

New houses is of course nice and more comfortable and more easier for you to clean... nothing show up, everything is kind of put in cupboards... terrific kitchen... (Nouha, p28; 146)

While Safie acknowledges that a new house does provide opportunities for having a personally appropriate design, she enjoys the feeling of being in an old house.

...so if I can find what I need in an old house, I prefer to have an old house. At least I can feel that I've got something being valuable to others and I can keep this value for later. (Safie, p44; 19)

Although some of the women I interviewed have undertaken renovations, Asmahan was the only person living in a house that she and her husband had built.

I'm very pleased that the house is beautiful... I'm not used to live with an old cottage - old house with the old kitchen. (Asmahan, p25; 128)

The clean and tidy house

It is important for these Arabic women to have a clean and tidy house. This issue came up repeatedly in the interviews.

...we like to keep our houses tidy and clean. (Naomi, p29; 117)

I'm not too fussy about nice looking house... but I want it clean... (Nouha, p29; 157)

I think it's a clean flat... when you clean it and fix it up, no matter how ugly it looks, it will clean. It's not one of those dirty, dirty flats because when I looked around for another flat, God, I said this one's, I mean, a prince compared to the other ones. They were so filthy... mouldy all over the flat and the carpet was dirty. (Faiza, p21; 129)

...we've made it clean and fixed it here and there, and it's livable now... (Claudia, p16; 16)

Sarah will only make coffee in her new designer kitchen, ensuring it is kept pristine and for display.

...the laundry's outside. I've got a stove too in the laundry. So most of my cooking, my washing [is] in the laundry. I hardly use the kitchen inside the house... It's only when you make coffee, if you've got visitors, you just make coffee there, in the kitchen. But mainly my cooking, frying anything... always in the laundry... as you know when you're frying, it messes the whole thing. So I mean I've got a new kitchen to keep it nice and clean... (Sarah, p22; 161)

The women spend time organising their domestic work and valuing it as a highly skilled activity. In most cases, cleaning is not viewed as an onerous chore²⁰ but one which the women are motivated to do.

I clean the house every second day, but Monday is really major with the dust and vacuum... I wake up about 6.00 in the morning, finish 3.30... every day [I] clean the bathroom... Oh I feel very comfortable and happy. I like to smell the freshness in the house... I wash every day... like one day I go shopping and do all the outside work, and one day spend it at house cleaning.. (Asmahan, p35; 150)

²⁰ Asmahan reveals a somewhat ambivalent attitude to her housework. Even though she says, several times, that she loves her new, large house and does not find the cleaning overwhelming (she uses the word "comfortable" - p35; 122), at one point she confides,

I'm always moving - I'm not relaxed. That's why I told my husband I want to sell this house. I want just a small unit. I just want small unit so I can finish my housework and have more energy for them [my husband and children]. (Asmahan, p37; 133)

...you are doing the housework not because of somebody is forcing you do so, it's because you want to be clean and tidy. (Safie, p39; 151)

I just mainly do all the vacuuming on Saturday, which today I did - I cleaned. And the dishes and things I do them at night. ...and in the morning before I go to work... if there's something... that needs to be tidied, I tidy it up and then I go. (Claudia, p19; 158)

I get up in the morning - I hardly have any work because I'm always up to date ...do his bed, do my bed, vacuum if it needs, I always wipe the dust because there's so much dust these days. Then I go to the kitchen - I make breakfast or whatever, I have some laundry work... (Faiza, p17; 148)

Yes, yes, I enjoy, I enjoy doing it, really very, very much. And I enjoy every second in the house - being in the house... (Zekia, p18; 121)

Because of their ease of cleaning, ceramic floor tiles (illustrated on the next page) are preferred by some of the women.

...maybe tile it. Yeah, because carpet with kids is impossible to keep clean. (Naomi, p32; 117)



The garden

Their gardens are well used and loved spaces. In some cases, they are filled with reminders of what was left behind, both physically and olfactorily. Jasmine is a favourite, shown in the photograph over the page.

...you see outside the jasmine. It's Lebanese... sometimes I come [outside] early... I smell - oh take me very far away to my aunty's place. ...I feel something in my heart when I smell [the jasmine]. (Nouha, p21; 140)



Gardens filled with fruit and vegetables are common (see next photograph).

...we have parsley now, figs - Australian figs, but in our country the figs are beautiful. (Nouha, p21; 153)

...the few months we been here we haven't had to buy parsley and mint and tomatoes, any lettuce, carrot... eggplant, and zucchini... capsicum and cucumbers... and radish... (Safie, p44; 140)



Gardens can achieve a multiplicity of purposes.

He wants to grow all vegetables at the back, and all flowers and things on the side of the driveway and all out the front - trees and things like that, and flowers... I think a garden makes the house look nicer... (Claudia, p20; 143)

You can put like a little shrub in the yard, you can put little garden and you enjoy yourself, and I have pond fish down there... (Samia, p32; 145)

The garden is an important recreational area, especially for entertaining.

...if it was good weather, we have bar-be-ques like practically every Sunday in the afternoon. (Claudia, p20; 159)

Faiza's ideal house would have a large yard with plenty of room for relaxing.

I'd like it to be neat... just like a normal [yard]... flowers... I'd like a fountain... I'd like a really big fence... maybe brick down the bottom and then steel... and in the back yard I wouldn't like a pool because I'd have that in the house - maybe tennis court... or just the normal green grass. (Faiza, p34; 145)

A garden also provides opportunities to accommodate large family gatherings, although fine weather cannot be guaranteed.

Sometimes we will use the garden you know, but you can't trust the weather all the time. (Nouha, p30; 119)

Religious requirements and the physical form

For the Muslim women there are a variety of physical characteristics that the dwelling should have in order to accommodate religious requirements and practice.

Having a separate bathroom and toilet is important. It is also desirable to have a tap in the toilet to facilitate washing. Owning a dwelling means that this modification can be undertaken.

It's a bit hard because I'm just renting, but if it was mine for example, the first things I would do, I would introduce a water system to the loo... I'm really happy to find a house with a toilet separate than the bathroom... that's in our country too, we have the toilet separate than the bathroom... (Safie, p33; 126)

Zekia's toilet has a specially fitted tap. See photograph on the next page.



I'm happy this is a house, too, because it has two toilets. Bathroom and a toilet separate... (Nouha, p32; 124)

Physical separation of the living areas from bedrooms is favoured as this ensures children can continue their studies uninterrupted by the visitor who cannot be refused. Isolating these two parts of the dwelling is also related to keeping private and public spheres separate. Again, rented accommodation does not always provide for this need.

I prefer to have a corridor and a door so if... my kids want to study and I have visitors, I won't bother them. (Safie, p34; 118)

It is not imperative to have a special place to pray at home, but some of the women talked about having a favourite place. For example, Nouha prays in the living room, a space she particularly enjoys.

Religious buildings can inspire housing design. For Faiza, an ideal house would mirror the architecture and decor of the mosque.

It's [the mosque] so beautiful... if I ever want a house I want it in that shape... because it's so big and there's chandeliers and stuff like that... (Faiza, p27; 132)

Formal/informal areas

Many of the women talk about the usefulness of separate formal and informal rooms. They facilitate entertaining and ensure that there is always a tidy area away from children, available for the unexpected guest.

...when you have guests on special occasions, you... can send their kids and your kids into their rumpus room or TV and your guest room remains clean and tidy... and you have good furniture in there. (Naomi, p32; 134)

At Easter we used it when people came over... but we don't use it ourselves... I've always liked a formal lounge room because it's always been handy... you always think of having formal lounge room for anything, for bad times, good times, whatever... (Claudia, p26; 130)

Faiza dreams of a house that is essentially open, except for the formal areas.

I'd like the things I'm going to use everyday, like maybe the lounge room to sit down and watch TV, the spa or the kitchen. I like that all in front of me... all open... but that other salon I'd like it to be closed - but a really big, big, big one... I probably won't use it until... someone comes over... (Faiza, p32; 138)

Zekia's formal rooms are illustrated below.





The informal room below is a contrast.



Home as ownership

The women generally aspire to home ownership because of security of tenure. Owning represents power and autonomy to control the physical space. In a rented house, this is impossible. Owning is an important symbol of success.

...in your own house you can do anything you like, but in a rented house you can't... (Nouha, p20; 127)

...you've got a roof over your head... and it's the future. A house is your future... Especially if you got a family or if you plan to have a family... a big family... (Claudia, p18; 150)

I feel it's important to have... something for... all your hard work - not to throw it away... You can be proud of yourself. I feel proud. ... in two years my husband and I have settled down and we've got our own home. We

haven't paid it off... but we've got something to show for the hard work that we've done. So it's really important. (Naomi, p22; 111)

...when I came over to Australia, everybody say to me, "Oh the first thing you should do is to buy a house, even if you're in debt, buy it and that's your security". (Zekia, p23; 127)

...if you want to knock a little nail in the door... you have to ask the owner [if you rent]... And it was really frustrating then because... the owner lived just upstairs from us. And they were really, really fanatics about being clean. (Claudia, p17; 122)

Economic advantages

Ownership can result in considerable economic gain. It is also possible to make extra money from renting out spare rooms.

So you improve the place and sell it. So we sold it and made a little profit... (Zekia, p10; 128)

We used to rent one room from house - it was big house - old house but it was very, very good one. We were lucky when we get it and we used sometimes to rent two rooms, sometimes one room, to afford living and paying all bills. (Nouha, p7; 135)

Conversely, renting is expensive and there is nothing to show for the monetary outlay.

The only [bad] thing... \$200 weekly... and the week goes just like that. (Ihsan, p21; 122)

Borrowing money

Even though owning is the preferred option, for religious reasons there may be difficulties in attaining a dwelling. Muslims are forbidden to borrow money if it entails paying interest. For Safie, this means not being able to afford to purchase.

... I don't think I will be able to reach this stage, so I am happy with the way I am. (Safie, p22; 114)

For others it means saving very hard and borrowing money from friends, which they pay back.

...friends lent us some money... we didn't take money from bank because we have to pay interest... (Nouha, p14; 121)

A conscious decision can be made to go against religious teaching and borrow money from a lending institution.

Well I tell you religiously we shouldn't be in debt to buy... we shouldn't work with interest. But at the time when we came here...that's the only way we could work it. ...if we just pay rent, the rent will go away - you don't have anything left for you. But with the money you lend from the bank and if you pay the interest, still you have something left for you at the end. (Zekia, p23; 138)

Insecurity of renting

Renting is uncertain because of limited leases. This is particularly difficult for children whose schooling can be disrupted. Family and friendship networks can also be destroyed. This means uncertainty for the whole family.

...if I can afford, of course own, at least I would have a safe place for them [my children] for later on. (Safie, p44; 125)

...it's security for me and my husband and my daughter. ...I was living in a flat before, it's not yours you know... You can't do anything and any time now he [the owner] can kick you out... (Claudia, p18; 141)

For women with large families, renting is very difficult. Nouha admits to lying to real estate agents. Had she been honest, the house she desperately wanted would not have been hers.²¹

So I lie to them, said I have only three children. And they give me house... it wasn't good house, it was old, but never mind, you have to start. (Nouha, p11; 126)

Ihsan also found it very difficult to find adequate accommodation for her large family.

And I start looking for a house and it was very hard for me 'cause I've got five kids and the agent or the landlord, used to say, "No, too many people"... I had a very, very hard time to get this house... (Ihsan, p18; 18)

The other side of owning

Owning a house is not without its problems. This is especially so for women who are separated or divorced. Trying to meet mortgage payments on a single income can result in considerable hardship.

...I can't keep up with payments - it's really difficult on my own. And I also have a personal loan that I have to pay. And it's pretty hard to handle, so I've got it [the house] up for sale and I'm waiting to see what happens. (Naomi, p23; 19)

²¹ This is an issue facing many large Arabic households. As a director of a community housing group, I experienced situations where families came to us as their last resort. They had been rejected by the private sector and found it impossible to rent. In some cases, this was also about racism.

Even though ownership is important, Naomi doubts that it will be achievable again given the heavy financial burden.

... I won't be able to afford to buy another place now even if it does get sold, because I've got so much to pay off. ...I know I won't have anything left over when I sell the house. I've got so much debt. (Naomi, p23; 115)

For Naomi, bad memories fill her current house, further reinforcing her desire to sell.

...plus it's really got bad memories of everything... I hate coming in here believe it or not. You know when I leave the home I feel really great and relaxed and when I come home I get all tensed up... maybe because of what's happened between me and my husband... (Naomi, p23; 122)

Although owning is out of the question for Fatima, she has made the decision to live independently with her children. As a divorced woman, her parents would prefer that she lives with them, but for Fatima, this would not be home.

...it's my place... I would have loved... to buy it - to have my own place, to own it, but because financially it was difficult for me to do, and still now, I still find that I need a big deposit to buy a place. But even though it's rented, I still feel that it's - that I have established it. Whatever I have, I have made it - I have bought what I have... it's my place. When I invite somebody, I know that I am inviting them to my place and not to my mother's. ...I'm not giving extra work to my parents or to put up with this and that. It's a different feeling. (Fatima, p21; 151)

Home as suburb*Neighbourliness*

Neighbours are an important component of Arabic life.

We feel comfortable together - Lebanese people - we're very close to each other. (Sarah, p36; 123)

...[neighbours] has a lot to do, I think, with everyday life. It's really important to get on with your neighbours and get mixed in with people in the street. (Naomi, p19; 116)

I always feel that the neighbourhood is very important to us... Muslim people. See we like to have the good neighbours. (Zekia, p25; 156)

The extent of neighbourliness that the women experienced in Lebanon has been hard to find in Australia. This is one of their greatest areas of concern and loss.

And something different too - our country more social country... all the time they visit each other, or make the tea together... And all children play together. (Nouha, p25; 154)

... in my country relationship between neighbourhood and relative is much, much, much stronger than here. ... even when I used to be in Belfield, I used to live in a block of units and believe it or not I just knew a few of them [my neighbours] ... I was the one who was interfering and sending dessert and stuff and letting them feel that I would like them to be a friend of mine. (Safie, p9; 120)

Others have less traumatic experiences, but still the concept of being neighbourly is restrained.

They [the neighbours] talk to me outside the fence... But in Lebanon we don't talk behind the fence, we go into each other's houses... (Nouha, p26; 118)

... If I didn't say hello or good morning or good evening, I won't hear their voices, they won't even greet me. (Safie, p18; 130)

Quiet and orderly neighbours provide a pleasant environment for Ihsan. Claudia is comfortable with a multicultural neighbourhood.

...the neighbours they're alright too. I mean quiet neighbour, I can't hear any fights or... anyone screaming like some other places. They are very good neighbours. It's a very good place. (Ihsan, p19; 112)

I know my neighbours very well, you know we get on very well. ...this neighbour here, she's Italian... And my other neighbour here - she's Greek - she's a nice lady too. ...I'd like to be friends with my neighbours... I like to be... friendly with everyone. (Claudia, p22; 156)

What could be interpreted as a contradiction of this expression of neighbourliness, is the deliberate choice to live in a street where there are not many Lebanese people. Such action could also be seen as an empowering step to take more control over the private sphere in an alien public culture.

Safie enjoys having Arabic people in the surrounding neighbourhood, but is content that there are no Lebanese in her street. She acknowledges that there are a variety of Arabic speaking people in Sydney - some from the city, others from rural areas - and that they hold different attitudes on a range of issues. Different education and class backgrounds complicate the picture, which is one of heterogeneity. Safie is also concerned that the Australians living in the street could adversely influence the children, however, because there is no cultural or religious obligation to be hospitable, any potential dilemmas can be controlled.

...if I do have a neighbour who is Arabic and who's from the village, I can't say no to them. They're going to be with my kids most of the time and they might just give my kids things which I don't believe in. (Safie, p38; 146)

Conversely, Naomi misses the conviviality that she enjoyed living in Lakemba surrounded by Arabic speaking residents.

I find people are more friendly when they realise that you're of their own culture. (Naomi, p19; 127)

Being part of the Muslim community plays an important role in bringing about a sense of belonging.

They like me very much and I like them very much. Believe me [they are like] my sisters or my daughters... (Nouha, p13; 135)

...when you go to Lakemba it's like if you're in Lebanon - you hear Arabic all the way - wherever you're walking. And you've got any type of food you want. (Fatima, p35; 138)

I like going to Lakemba... they've got the Arabic bookshop there... that little shop that sells food has got really good falafel... Or you go to Punchbowl... just walking around in shops that sell things out of sacks... you buy your lentils like that, not in a packet... I do enjoy it and just seeing all the Arabic writing... (Yasmin, p39; 116)

For Faiza, a brief sojourn away from the Lebanese community made her realise how comfortable she felt living close to Arabic people.

...[it wasn't] our area in a way... in Cronulla they're all Australian right, I'm not against that or anything, but... you always feel like you stand out... I

always felt like I would have stood out. 'Cause they're all Australian and... you're a different nationality - you stand out... (Faiza, p11; 122)²²

Proximity to services

Being close to shopping facilities, employment opportunities and transport is considered an advantage.

[My house is] very close to the shop, to the post office, to the doctor... the station, to the buses, everything. (Samia, p32; 138)

We liked it because it was - it's near the station. It's only just about five minutes walk for my husband... He needs transport to go to work. (Claudia, p14; 153)

...the location of the unit itself is handy because it's near the shopping centre, it's near where I work, it's near the school, and it's near my parents. (Fatima, p22; 135)

Proximity to specialist Arabic food shops and cultural and religious facilities is also valued. Safie shops locally where she can find Lebanese grocery stores.

...you need Arabic grocery, even I do buy it sometimes from Franklins but it's much dearer, so it's better to get it from the Arabic shops. Like you do find the humus, the lettuce, all these stuff in the Australian shops but they'll be much, much dearer... (Safie, p36; 139)

Here in Campsie, or sometimes I go to Bankstown after work to get my shopping. ...everything's here... (Claudia, p18; 124)

²² When Faiza first started to talk about this issue, she spoke of her discomfort with the area in terms of not wanting to move because she had just started high school. It was only after giving her time to reflect, that she told me she felt uncomfortable because of her perception of being different.

As I discussed previously, proximity to the mosque is not essential for the Muslim woman's worship. However, for the devout Muslim family, the mosque should be close.

I like it very much. I don't like to go very far, I mean far away because of the mosque, we have the mosque here. All the Muslim community and the Lebanese community...most of them live in this area. It's very social, very close to me, I can go any day I like, any time I like. (Nouha, p19; 142)

The mosque is an important place of instruction for children. Faiza recalls one such experience.

I slept there for about four days once - we were having kind of a camp... they teach us a lot about our religion and we had a great time... you learn more things each time you go... (Faiza, p27; 136)

As individuals, Christian women have more incentive to locate close to their church as this is the traditional site for their worship. There is more choice as a variety of churches can meet the Christian's needs. The car makes a difference and allows one to live further away.

...we've got a church here next to us. Australian church here - called St Mells and I just go there every Sunday. (Claudia, p4; 131)

...we only go to the Lebanese church when... I go with my husband, funeral or wedding or Christmas, or something like that. (Claudia, p4; 134)

I mean when you have a car, you can go anywhere these days. Nothing's far any more. (Naomi, p27; 160)

Familiarity with a suburb and the presence of family members entice women to settle in particular areas.

But then when we sold the house, we couldn't find anything, because my husband wanted to stay sort of in this area. He's always been here. He's been here nearly 14, 15 years in this area. And I didn't mind here, because I've always been in Campsie... When I first came to Australia, I was in Campsie, and then I went to... Bankstown, but then I came back to Campsie after I got married... (Claudia, p14; 136)

Comfortable... everything is around you, everything you need is here. And I'm used to this area too. I feel good living in this area... The only time I haven't lived in Campsie is probably about four years out of the time I've been here. (Claudia, p27; 149)

Safety

Feeling safe or unsafe in their suburb did not emerge as a major concern in these interviews. Nevertheless, three women specifically discussed their concerns. Precautions are taken for children as they travel to and from school.

You can't trust guys in these days and you don't know if something happen to them, how much I'm going to blame myself. So I'm in an office and they can come anytime, I say just come over we will make our way home together. (Safie, p37; 131)

Physical treatments such as bars on windows, can make a house feel safe and secure.

I feel warm in here and safe - we have... the bars all around the house. (Asmahan, p35; 122)

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed major themes from the interviews with Arabic women. Their stories of home are dominated by the centrality of family. There are individual differences and relationship difficulties, but the primacy of family is a

unifying theme. So too is the physical dwelling as the most significant private and controllable space with which the women interact. Although its most favoured form is an owned house and garden, the women do their best to adapt less suitable structures. In every dwelling type these women maintain the richness and diversity of their cultural heritage, passing traditions and values onto their children. Religion plays a key role in the Muslim woman's home. The physical dwelling is the site for her daily religious practice as well as the centre of hospitality. Domestic skills continue to be valued by all the women, although change is in evidence as the roles of men and women are questioned and challenged.

Chapter Seven

Vietnamese Stories of Home

Sweet home. It's where we have happiness. We always have each other. (Van, p39; 124)

INTRODUCTION

The stories of the Vietnamese women are presented in this chapter. Following an overview of Vietnamese migration to Australia, I explore their childhood meanings of home. This contrasts markedly with the years of war that the women endured, culminating in their decision to leave Vietnam. Their journey to freedom, although entailing great loss, was instrumental in shaping their current experiences of home. In the final section of the chapter, I explore these developing meanings.

THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

Politically and socially, Vietnam has suffered from external and internal conflict for many years (Viviani, 1984: 6). The French colonial government held power in the nation for over seventy years. Catholicism was introduced, the country divided and a market economy introduced (Viviani, 1984: 6).

A rise of nationalism heralded protracted battles for independence, with the 1954 Geneva Conference finally determining Communist rule in the north and a non-Communist government in the south (Viviani, 1984: 10). Civil unrest occurred in the 1950s. This evolved into an internal war, escalating in 1965 when the United States of America decided to commit large numbers of combat troops to the conflict (Lewins and Ly, 1985: 5). South Vietnam became dependant upon American financial and material support for the military, administration and the economy (Viviani, 1984: 13). The war was fought in the countryside causing a disruption of food production and mass urbanisation. "The social dislocation was vast and millions became refugees living on the outskirts of towns in temporary shelter" (Lewins and Ly, 1985: 8).

The Communist forces were victorious in 1975, taking over a country devastated by bombing, chemical warfare, high unemployment, severe deflation and a dislocated and divided population. They immediately set about reshaping South Vietnamese society. Those who had occupied positions of power in the previous government had the most to lose. Many escaped in American evacuations soon after the war, but for those remaining there was political re-education, imprisonment, forced communal labour, food rationing and for their children, denial to higher education (Lewins and Ly, 1985: 10-12).

Over the next few years thousands left Vietnam, either by escaping illegally or by paying an official fee to the government.¹ Not all who sailed from Vietnam reached safety. Many died either through the sinking of unseaworthy and overcrowded vessels, being ignored by some ASEAN states or through Thai pirate attacks (Viviani, 1984: 38).

The majority of boat people went to Malaysia or Thailand. If their boats were pushed out to sea they made for Indonesia or ports such as Darwin, Hong Kong or the Philippines. A relatively small number (2000 out of over 50,000 refugees) actually entered Australia in this way (Lewins and Ly, 1985: 26). The Fraser government assumed some responsibility for accepting refugees as part of the aftermath of the war in which Australia had taken an active role (Jupp, 1992: 92). The first refugees, 64 in number, arrived on 14 May, 1975 (Lewins and Ly, 1985: 14).

¹ In March 1975 the government closed all private retail business, which mainly affected the Chinese or Ha. They were given the option of moving to a New Economic Zone or leaving the country by paying an official fee. This program was halted in 1979 after the second Geneva Conference on Refugees (Viviani, 1984: 35). The orderly departures program was set up instead and negotiations were made with France, the USA, Canada and Australia for the repatriation of refugees (Viviani, 1984: 35).

Between 1975 and 1988, 120,000 Indo-Chinese people made their home in Australia, the largest refugee influx since the end of World War II (Burnley, 1989: 129). Those who came to Sydney tended to settle in the west, with concentrations in the inner and outer regions. The municipality of Fairfield attracted the highest percentage of Vietnamese residents, with 19,000 by 1991 (Burnley, 1995: 186). The reasons for such high concentrations were the proximity of migrant receiving centres, family reunions and the associated emotional and social support networks (Lewins and Ly, 1985: 34). The existence of rental accommodation in the area and a depressed economic climate, which inhibited residential dispersal of migrants, also contributed to Vietnamese concentrations in Sydney's west (Burnley, 1989 in Dunn, 1993: 232).

The photographs below show shops located in the study area, selling Vietnamese food.



THE WOMEN

Basic demographic characteristics of the women are presented in the table on the next page.

Table Twelve
Demographic Characteristics of the Vietnamese Women

Name	Age	Religion	Marital Status	Children	Place of Birth	Residency Status
Huong	43	Buddhist	Married	None	Saigon	Arrived in 1985 as a refugee
Loan	21	Catholic	Single	None	Sth Vietnam	Arrived in 1986 aged 15 as a sponsored migrant
Ha	30	Catholic	Married	None	Saigon	Arrived in 1989 aged 27 as a refugee
Diem	44	Buddhist	Married	2	Sth Vietnam	Arrived in 1977 aged 29 as a refugee
Fuong	31	Buddhist	Separated	2	Saigon	Arrived in 1981 aged 20 as a sponsored migrant
Nhung	42	Buddhist	Married	None (husband has 2)	Nth Vietnam	Arrived in 1979 aged 28 as a refugee
Van	49	Buddhist	Married	4	Central Vietnam	Arrived in 1981 aged 38 as a refugee
Ha and Dung ²	40s	Buddhist	Married	2	Sth Vietnam	Arrived as a refugee
Hanh	45	Buddhist	Married (Husband in Vietnam)	None	Saigon	Arrived in 1988 aged 41 as a sponsored migrant
Nhan	36	Buddhist	Married	3	Sth Vietnam	Arrived in 1979 aged 23 as a refugee
Minh	23	Buddhist	Married	None	Saigon	Arrived in 1979 aged 10 as a sponsored migrant

See Appendix Sixteen for an overview of each woman's history.

² This interview was not transcribed (see explanation in Chapter Four, page 116). Accordingly, complete demographic details are unavailable.

THE CHILDHOOD HOME: MAJOR THEMES

The women spoke with great fondness for their childhood homes.

...it's always in my heart... because you born there and you grow there...
(Nhan, p10; 154)

I so happy with my family... my father and my mother - they look after all the children well. (Ha, p8; 18)

...that's the feeling I grow up [with] and I bring with me forever - for my whole life. (Huong, p13; 129)

Life centred around the family. It was peaceful in contrast with the years that followed.

...it was like that at that time... quiet, no war, nothing at all. (Van, p6; 162)

The home as family

The family is central to these women's memories of childhood. As girls they spent most of their free time with relatives, either in the domestic or neighbourhood setting. Accordingly, relationships were close and special. School was only held in the morning, leaving the afternoon free for family time.

We studied together, we played together, we eat together. It's everything is really together. Yeah. (Minh, p5; 14)

...most of students they study in the morning not the afternoon, just half day, not the whole day. So usually we have enough time to have meals with our parents. And my father worked full time, the whole day... he came home for lunch everyday. (Nhung, p8; 155)

With my family we have a room, everyone had to have... dinner together about 7 o'clock. Everyone had to be there at 7 o'clock to have dinner, so we, from my grandmother, my uncle, my aunty, we all come home together at that time to have dinner. (Diem, p3; 140)

For Nhan, free afternoons meant joining her siblings to help in their parents' business.

I can be my father's cashier, or helping filing some of medicine, you know, it's a lot of help. Yeah and I like too. (Nhan, p5; 149)

The majority of the women lived in large, extended families. They had a lot of brothers and sisters and often lived with grandparents. Other family members were close by. Their memories are that this was a happy time.

Yes, when I was young I lived with my parents and in Vietnam we had the very big family, I mean extended family. I mean I live with my parents, my grandmother, my aunty, my uncle and my brothers and sisters. (Diem, p1; 151)

Yes, I came from very, very big family. I have four sisters - four older sisters and three younger sisters, and four younger brothers. Very big family. (Van, p3; 138)

In Vietnam everyone is really close together, you've got like the grandparents and they live with you a few houses away. Other relatives live a few houses away. (Minh, p3; 145)

It was common to have servants in the household.

Most Vietnamese they have a servant... (Nhung, p9; 150)

...my family always have a servant. Easy for us to pay for them because with my father salary we can cover everything. (Huong, p2; 154)

In some cases, they were part of the extended family.³ In Nhan's household, they ate together.

Parents and grandparents played a special role in teaching children. They taught them appropriate moral values, religion and life skills, as well as how to care about others.

They teach a lot about how to live and how - the way we get on with a lot of people and things like that. (Nhan, p9; 134)

Fathers in particular played a pivotal role here.

I remember one day one of my eldest sisters did something wrong and he [my father] asked her to sit down with him and then he read something in the prayers to explain to her what she was supposed to do. (Van, p5; 124)

My father encouraged all the children... to study. He say when you study your brain improve, and also you get money from that and your life better. (Huong, p8; 156)

The stories of childhood reveal patterns of structural patriarchy in a variety of guises.⁴ Competency in domestic chores was generally emphasised by mothers for daughters. Girls helped much more than boys, who occupied a privileged position in the household.

³ Nhan tells me that for some families who treated their servants badly, it was difficult for them when the Communists came. The servants accused their former employers of being bad. This gave the Communists the opportunity to take these wealthy people away and re-educate them.

⁴ Women are traditionally subservient to men. They are taught to obey their fathers before marriage, then their husbands and if widowed, they must follow the instructions of their sons (Hassan, Healy, McKenna and Hearst, 1985: 273).

My mother very strict on this. She said the first thing and very important, is cooking and doing housework. We [girls] should know - doesn't matter how educated we are. So that's why at holiday... she always asks me to stay in the kitchen to help and to cook meals. (Van, p5; 153)

...my mother teach me how to do the things in the house. ...my mother say girl have to know how to do the housework... And I say, "Why only me do that and how about the brothers?" And my mother say, "No, because they are the boys. They no need have to learn to do... housework". (Ha, p6; 144)

...we had to speak nicely and softly, never in loud voice - always be a good girl. Even some of the families still keep this concept that one boy very more than ten girls. Can you believe it? (Van, p11; 122)

Girls were sometimes excluded from their brother's play.

...so because I'm a girl, they just left me out... so they can play - two boys play together. (Nhan, p8; 135)

In Vietnam, good karma is considered being a man eventually. This underlies the patriarchal nature of Vietnamese society.

...in Buddhist they say reincarnation... you live and die, live and die, many time to be a man... They lucky to be a man. (Nhan, p29; 134)

The men did not do anything. The men just sit... smoking, drinking, and ask friend [to come over]... (Huong, p10; 140)

Education and western influences started to change these ideas for Van while she was still in Vietnam.

See before girls and women so submissive and then with that new way of thinking about this from outside, we think it's better. So we can contribute to the society and then we feel like equal to men - we can do anything if we have ability... (Van, p11; 111)

Children were expected to be obedient and do as their parents instructed them. There were often rules about not leaving the house after a certain time, doing homework and not arguing.

...all the children, we obeyed the old people, even my aunty, my uncle when they said something, we obeyed them. (Diem, p2; 155)

I went to school just half a day and I think I spend most of time for my assignments. (Nhung, p10; 14)

There is a negative side to the notion of family obedience. Nhung talks about feeling like a child in her family, right up until the time that she left Vietnam in 1979.

I left them when I was 28 but I never felt that I was an adult in the family. (Nhung, p21; 135)

The home as physical dwelling

The childhood home was usually a traditional Vietnamese house where there were few rooms. With western influence, particularly from the French colonialists, houses were constructed with more individual spaces, doors and walls. However, these women experienced living in traditional dwellings. This meant sharing with siblings and in many cases, sleeping close together or in the same bed. A mosquito net was the only definition of individual space.

We have about two or three separate rooms. There's the one for my parents, and I think one for my older sisters... because we were very young, we didn't have separate rooms at all. (Van, p3; 162)

I remember my parents' bed just at the back and we slept in the front. We have about three beds next to each other and at night time we slept in the

nets and that's our space... Now I don't think I could sleep in that way, but I used to sleep like that for a long, long time. (Nhung, p6; 156)

...in Vietnam when they live together in the house, they don't live in the separate room... they live only one bedroom for the whole family, about seven or eight... (Diem, p28; 157)

Houses were often multi-storey with children restricted to one floor and parents another. The concept of privacy was unknown in terms of its western connotation.

We don't have privacy in Vietnam. (Nhung, p6; 155)

...at that time I didn't think of privacy... I thought it was lovely. (Loan, p4; 132)

Living areas were generally separated from bedrooms, although girls sometimes slept near the kitchen. This physical arrangement of the dwelling had important implications for family closeness.

...we don't have rooms like this. It's more an open space... It's a lot of sharing. (Minh, p3; 129)

This photograph shows Minh's family's traditional house in Vietnam.



Memories of gardens feature in the stories. This is interesting because many of the women lived in Saigon where it was unusual to have a large outdoor area. However, as the majority came from wealthy families, their accommodation was well appointed and sited.

...in Saigon it's very hard to find a small place for planting. You can hardly find a place with trees or plants. (Nhung, p13; 15)

...we have lots of banana groves around the house. And I remember we had a guava tree and it's very nice... (Van, p3; 119)

I still remember the flower of the five star fruit... the flower's very nice, tiny and purple... I always pick up and turn [the flower]... And I remember the hedge of the house - it had a lot of bamboo... (Van, p7; 127)

Roof-top gardens were also a favourite space in these childhood homes.

...and balcony and terrace on the top of the house... every night we stay there talking and the children run around. The parents and grandparents sit there, have tea and biscuits and talk and tell the fairy story. (Diem, p4; 134)

The home as suburb

In contrast to the role of family, the neighbourhood, while important, is not central to these women's childhood narratives. They attended local schools, played with friends who lived nearby and in some cases, worshipped at the Buddhist Temple.

I went to my friends' places and played with them... (Nhung, p10; 147)

Yes, we used to go to the temple, we go shopping... (Diem, p5; 137)

I liked the area and I liked the garden and I liked the school... (Van, p7; 112)

...over there every door is open... it's really friendly... (Loan, p9; 137)

Families often lived close by and visiting each other was an important aspect of daily life.

*...sometimes I went to my aunty's or uncle's place for holiday. **Where was that?** Just around Saigon you know. But because we have extended family and we are very close to our relatives, so we got a lot of people come to my place. Sometimes they stayed for a long time and sometimes we went to our relative's place to stay there, just like in our place. We were very close to our extended family, grandmum or grandfather, I used to spend a lot of time with my grandfather at that time. (Nhung, p10; 111)*

Given that they mostly came from wealthy families, outings, other than going to school, were largely recreational. Servants did the domestic shopping at the markets

and in Diem's case, a tailor came to their home to make their clothes. Visiting family members in the neighbourhood was an important activity.

So when we go shopping just for looking, window shopping and buy something like cosmetics or perfume or have lunch with a friend or something like that. (Diem, p5; 146)

...I went to cinema every week... because in Vietnam we didn't have television and at that time... my place is quite close to the cinema. (Nhung, p11; 123)

Beautiful physical environments made ideal play areas.

Even about five minutes walking we can go to a very nice pool with lotus and it was built a long time ago by the King, I think, for him to go there, to have fresh air sometimes, so it was very nice place there. ...it looks like a small forest, a lot of big trees. It was a good place to play... (Van, p7; 147)

DECIDING TO LEAVE VIETNAM

The war in Vietnam changed these women's lives forever. The consequences of a Communist victory were behind the decision to leave their homeland. The peace of childhood was shattered and family relationships strained to breaking point. Trust and loyalty between siblings, wives and husbands, children and parents was destroyed by the Communists' re-education campaign. Given the centrality of family in these women's lives, the enormity of the impact of the war and its aftermath can be understood.

The women's loss of home occurred when conflict took hold of their lives. This is why it is important to consider their stories about the war and its impact here. The new government in South Vietnam changed all societal institutions, dictating how people could and could not conduct their lives. In a way this robbed the women of

their sense of home - feelings of security, belonging, familiarity and happiness. In the women's tales there is evidence of continuity, but the war and its consequences seriously interrupted this until they came to Australia and were able to finally settle.⁵

Experiences of the war

The war was a frightening experience as bombs fell and people were killed and property destroyed.

...the Vietnamese Communist killed a lot civilians... I just gave born to my second child and she was about ten days at the time and we... experience a lot of hardship and a lot of horror from the war, it was terrible... the traditional house we live there at that time... one big bullet... in French they call cannon, just went through the roof...through a big, very, very thick table... through the floor and die there. Didn't explode... the other one just in the back yard but very close to our bedroom... it exploded... part of the roof shattered... (Van, p17; 116)

I was only 25 years old, I was so scared I didn't know what was going to happen after that... (Diem, p8; 121)

For a child there was an element of excitement and adventure in the battles raging all around. Even though Saigon was constantly being bombed, the dangers of war were hard to comprehend.

We had a lot of fun at that time, the sound of the rocket flying over our heads. My mother said, "Jump under your bed". My sister and I you know, we did but we laughed. We laughed all the time under the bed and my father said to us that, "How dare you laugh when we are going to die of the bomb"... he was angry but we didn't care much. We didn't know how dangerous it was. (Nhung, p17; 148)

⁵ Personal stories of hardship and terror can be found elsewhere, confirming the accounts presented here (Henderson, Anne, 1993a). The end of the war did not herald peace for those who had opposed the Communists. Indeed, the motivations of those escaping from Vietnam were questioned by many western leaders (Henderson, Anne 1993a: 121-124).

Life after the war

South Vietnam fell to the Communists in 1975, heralding a life of hardship for many people.

...when the Communists took over my country, everything there very hard. (Hanh, p10; 17)

Those who worked for the previous government or its army were targeted for severe punishment. Many of the women I spoke to were in that situation.

He [my father] was high in the government...⁶ so he had money, he had a few factories in Vietnam so we live in a big house with housekeepers, drivers and the servants at home, altogether about seven people. And my father he had two bodyguards for himself, so we live in a big house until the Communists took over South Vietnam. (Diem, p2; 16)

There were re-education camps and prison, first of all for the rich and then later, the poorer people. This continued until 1989 when the Communists reduced their control. Schooling ceased as students were forced to take on different roles in the community.

Houses and businesses were taken over. People were forced to undertake different work and establish a new set of values.

...when Communist comes my father close all the business... just leave it for Communists - they can do what they want. And after when all my brothers and me, you know, left home, the Communists come... they took over the house and they lived together with my parents, because they say oh the house too big. (Nhan, p6; 159)

⁶ Diem revealed her father's position but I felt it was important to leave this out in order to retain confidentiality.

...we had to move to our traditional house again... it was very hard life because we didn't know which class we belonged to. ...the Vietnamese Communist pay us very low wage, we couldn't live without doing something else. That is why my husband tried to improve our living by planting some other supplies like potatoes, or any fruit so we can improve our meal or sell to get money to buy something else, like meat... that is why he worked very hard... all day he had to go to school to teach. And after 5 o'clock he had to go to work hard in the garden and then after 9 o'clock he had to stay at his desk to prepare his lecture for the next day. Sometimes we looked at each other and say... what are we doing now, labour work or another one? (Van, p18; 121)

To ensure that the Communist message was heard, there were compulsory meetings all the time in the village.

*...when the Communist came they tried to set a new rules... they ask us to come for meeting every night, can you imagine? So early after 5 o'clock, I rush home to cook meal for the family and sometimes I didn't have time to have my dinner. I have to rush back to school to attend the meeting. **And you had to go?** Yes, otherwise they assume that I was against them so they put me in jail, so it was very dangerous. We worry. **It must have been awful.** Really awful. And really I felt very tired and very worried... (Van, p18; 159)*

Some tried to escape before Saigon fell but this was not always possible. For Diem's father this was catastrophic. He was arrested shortly after the Communist take-over and never freed.

... we went to that place to wait for the helicopter but when they came they said they haven't got enough helicopters to pick up all the family... then my father said, "No, we should stick together and I don't want to go without my children and my wife and my mother-in-law". So that's why he decided to stay with us and that was the wrong decision. (Diem, p8; 134)

Others predicted the situation and resigned from highly prestigious positions well before the fall of Saigon.

...because of the war in 1968, my father, he resigned because he was with the former regime. Actually he worked directly with the Prime Minister and the President at that time, so he thought if the Communists came... he could go to prison. It was terrible for him at that time, so he resign in 1968. But after that still the Communists didn't take over. They did in 1975 but it's too long for them to remember what my father did, so my father didn't have to be put in the jail or in the re-education camp, so he was lucky. But if he continued working with the former regime it's not good for him, so after that my mother became the breadwinner. (Nhung, p20; 126)

Even though he escaped re-education, this action had implications for the family as they had known it. There was a power shift from the father to the mother, given her successful business.

Life became unpredictable and dangerous. For Diem's family, there was constant surveillance and terror.

But during the time my father got caught, during that time, anytime the Communists government can come to my house... and then, "Open the door, open the door". And then they come through the house... they check everywhere and [say], "Everybody move here, here, here, go to there and stay there", and they check everywhere and ...they go and we stay there. Oh {anger}. And my mother since that time you know, she feels like scared of everything. Like when she heard somebody knock the door the eyes getting round and big surprise and scared... (Diem, p10; 143)⁷

Diem tells me that the Communist military made sure that the family could not take any personal belongings from their house. Her friends were too scared to visit in

⁷ Diem's story is a particularly moving one. I was in tears as I heard how her father was mistreated in jail. The family were not allowed to see him for months and when permission was finally granted, they were prohibited from showing any emotion in his presence. The self discipline that this would have required was quite beyond my comprehension.

Her sadness about the loss of her father continues today.

...that's why sometimes I couldn't sleep because suddenly I remember and sometimes you know, when I eat something my father used to eat, suddenly I couldn't eat anymore... (Diem, p12, 116)

case they were questioned by the soldiers. This reinforced the sense of loss, but also confirmed her decision to escape.

...they put the sticky tape... on the door, on the drawers, the cabinet, everything and they sign there and since that time we couldn't touch anything, we couldn't open any more. That's why you know, I had to leave my house without certificate... (Diem, p10; 160)

Deciding to leave

The instability of life in Vietnam and the oppressive nature of the new government motivated many of the women to make the decision to leave. Even though an uncertain future lay before them, they decided to risk the enormous dangers rather than continue living under an intolerable regime. Stories of what had happened in North Vietnam when Communists took over, further fuelled the women's determination to escape.

...everybody's life mixed up... we don't know what future is and we scared. And we don't know what they going to do... (Nhan, p12; 131)

...after 1975 the Communist took over our country and then we couldn't stand their domination... (Van, p2; 162)

So then we just have a lot of worry... We worry about the future, we worry about everything happen today and everything happen tomorrow. (Huong, p19; 111)

Together with the oppression of a dominating regime, the decision to come to Australia was often for the children.

...that is why we were thinking about escaping because living with them our children never have any good future at all and that is why we planned to escape. (Van, p19; 117)

In some cases, parents did not leave but insisted that their children go.

So my mother say we must let the children go overseas. Because if they live in the country they will be poor and they will die soon... (Ha, p14; 118)

My mother said, "You should go because you have more future... in other countries". (Loan, 23; 153)

For younger women, without family responsibilities, the chance to escape an unpalatable political regime also provided an opportunity to be free from parental restrictions. Some had dreamed of leaving long before the Communist take over.

...the main reason was, I did like to go overseas, that was my dream at that time. So when a lot of people escaped from Vietnam for freedom, I said to my Mum, "OK I want to be free too". Because it was a bit restricting to live with my Mum and Dad. I think when I was 26 or 28 and I came home at about 11 o'clock still, my Mum and Dad look at me... "How dare you go out until this time". And all the time we were under the control of our parents. (Nhung, p23; 132)

The escape

Preparing for the escape was very difficult because it was too risky to have faith in anyone. The Communist invasion brought an end to trust for these women, even within the family. Given the centrality of these close relationships, this loss was considerable and represented an incredibly destructive force.

Everyone can maybe talk to the government so you don't trust anyone, even your family, even the children... when the Communists come they give the children cigarette. Like they cut the connection from the family and they think they can teach the children and the children later on they become a member of the Communists... (Diem, p12; 131)

You couldn't trust anybody, even husband and wife. Can you believe that some wife went to the police station to report about their husband's behaviour? And the children too. They taught the children to report about their parents also. (Van, p20; 149)

She [my mother] didn't tell my brother about our escape and didn't tell my Dad about our escape for more than a month. She just said to my Dad they went on holiday. (Nhung, p24; 139)

In preparing for an escape, it was important that children be skilled in leading "double lives". At school, they were complimentary about the Communists, even though at home the family espoused a different position. For very young children this may have been impossible. Accordingly, they were not told of the planned escape.

...we try to teach... our children to live in two faces. So when at school they try to say something good about the government, the party, everything... very careful about their words. (Van, p21; 16)

Children were also trained to survive the journey by practising living in the open air and being able to swim strongly.

*...before we escape, we train the children [to] live in the open air at night... so... let them sleep in the front yard to get familiar to living in the weather. **To prepare them for the boat journey?** Yes. ...to prepare as much as we can, that is why they all very good swimmers. (Van, p21; 150)*

It was not only lack of trust that dictated extreme caution being taken in relation to who could be told about the plan to escape.

Even we were living with my mother-in-law at the time, we didn't tell her anything at all. Even we lie to her that my parents still live in Saigon and that he [my father] was sick at that time. I tell her that we had... to take our children to see him and she believed it... we are so afraid. You see, if she can't control her emotion, maybe she cry and everybody knows. It is very

dangerous for us... How did you feel, you know, not telling her? Oh it was terrible, but you see, we can't help... my husband has a younger sister, she is very [gestures that the sister is talkative] so we afraid, you see, if my mother-in-law knows, and then she [my husband's sister] knows also, so the news should spread very easily. It [is] not safe. (Van, p20; 19)

The women talked about the experience of preparing to escape and the elaborate plans that had to be made. It was also an expensive exercise and all their savings went towards getting out.⁸ In some cases, parents wanting to give children a new life, paid for their escape. First attempts were not always successful, resulting in even greater cost.

...the whole family tried to escape, but we didn't do it successfully. My father got caught. (Loan, p22; 17)

And I try to escape many times, and I was caught by the police twice... (Huong, p19; 137)

...we have been working for 15 years and then all our savings we pay for the trip, all. We so happy we have enough to pay. Otherwise we can't come. (Van, p44; 156)

Oh, she [my mother] paid. She got money, actually she had money to do that, my Dad didn't have. (Nhung, p24; 150)

One had to pretend that life was going along normally. Daily rituals had to be maintained right up until the moment of escape. The tension that this brought about

⁸ Payment was made to Government officials so that they would turn a "blind eye" to what was going on.

...it is called a semi-official escape. When I say that I mean we paid the authorities and they let us go. So for the Government, that is illegal but because we go through them we got accepted by them. So by that way we could escape legally, not completely legally... (Nhung, p27, 155)

was considerable. Where a relative did know about the plans, there was a very emotional farewell.

...I was so calm at that time, it was my birthday that day. I still bake a cake and cook a party for the family {laughs}. I still went to class in the morning because the trip would start at 1pm. And then we all had normal life on that day... we had lunch altogether but I was so worried at the time I couldn't eat anything at all... (Van, p19; 152)

So my Mum ... contacted the Chinese boat owner and put us in the boat and said goodbye to us, it's very sad, [cries] but she knew that it was better for us and that was what we wanted. (Nhung, p28; 114)

Escape was by boat. The vessels were usually very small and not fit for the open sea. Stories of successful escapes filtered back to Vietnam, strengthening their resolve to risk all and flee.

Before that nobody believe that with a small boat like that can go far away... (Huong, p20; 14)

...I went to Australia by boat with my older sister and my auntie and we stayed at one of the island in Malaysia for three months. (Minh, p17; 128)

...[our boat was] one and a half metre wide and about six metre long without roof, nothing at all. But we have engine. (Van, p19; 137)

Occasionally, it was possible to escape in a more suitable vessel. As vice-captain of a government ship, Diem's husband disobeyed orders and left Vietnamese domestic waters to sail to Australia.

And my husband was like hijack, [laughs] he took the ship to Darwin and we went straight to Darwin in 1977, when my first son was two months old and very hard to escape. (Diem, p10; 138)

The journey was dangerous, barely tolerable in terms of the physical conditions that had to be endured. All the women in my study obviously survived, but there were reports of some very anxious moments. I was told about more unfortunate women who died at sea or suffered other fates. Rape by pirates and then being sold into prostitution was not uncommon (Henderson, Anne 1993a: 128). Even if a woman eventually reached safety after such horrendous experiences she faced being disowned by her husband because of the shame that sexual violence brought on the family.

...it is very dangerous because our boat very small... and ...because... very high waves, we nearly die twice. ...we try to sail along the shore and when the storm came we landed... that is why it took us about 18 days. And then after that we cross from this sea to Hong Kong. It was very dangerous part.... Someone told us that the swirl of water there... it can sink your boat easily but we survived that and after that we could reach Hong Kong. (Van, p22; 121)

We were robbed by the pirates - oh, it's terrible, you know when we left Vietnam... (Nhung, p27; 153)

...when I come here on my escape, it's good because nothing happen but some of them, somebody died on the sea, somebody got the pirates, so many things happen ...they... suffer when they escape, they got bad luck. (Diem, p33; 147)

The refugee camp

Arriving at a refugee camp without any money or possessions and very little idea of what the future held was difficult to say the least. However, the women were grateful to be alive and relieved to be on dry land once again. They knew that many others had not survived.

I stay in the camp, yes, but people was nice. We lucky. After that we heard a lot of people came to Thailand and they got very bad thing, and you know many people die and things like that. (Nhan, p17; 115)

All I know is, okay I'm going somewhere, right. But I didn't know where I was going and I didn't know... what was going to happen. (Minh, p18; 139)

So we started new lives at that age completely, we have freedom... we got friends to come to our place and they could stay as long as they could... (Nhung, p29; 15)

I would say that we had a very hard life there [in the camp] because we didn't have enough food, clothes and money to spend, but we enjoyed the life there because we knew that we were waiting for someone to pick us up to the new country. (Nhung, p29; 127)

Nevertheless, there were hardships in the camps, ranging from poor accommodation, threatening people and uncertainty about their futures.

...it was terrible in the refugee camps {reflective long pause}. Oh, it was really, really terrible. You see, we had to share the room... very tiny room... about two and half square metres, ...our family, six members, plus... four more men... those men very bad and very dangerous... They didn't do anything all day and they only go out at night... scaring people to steal or to rob jewellery... they try to threaten us a lot. You see very small room and we had to cook there, to live there everything there... And they left the light switch on bright all night to play cards because they didn't do anything. They didn't work. That is why they have all day to sleep. And we ask them to switch off the light for us, they say, "No", they say, "No, you can go outside to sleep"... (Van, p22; 155)

...it was one fourth of this room, just enough for three or four of us to sleep and it was made of bamboo... so you can imagine it is very cold at night time because the wind could get through. (Nhung, p30; 136)

Reconnecting with their families back in Vietnam was very important. The women spoke about their parent's relief knowing that the escape had been successful and that their children were safe.

They were so happy when they received our first letter... my sister told me that my father was... half way through his lunch at that time. And he got my letter and he cry on his meal... when I was in Hong Kong, refugee camp... he passed away... at least he is happy to learn that I was safe in Hong Kong. (Van, p44; 116)

...we were quite happy because we could contact our Mum and Dad and they knew that we were really safe... (Nhung, p33; 113)

When they left Vietnam, many of the women did not know where they would eventually settle. America and Australia were favoured destinations. In some cases, relatives already in these countries could sponsor them. In other cases, they gained entry as refugees. The prospect of living in a new land gave my interviewees hope, despite the hardships of their refugee status.

ARRIVAL IN AUSTRALIA

There was a great deal of optimism during those first months in Australia. The sense of freedom on arrival was exhilarating. Humour helped one woman through the inevitable pain of settling into a completely different way of life.

When I first came to Australia I feel like very good, very freedom, I can breathe, I can talk, I believe I become a bird, feel like very light, nothing pressure and I think very nice country... (Diem, p14; 116)

It very funny... it's sad, but sometimes we laugh too... the ways when we first came and we know nothing. (Nhan, p18; 117)

Most of the women stayed in refugee hostels when they first arrived. This experience was positive for some and negative for others.

And when we went to the hostel, I was so happy when I first sleep in the mattress... it was so comfortable and so warm and so good for my back... and I could sleep in one bed... we found the accommodation was really excellent... and I love the food {laughs}. I love milk, I love beef and chicken and also lamb... (Nhung, p31; 154)

We stayed at a hostel... We stayed there, didn't know how to use the phone. Was air sick. So basically, like I'm not used to all the transportations. I get bus sick - even when we go for health check up, I got bus sick, car sick, everything, just sick, sick all the way. (Minh, p20; 124)

...at the time... I need someone to share my thinking and talk to me... I cry. And I feel lonely. And I feel disappointed and I think that if I stay in the country [Vietnam], then much, much better than I being here. (Huong, p24; 134)

The women worked hard to earn money and save enough to find rental accommodation outside the hostel. Even if a job was a long way from where they lived, it was accepted. This had implications for family life as work demanded so much time and energy.

...I never see the sun at that time because we had to get up very early, four o'clock in the morning and it was winter, and came back at say half past five... (Van, p24; 126)

Exploitation of workers was common. Even though Van was aware of the paltry amount of money that she was paid, she was proud that she had found a job and did not have to accept unemployment benefits.

...even for the first two months... I didn't stay doing nothing at all. At that time I had the job as knitting from the Boutique. I finish one jumper every day, but only \$13, can you imagine? (Van, p24; 157)

Racism was also evident in the way that workers were homogenised and patronised.

And he [the boss] said, "Oh that Chinese speak English very well". He thought all Asians is Chinese. (Nhan, p19; 17)

I scared of the people... I try to do my best to keep away from them. Some people... I see their face and I don't want to [be too] close to them. Otherwise they may punch me or kick me. (Fuong, p16; 148)

Language competency was an important factor in the settling process. The women in my study spent time in intensive English language courses shortly after they arrived. Some had studied English in Vietnam, although local accents and speed of delivery were difficult to comprehend at first. They also learnt other new skills and reluctantly, adjusted to different life style priorities.

I remember when I first met the Australian officer at the airport and he asked me, "Are you refugee?" And I said, "Yes I am". "But you can speak English". I said, "Yes", and he ask me something else I couldn't understand. {laughs} I feel good about that because all the papers I could read... (Nhung, p31; 142)

...so when I came here I start to cook, start to learn to cook, and I had a baby, so I had to look after the baby. And I have to learn English everything and then try to go to work, get a job because we need the money. (Diem, p14; 141)

...they thinking about more money than in my country... In my country we live together - we share everything so we don't care about money... I thought at the time - the people in here just thinking about... big television, big house, good car, everything for them. So I'm disappointed... (Huong, p23; 147)

Generosity by individuals, usually representing organisations which helped refugees, also feature in the women's stories as factors which helped them to settle. Financial

assistance to secure rental accommodation, to buy essentials such as a rice cooker, and donations of clothes, were welcomed.

Actually I really appreciate what she [the community worker] did for us and we were so happy. (Nhung, p34; 121)

...so when we come here and see the people coming up to you, "Want some help? Do you need things?" they ask us. And they were so kind to us. And I feel so happy to live there and I said, "We start a new life from the beginning {laughs} with zero". (Diem, p14; 128)

Ironically, this help gave some families still in Vietnam, the wrong impression of the refugee's lives in Australia.

...and we got some pictures to send home and [my relatives] said, "They very rich, they got very good clothes"... (Nhung, p34; 134)

Choice of residential location

For many of the women, the presence of extended family already in Australia determined their first residential location. Shared accommodation was common. Economic factors relating to housing affordability and proximity to services such as transport, were also important.

Stories of initially settling in Australia are peppered with discrimination.

...he [the agent] just give him [my husband] the key and he's got to look... himself. But so many years now we know... they supposed to get the car and bring us there... showing us the house. But it's not. I think because we are poor, very poor... (Nhan, p20; 157)

...every time we did something wrong, when we drive slowly or something happen with the car... blow the horn and they open the window and say blah blah blah!! {laughs}. (Diem, p15; 17)

Nevertheless, in reflecting on their first few years in Australia, these women generally perceive themselves to be fortunate.

...everybody different and some people lucky and some people not... but me and my husband... everything gone very well and good. (Nhan, p19; 129)

MEANINGS OF HOME

In this section I discuss the women's meanings of home. As in Chapters Five and Six, this material revealed a multiplicity of ideas around several major themes.

Home as family

Following the tradition of their childhood home, the family continues to be important. However, the process of migration has changed this meaning as relatives are geographically separated, cultures clash and children challenge traditional values and notions. Nevertheless, family relationships are central to home in the new country. The western custom of birthday celebrations has even been adopted by one woman to enhance family life.

...I open the door and I felt everything was leaving me at the lift, so I don't have to worry about it. I came in and I said to [my husband] "home sweet home"... (Nhung, p51; 155)

So many things to celebrate. And with a reason - good reason to recognise the family often. (Van, p31; 129)

Sharing daily rituals such as meals is an important way of connecting with the family and keeping emotionally close. This can be very difficult in busy schedules where employment and education have to be juggled with the responsibility of family life.

But since we came here, we used to have dinner altogether. It doesn't matter how late they [my children] come, we always waited for them... (Van, p48; 19)

Children are central to the family and for those women with offspring, the reason for staying in Australia. This is despite their sense of loss of an extended family. Returning to Vietnam without their sons and daughters, who feel more at home in Australia, is impossible to contemplate.

You see, the children grow up here and they have a life here, so I don't think we go back there to live because they can't make it that far - it may be a bit different. But see if you have children, you have to stick with your children. Anywhere your children are, you have to be there also. (Van, p49; 15)

The extended family

Living close to parents and other relatives is favoured by the women who have family in Australia. Nhan's parents live a few houses away and help with the care of children and domestic work. They visit daily to share meals and each other's company. As well as proximity to family, economics can also play a role.

...at that time my brother lived in Stanmore and we want to be close to him. And that is why we rent a house in Newtown. We like it here also because the rent at that time, quite cheap... (Van, p26; 125)

I wish I had... a big house so I can take all my family, they can stay with me - you know big happy family. (Minh, p53; 14)

For those women who do not have their families here, it is quite common to dream of being able to bring them out to Australia.

...if I have the money I just try to sponsor them to come for a visit to Australia, to Sydney... (Diem, p26; 136)

Change is evident too as the Vietnamese notion of family is redefined in contemporary Australia. The traditional custom of living as extended families and caring for ageing relatives is one such area of challenge.

For some, the change is healthy.

...no need to live close and live together... in my country, the parents they have the house and they have the children, and when the children grow up and they get married... they must live together with the parents... So it's easy [to] have a conflict together. So I think in Australia it's good - it's better. (Ha, p30; 156)

Others fear the dissolution of the extended family. Nhan is scared that she and her husband will go into a nursing home if they are in Australia when they are old. Her parents talk about going back to Vietnam to be looked after by relatives.

...one thing we always talk about... when we older in here, we got to get into nursing home, and that's what we scared of. Same with my parents. They prefer to go back there [to Vietnam]... they say over there still got plenty relations... (Nhan, p11; 129)

Diem talks about the changing nature of the Vietnamese family as young people take on western lifestyles and increasingly question the role of the extended family. As an aged care worker she is in an excellent position to reflect on emerging trends.⁹

⁹ In Vietnam, when children marry, they usually live with parents or parents-in-law, as an extended family. As mothers and fathers age, there is no question that they will be looked after by their children. The fact that social security is non-existent in Vietnam, reinforces children's obligation

Older people complain about the lifestyle that they lead here. They report that their children have changed since leaving Vietnam.

They complain to me about the life in here, the life style, ...even the children they've changed a lot when they come here... (Diem, p28; 139)

When the elderly come to Australia they do not own property or any money. Arriving after their children, they must depend on them, reversing the traditional family roles. Their children have less respect for the older generation and even disobey them, which would have been impossible before.

...when they come here they don't have any money, they don't have the house, they don't have anything... and then the children, most of them they live separate and they start to learn from the Australian... (Diem, p28; 147)

Roles in the family

The women talk about the changing nature of roles in the family, particularly around male and female relationships. The traditional patriarchal nature of Vietnamese society continues, but there is challenge from Australian values about women.

...when you married, you belong to the husband's family. If you are not happy in the marriage... you've got to think about the children and you have to live with the husband because of the children... you've got to forget about yourself, you've got to live for the children. (Diem, p34; 128)

He [my husband] didn't do anything in the house, even clean or repair something - everything I do in the house, after work... he watching the television... And when I'm so tired, I asked him to help me, but he didn't... (Fuong, p24; 160)

to parents.

A lot of Vietnamese [women] had to do very hard work to help husband. He didn't do anything... my husband... he want to help me... he thinks I'm working and he working too - two people working have to help the other. (Hanh, p20; 120)

Even though some of the women accept change as inevitable as both men and women work outside the home, there is still concern about the consequences for the family.

I'm afraid if they go too far... the family can't be good like the old days any more... man... different from woman - they was born like that - like they come home, they like to have good meal, they like happy wife... We [women] can ask them to do it for... busy time... but it can't be a rule... every day you do this and I do that. I don't think it would be nice. (Nhan, p29; 159)

Traditional roles have already started to change for some of these women. Important decisions are frequently made together, as well as ensuring accounts are paid on time.

We put in one bank book and everything together. Just like we say, we live together, we sleep together, we eat together, so everything got to be together. (Nhan, p31; 142)

...we share [bill paying]. ... the Water Board and Council rate, my husband takes care, the rest I do. (Van, p46; 153)

Nevertheless, working outside the home does not necessarily mean that their domestic responsibilities are diminished. In this way, the home can be an oppressive place.

*...[I] come home every day, cooking, shopping. **Do you do all the housework?** Yeah. Almost. My daughter helps me sometimes. She does the wash up. But she always leaves the cooking for me... since I was in Marrickville, I do shopping nearly every day... after work. I... go around to*

buy some food for the dinner - shop every day. It's very tiring - it's tiring. So always go home with some bags. (Van, p32; 113)

In Diem's household, her husband helps with domestic chores and child minding. But she is the one who is in command, as the principal breadwinner. This, in turn, can cause tension as the traditional roles are reversed.

Day time he can look after the children... And he teach my son mathematics and physics or chemistry. (Diem, p20; 151)

Changing moral standards in the Australian Vietnamese community are also impacting on behaviour. It was taboo for a woman to live with a man before marriage but this is happening now. Consequently, there has been a breakdown in the relationship between the generations. Women's greater freedom renders them less respectful to the values of the older generation and this causes a lot of problems.

My husband's sister, she lived with the boyfriend before married but they decide [to] marry. But since that time, my father-in-law didn't talk to her. (Diem, p35; 145)

Children's roles are also changing and challenging traditional values. Obedience to parents is breaking down as offspring do not always meet parental expectations to work hard and make the most of the opportunities afforded by the new country.¹⁰

¹⁰ Adult children are expected to obey parents, even when separated by thousands of miles. Traditional customs were maintained to ensure an appropriate marriage for Nhung. Parents arranged the partnership in Vietnam and instructed their children to go ahead in Australia.

...[my boyfriend's] parents went to my parent's home to ask my parents if they agree to let me marry [my boyfriend]... and they sent a letter to us saying that I want you to get married now because you are old enough... so we got engaged in 1985... but not romantic... just through parents and through the friendship... (Nhung, p42; 134)

...that's why we try to bring them here for better education, because [if] we let them stay in the Communist [country], they never have that chance. (Van, p35; 126)

For some women, there is a realisation that parental dreams may not be shared by the children. Nevertheless, traditional values are taught to give sons and daughters a firm foundation for later life.

...we don't push them [the children] to get our traditional way but we don't want them to lose it... So when they older they can put two thing together and they can sort them out... which way good and bad. (Nhan, p30; 161)

Traditional family values are also being flouted by children leaving home before marriage.

...she wants to be on her own - she's very independent. And she moves out of the house. How did you feel about when she moved out? Oh, a bit terrible at the beginning. But I'm used to it... I offer free everything for her, but she wants freedom more... the children since they are under our roof, they have to follow our rules... but if they want to be independent, we can't help - we can't control when they move out. (Van, p34; 132)

For those children who do work hard, there is great pride in their achievements.

...that one she's economist - she finished her Bachelor of Commerce - two years ago. (Van, p34; 125)

And he pass, I'm lucky he study well, come always top in the class and he passed the exam to go to high school... (Diem, p15; 119)

Supporting the family back in Vietnam

The majority of women send money back to relatives in Vietnam, although this is not always easy. The practice can result in feelings of disloyalty as the realities of

meeting daily expenses and the traditional cultural imperative of honouring the family, inevitably clash. Once again, the old order is being challenged by changing attitudes. There is also the issue of hard work not being sufficient to support a household here, as well as in Vietnam. Some families argue over who is in a position to financially support parents.

...my family very lucky - all my relatives in Vietnam or here... we are not rich, but all... have good life. Same with my husband - nobody in Vietnam, all his family here. So we are lucky family - all my friends say that, because we don't have to give money for anybody else. But many, many different Vietnamese family, they got problem about it. They got to send money back to Vietnam. And you say, "How much you give to your family and how much I give to my family". And they work here very, very hard... very big problem. (Nhan, p31; 151)

...when I came here I took... any job I was offered as long as I get paid to support my children's education and I can save something to send to Vietnam to help our mothers to live, because no Social Security there at all... if you're old, if you're sick, no-one look after you except your children. (Van, p44; 133)

...and I have to send the money to my mother. (Diem, p19; 151)

I don't think it's too hard, but they [my siblings] have the reason to say, "Oh I'm broke"... but I never put the blame on them. I just tell them that if you think of Mum and Dad please send some, it's up to you. It's not good to force others to do what you want. (Nhung, p45; 149)

Ironically, it can also be difficult for those receiving the money in Vietnam. They have to be careful not to show this wealth. According to these women, Communism has encouraged a deep mistrust within families.

...they [parents] never want to show people that they have children overseas, even now you know. She [my mother] never tell people that she got money from us... if you tried to put yourself in the situation like everyone there you know, you are not very remarkable and people let you live peacefully. But

if you know that you are better than they are, of course they become jealous of you. My Mum and Dad... they never let people think they have more money than others... And when we send money back to them, still we have to be careful too... when I went back to Vietnam, my Mum said... "When you see your uncles or your aunties, don't tell them much about how much money you earn here because you give them a shock. And never show people that you come from overseas". (Nhung, p26; 115)

It can be risky sending the money, ensuring it arrives safely and is not taken by the authorities. This is a constant concern for Diem, whose family is still monitored given her father's very high position in the previous South Vietnamese government.¹¹

Home as cultural continuation

Language

As with the other participants in this study, the Vietnamese women perceive the maintenance of their mother tongue as vital. Not only is it an important mechanism to continue culture and traditional values in the next generation, it is spiritually and emotionally comforting.¹²

¹¹ If Diem sends the money through the bank her mother only gets some of it because the Communists steal a portion of it. However, if she sends it through the black market, she can get the full amount to her mother. She tells me how she does this through friends bringing out their relatives to Australia. This is another reminder to her of the loss of freedom in her own country and of the benefits she enjoys in Australia, despite the hardships.

¹² Of course, traditional values have to be specifically taught. They are not simply transferred via language. Minh talks about creating opportunities for her future children to respect family togetherness and its central place in Vietnamese culture.

I would have to create the right environment... I would try and get them to see my grandparents... see the relatives as often as possible... just create a bond between all of them. (Minh, p10; 149)

... when you're talking Vietnamese there's a greater bond. Like there's some words that you can't express in English and when you talk... the words sort of create more emotion... (Minh, p41; 151)

...to be a Vietnamese, you have to know [how] to speak Vietnamese... Though they [my grandchildren] live here, they're born here... they are Vietnamese. They have to keep their tradition and their culture... (Van, p50; 152)

I would teach them the language and the cultural values and everything that I could... I think you are responsible... (Loan, p39; 134)

Language can also be an area where there is some mixing - in this case, Vietnamese and English. There is generally greater comfort in speaking the mother tongue, but when English competency is high, it is not unusual for languages to be blended. For some women with children, they allow both languages to be spoken in the private sphere.

You and [your husband] speak Vietnamese together? Yes of course, it's natural. But usually we mix the two languages... I say that I "feel" in Vietnamese but "upset" in English because the word "upset" isn't translatable into Vietnamese. ...but we can't speak with each other in English all the time, it's... very artificial. (Nhung, p50; 16)

Sometimes English and most of the time Vietnamese. Because sometimes I try to speak English with him to learn more English... (Diem, p33; 111)

For older people, Vietnamese is often their only language. This has implications for dependency on the extended family and social isolation in the wider community.

...the very old they can't learn English, they try to study but they can't remember. (Diem, p29; 136)

Because they do not have competency in English, they are socially isolated and totally dependent on their families. This puts pressure on the children, who are trying to lead their own lives. Feelings of isolation, fear and powerlessness are common, reinforcing their loss of position in traditional Vietnamese society. In this way, language becomes an isolating force, separating them out from any involvement in the English speaking community.

...they so scared, they stay inside in the flat and lock themselves in... they don't open the window... (Diem, p29; 142)

As well as reflecting on the issue of language and older people, some of the women considered the survival of Vietnamese within the younger generation. It is possible that the language will not continue.

I can speak little bit English and Vietnamese but later on, my son's generation when I die, he can't speak Vietnamese to anyone... (Diem, p32; 142)

...when my friends come here they bring their children, the children and my children they speak English... (Diem, p32; 156)

Interior decorations

Paintings, photographs, ornaments, indoor plants and dried floral arrangements feature in the women's homes as reminders of the lost homeland. Some of these aspects are illustrated in the images below.



A map of Saigon brings back memories for one of the women.



For the Buddhist women, there is usually a shrine where they can worship or meditate. These altars differ according to personal taste, as the following photographs show.





Do you have a shrine in your house? Yes, sort of - that one [points to a picture of Buddha]. We use it instead of a shrine... I don't like... incense which will dirty the house and all of that with the fume, the smoke. We set up a sort of decoration. (Van, p38; 14)

Van says that her shrine takes from both Vietnamese and western culture in its creation. The shrine is very simple, compared with more traditional ones.

The traditional yellow blossom which signifies good fortune, is found inside and outside houses.



...that blossoms on the new year and every house in Vietnam... they try to get that flower at home and they believe if they've got plenty of flowers, they blossom at the new first day. That means you lucky that year, you've got enough money coming in... (Diem, p23; 18)

Some of the women prefer traditional floor coverings, whereas others have adopted western styles and use carpet rather than tiles.

...I don't like carpet very much because we can't clean every day and [it is] dirty. ...Even... in winter very cold, but we can wear the slippers at home.
(Diem, p22; 129)

Traditional food, costume and festivals

Although the women in my study do not focus on food as a way of continuing traditional culture, it is important.¹³

...eating also makes you have a feel of the culture - a sense of belonging.
(Minh, p50; 147)

Their kitchens reveal Asian cooking equipment and all make Vietnamese dishes.



Traditional cooking can be used to teach outsiders about the culture.

¹³ It is interesting to note that at the interviews I was not given Vietnamese food as a light refreshment. This contrasted with the Greek and Arabic women who served me traditional sweets and savories. However, one of the women invited me to share in a family lunch, where Vietnamese food was served.

Even easy to make friends by recommending food... Even some of my Australian colleagues and friends, they enjoy my cooking... they want to learn how to cook in Vietnamese way. (Van, p30; 122)

Traditional ceremonies such as weddings, are enhanced by serving special food. For her daughter's wedding, Van made a traditional cake with the help of an Australian friend.

You see this very... traditional wedding cake [pointing at a photo]... We call husband and wife cake. You see the box, the cover made of coconut leaves... I had to ask a friend of mine from Cairns - she's Australia... I asked her to send me some of these leaves from Cairns, and then I made it. It's very - how shall I say - very original. (Van, p35; 129)

The smell of cooking is an important reminder of Vietnam, but it is not as pleasant as it was there.

...here this smell from the kitchen spread over the house {laughs} everywhere. It's terrible but in Vietnam it is not. Maybe we have the house always open... mainly because the weather, but here we have to close the door. (Van, p28; 137)

Only one woman wears traditional Vietnamese dress. Her skill at sewing enables her to maintain this link with her culture. The traditional costume is a mid-calf dress over trousers.

I still sew my traditional dress. I still make it for myself, because it costs me a lot if I don't... (Van, p33; 124)

Links are also maintained through the celebration of traditional festivals.

I still keep the Vietnamese culture... mainly on the Vietnamese new year, we make the food exactly [like] Vietnamese people in my country. (Ha, p26; 157)

Mixing east and west

There are some interesting ways in which these women mix east with west. Sometimes the blend between their traditional culture and aspects of Australian values is accepted and easily incorporated into their lives. In other situations, it is more difficult and contested. One area where this is evident is mixed marriage. Nhan's husband's younger brother is married to a non-Asian Australian and they get on very well. Huong is married to a white, Anglo man.

You know my husband's young brother, he is married with one Australian and they got four girls, and they got on very well, she's very nice. (Nhan, p14; 122)

For some women, a Vietnamese partner is still preferred for their children. Marriage outside the culture will be difficult because of differences in upbringing and cultural heritage.

...we have to expect... because they live in this country... the possibility to marry to a non-Vietnamese person... but it would be better if they have found a Vietnamese one... from the same culture they can understand easier. (Van, p51; 121)

By picking up the western way of living in Vietnam, Van was able to make the transition more easily to life in Australia.

...we picked up through our study. That's why make that decision - we like to live that way. So we keep part of the tradition, and then part of the western. That's why we integrate easily to that life here. It's not strange at all, not unfamiliar. (Van, p10; 124)

Home as suburb

Suburban location is something that is important for the women, although in choosing to live where they do, a variety of factors are considered. I have already discussed the importance of family, which has implications for suburban location. The women have chosen to live in the established suburbs to the east and west of Canterbury because it is convenient and suitable for raising children. This links with the importance of family in their concept of home. There is little emphasis on the need to have lots of Vietnamese nearby, although being able to buy Asian food easily is considered advantageous. There are other issues which concern the women about their neighbourhoods, the most important one being safety.

Safety

Safety within the suburb and city is an issue that concerns every woman. For these women, it is a major issue.

I prefer to live in an area which is safe, quiet. You know I don't mind if there's all Australians or all migrants. As long as it is safe to live in, you know, with a happy environment, that sort of thing. That's the main thing. (Minh, p31; 152)

Many of the Vietnamese women have bars or shutters on their windows, enhancing their feelings of security.

The role of the media in encouraging fear, especially for children, is mentioned. Although Nhan feels safe in her suburb, she worries about the children. Ironically, since she and her family have watched television more as their understanding of English has grown, this fear has increased. She makes the point that in her country it is very different. Her mother would not worry if she did not see her daughter all

day, whereas Nhan has to be looking out for her children constantly.¹⁴ She will not even let her youngest child go to her mother's house by himself.

Some of the women do not feel safe at night and there is little confidence of gaining help if something goes wrong.

...that's why I don't feel safe to walk at night because in this country when something happens they didn't help... you shout but nobody can come and help, they stay inside and they don't do anything, sometimes they ring the police, but they don't come and help. ... so we don't feel safe to go out at night. (Diem, p24; 123)

This situation is in marked contrast with Vietnam, where Diem always felt safe and protected by other people. Suburbs were crowded during the day and night.

...in Vietnam... about four or five million people... the weather all the time hot like summer in Darwin... So that's why the people like to go out to play and talk and stay in the front or the balcony or things like that and if something happen ... you shout like, "Somebody stole something", and then straight away try to get them. (Diem, p24; 138)

Safety is a particular concern for older Vietnamese. In her work in the community, Diem has found that many older people are too frightened to leave their dwelling. As a result they become socially isolated and in some cases, unhealthy.

...health is not very good, they live, they scared, no fresh air, don't do anything ... even shopping, they don't know how to buy good food, so they get sick... (Diem, p29, 154)

¹⁴ This growing awareness of the potential for crime has also impacted on all families who have lived in Sydney for several generations. My childhood in the suburbs was never constrained by parental fears for my safety. Children growing up in the same streets today face a very different lifestyle.

This contrasts with life in Vietnam, where social interaction, community caring and shared values within the neighbourhood are central to an older person's life.

... they sit there and talk to the neighbours because the neighbours [are] important... they can't do it in here - so if they live in the village... they can open the door and then they go outside and this one look after the other one... (Diem, p29; 161)

Convenience

Convenience is a sought after commodity. Being close to shops, especially those selling Asian groceries and vegetables, as well as proximity to schools, public transport and extended family are all important when considering suburban locations.

...it is very convenient for travelling, see only few minutes to stations, and then few minutes to the bus... we didn't have car at that time. (Van, p26; 136)

...it is easy to go to shops, to buy some food... A lot of Australian food here. And Vietnamese food here. (Hanh, p15; 118)

Nhung's flat is also convenient to all the facilities that she requires. This is very important and provides a good reason for staying in a flat.

And I think it's quite [a] good flat here... it's close to all the facilities and Frank got the office here... we have no reason to move (Nhung, p47; 18)

Children's needs

For those women with children, it is important to locate in an area that they feel is morally appropriate. The behaviour of other children in the suburb must meet their standards, as must attitudes of parents towards their offspring. A Vietnamese

proverb suggests that if one is close to good people, then this behaviour will be a positive influence.

If you grow something black, you going to be black one day... if you close [to] some good people... you get a good thing from them. (Nhan, p26; 117)

I don't like to live there because some children they come here with the family, they go to work and they don't have enough time to look after the children. The children ... join the gang, that's why I don't like my son to live there... some children when they come here they start to dye their hair different colours. And they just don't go to school or go to school because compulsory. But they're not learning. They take the day off to walk outside the shopping [centre] or stay in the railway station and talk... so that's why I don't like to live there. (Diem, p15; 115)

Neighbours

The women talk about neighbours from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, some of whom they get on with well and others, not so well. Occasionally, there can be problems living in close proximity to a lot of Vietnamese. Gossip may occur and pressure can be exerted to become involved with political activities. There are also ethnic and class differences in the Vietnamese community that need to be appreciated.¹⁵ The public sphere homogenises this difference.

...they're [the neighbours] not quite Vietnamese - they came from Vietnam - Chinese originally. So they're quite different. We only know, but not very close. Our neighbours next door... Greek and Romanian... since so busy... we don't see them much... only we're talking over the fences. (Van, p41; 127)

...all Australian around that area, my house. And they were very good to us, they watch the house for us... when we go somewhere we can leave the key.

¹⁵ In Vietnam, 80 per cent of the population are ethnic Vietnamese, with others coming from minority groups, including the Chinese (Hassan, Healy, McKenna and Hearst, 1985: 265). Ethnic background was not identified as a major issue by the women in my study.

They can come in to water the plants in the backyard and every time someone come to see us, they very kind... And that's why I like to be with them. Italian people, but not with the Lebanese people because they're too noisy. (Diem, p17; 159)

Normally the Vietnamese people who live in Australia got three grades... so I don't like to live near Cabramatta, because many Vietnamese people. Our grade is middle. Others... sometimes they didn't have the education, higher education, so they come from the country, the didn't go to school, they were poor and when they come here they bring the country customs... (Diem, p15; 128)

Ironically, areas such as Cabramatta, which Diem perceives as too ethnically concentrated, are where she likes to shop.

I don't like to buy the Vietnamese food in Marrickville because very high price and they haven't got enough. In Cabramatta, most of the big supermarket is in Cabramatta. They import from Thailand or somewhere, so the food is nicer and cheaper and they've got everything. (Diem, p16; 112)

Other women visit centres such as Cabramatta in western Sydney and Chinatown in the central CBD because of their vibrancy and the fact that these places remind them of Vietnam.

Cabramatta... a lot of Vietnamese there and I didn't have to speak any English... I feel good because I saw a lot of people running a business around there, so that's good for the community. At least they are successful in this country. (Nhung, p59; 133)

...if you go to Chinatown or Cabramatta... a lot of Asian people, crowded, that sort of atmosphere... food, that's the main thing. (Minh, p41; 14)

Home as ownership

The majority of the women are driven by the dream of home ownership.¹⁶

...that's the dream for everyone in Australia... my dream too (Loan, p34; 134)

Some quoted Vietnamese proverbs that stress the importance of ownership before one can properly settle. Accordingly, renting is a temporary and undesirable stage. They endured hardship to ensure the realisation of this desire. The focus was, and still is, on work, frugality and sacrifice.

You must have worked so hard. Yes, two jobs and my husband working night shift... (Van, p25; 124)

I had the business, I was an acupuncturist so I had to live in Bankstown... And then at the same time I worked daytime in Australia Post. (Diem, p18; 151)

Our proverb say only you settle now and then you can be happy with your work. That is why we think that the most important [thing] for us is to have a house to settle first, to have a home, really a home. (Van, p27; 115)

Because I haven't got my own house yet, so still I don't feel settled... (Diem, p26; 14)¹⁷

It is important to keep hard work in perspective and not to desire higher and higher achievement. Owning your own house, even if modest, is sufficient. For Nhan, this

¹⁶ In Vietnam the majority of these women would have inherited property from their families. Struggling to buy their own dwelling would not have been an issue in this situation.

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Diem did own a house but through business failure, had to sell and currently rents accommodation. Her hard work initially brought success but now this feeling has gone.

realisation has come after seeing her sister-in-law die before she could enjoy the fruits of her labour.

...she nearly get everything she likes... she got house, books, good children, and suddenly she got to go away... She not enjoy her life, even one day. ...always work and look after the kids and she die. (Nhan, p33; 133)

...we [my husband and I] agree, just have what we have now... We happy now. (Nhan, p33; 142)

For Ha, the success of home ownership is nothing if the family dynamic is problematic.

I think if we have the house and we have the bad family - the husband no good and the children no good, I think that not successful... (Ha, p33; 122)

Hard work has implications for family life.

And you don't have enough time to look after the children, you don't have enough time to cook. Sometimes when you come home you feel tired, you don't do anything... (Diem, p25; 148)

To be able to afford the deposit on a cottage, Van did anything to save money. She made the children's clothes, all meals and the family decided not to buy a car until they could afford their house. Life was not easy. The weekly shopping expedition by public transport was a considerable ordeal.

We didn't buy any car at that time. We knew that we need a house first. It was really hard life at that time. You see for a big family every weekend we had two [shopping] trolleys to climb up so many stairs from the stations... (Van, p25; 136)

Owning means security, personal freedom and having an asset to pass onto your children. It is also an indicator of success. For these women who arrived with nothing, the satisfaction of attaining home ownership is considerable.

[Home is a] place where everything belong[s] to me and I belong to it. (Huong, p35; 152)

So out of your control, you rent a house... then they [the owner] say, "No you have to move because we want to sell the house". So it is better you own a house. Even you can change the decorating, anything in the house you can do, but if you rent you can't. Even something wrong with water or the stove, you have to wait for them. You can't do anything at all. (Van, p27; 155)

...we like to work harder to get our own place [rather] than renting the house. Because you know we rent it, and we know years after years, it still not our house. But if we try to work harder and we save some money and it's our own house, we pay hard, but at least later on we can have the house or our children can... (Nhan, p22; 130)

...here I think it's more important because we came here with bare hands and we can't use our skills which we used to have in Vietnam, and we have to start everything at the beginning, everything. We are so proud about what we have made, honestly. (Van, p52; 116)

Nevertheless, there are costs that come with the dream of owning, such as high interest payments and buying in an undesirable area because of affordability. This was the initial reality for Nhan who purchased a house in the far west of Sydney, a long way from her job. It was impossible to find work close to this home and meeting the monthly mortgage payments demanded two jobs, which in turn exacted a heavy toll on her family. In time she was able to buy a house closer to the city, and even though it was difficult, she does not regret pursuing home ownership. On reflection, she thinks that they should have waited until they could have afforded to buy closer to their work.

...working very hard to get money to pay in interest... that's why I say silly to do it. You know we should live together more and save more... at least half of the deposit... (Nhan, p22; 114)

There is one dissenting voice in this group who, at the time of the interview, had rejected ownership.¹⁸ Her lifestyle is such that flexibility is important. Renting means that she is not tied down to a financial commitment, which prevents her from pursuing other interests such as travelling.

We are happier to pay rent than to pay for the mortgage... he [my husband] usually say that he doesn't want to be settled in one place... if you buy a house of course, a lot of commitment... and I think he [my husband] travel too much to save money, every year he goes overseas... if we stick to the house, nothing else we could do because all the money go to the house... (Nhung, p44; 129)

So in our family circumstances we have no reason to buy a house. I got my insurance, he's got his, we've got our superannuation... (Nhung, p48; 122)

Even though Nhung is content with her choice, there is outside pressure to own. Her friends perceive a rented flat as temporary. It is not a real home.

My friends, they said to me that it's better to have a house because you would feel that's your home, because living in a flat you can't live for long, maybe they evict you... (Nhung, p55; 15)

Home as physical dwelling

Internal design and privacy

The traditional Vietnamese house, where these women spent some of their youth, is a very different physical structure to the western dwelling with its separate rooms.

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that since the interview, this woman has purchased her own house.

This has important implications for notions of privacy, especially when relatives come to Australia and are faced with living in situations that feel very alien. Friction within the family is often the result.

Nhung recalls how difficult her niece and nephew found this situation when they first came to Australia. They did not like sleeping in separate rooms and initially panicked when doors were shut and they were alone. Older people can also be uncomfortable and take time to adjust to the physical layout of most western accommodation.

And my brother-in-law he took his Mum here just a few days ago from Vietnam. And when she came here she was put in one room and she didn't like it. She felt very isolated, she came just a few days ago and she said that. "I don't want to be in the room by myself". And she got lost in the house because too many doors. She got lost three times when she went to the kitchen and she had to ask someone to take her back to her room. Just small house but she couldn't realise which door is her room because all the doors are the same. (Nhung, p7; 143)

The problem is compounded when elderly relatives are accommodated in small flats, which are unsuitable for extended families. Grandparents may have to share a bedroom with grandchildren, which breaks down the traditional hierarchy of inter-generational respect. In cases where the elderly are accommodated in flats of their own to alleviate overcrowding, the problem of social isolation and dependency on younger family members is often the result.

In returning to Vietnam for the first time since leaving, Nhung and her husband realised that they needed more privacy. Life in Australia had wrought changes for them.

He didn't feel good to sleep that way [in the same room with relatives]. But we used to be like that, but now we change completely. (Nhung, p7; 117)

The clean and tidy house

Unlike the Greek women, the clean and tidy house is not a focus of these women's narratives. Pragmatism is in evidence.

I like to have a clean and tidy house... but if we can't we just have to accept it. So we try our best to clean things and make things neat as possible, but I'm not that fussy... (Minh, p35; 124)

For Nhung there is simply too much outside work for her to spend time cleaning at home.

I don't have much time to tidy house. (Nhung, p57; 110)

Nevertheless, the clean and tidy dwelling is still a priority for some.

I feel very upset and uneasy if I see the house needs to be cleaned and... put in order. But if I can't do it, I really feel very annoyed not to fulfil my duties. (Van, p46; 120)

Flats and houses

There is a general preference to live in a house with its own garden, rather than a flat. Spaciousness, private outdoor areas and suitability for children are among the reasons. Living in Australia means there is a choice of dwelling styles, whereas in Vietnamese cities there is very little option. Most people live in medium density housing.

A house gives one greater autonomy and comfort. In a flat, noise of children playing will disturb neighbours. Inconsiderate residents are disturbing and make life unpleasant.

...you've got small space, you have no back yard, no front yard... I feel like [I'm] in a box. (Huong, p22; 112)

It's not comfortable like the house... it's too noisy in a flat... (Ha, p18; 121)

... when we try to do something we scared about making noise because of the neighbours. Like when I want to wash the clothes at night time I don't like to do it because maybe make noise... disturb the people. That's why I wait until the daytime, nobody home. (Diem, p16; 160)

I like the children to play in the garden but we haven't got a garden. And sometime I like to grow something special beans or something. We haven't got enough room to grow... flowers. (Diem, p17; 114)

In Australia, the house is the most desirable, provided one has sufficient financial resources.

...we have to [live in a flat] because we cannot afford to live in a house... (Diem, p16; 140)

Safety is an advantage associated with flat living, which, as I stated previously, emerged as a major concern for these women.

...the reason we couldn't live in the house is because of the safety. (Nhung, p46; 148)

...I like... the second floor because of safety, nobody can break the window and get in, and sometimes we can open the window or door in the daytime or even in summer at night time... (Diem, p24; 14)

Flats often have a security door, which is another attraction.

[My husband] has been here for nine years because of the security door. We never pay for insurance. (Nhung, p47; 16)

Flats are also easy to clean compared with a house and garden.

...but good for me to clean up because not big, that's really only one convenience. (Diem, p17; 113)

Nevertheless, it is difficult to accommodate extended family members in a flat.

...our nephew is coming here so it's a bit too small... I couldn't... have many people in one place like this. (Nhung, p47; 123)

Houses are more spacious, but even then, a large family is not always adequately catered for.

I would like to have a bigger house... more private bedrooms... we usually have six members of the family. But we have only one bathroom - very uncomfortable. So that's what I want. And a big garage to put the car in. (Van, p50; 138)

The garden

Gardens can be used to re-create the landscape that has been left behind. Plants powerfully evoke past experiences, their appearance and perfumes reminders of home.

Images of the women's gardens appear below.





My back yard looks like the back yard in Vietnam... with flowers... paw paw... Sugar cane... and bananas. (Van, p8; 122)

...when we settle down here, we want to have something just similar in my country. So we want to have our own house, the house. So we set up everything looks like back home and also we need plants that remind us back home, remind us, a souvenir of everything back home... if you go out you look at your garden and you look at some tree and its like palm tree and some plant that remind you of your home... (Huong, Focus Group, p8; 16)

Nhan says that she has got used to living in a house with its own yard. The family use this space for outdoor meals and the children can play there in safety.

Children can play in back yard, it's better than front, you can look after them easier. (Nhan, p34; 132)

The availability of a garden can help elderly people to settle, as well as giving them a healthier lifestyle. Diem proffers her vision for a community where elderly Vietnamese are supported and able to share with each other.

...they can grow some vegetable at home... or mint or small fruits like tomatoes... and they don't have to buy from the shops and they can share together... The other thing is they have time to do the garden, so they exercise... they go outside and talk ...they can stay outside the whole day for fresh air, that why the people wish to live together because they can talk and they can have the garden and they can share the things, the vegetables, the fruit, they can share together and when they cook... ask some friends to come and next day the other one cooks, so they quite happy to do it, they make the small group together. (Diem, p30; 113)

CONCLUSION

The women's stories here are seeped in loss. This was heralded by the fall of Saigon. The country and the way of life that they had enjoyed prior to the war were no longer. Consequently, the decision to leave Vietnam served to reinforce this loss, but for the women in my study, there was no real choice. They left what was an intolerable situation, where their meanings of home had been shattered. They departed in the midst of uncertainty, bravely searching for a new home and a different future.

Family remains the thread of continuity across their meanings of home even though the traditional family roles are being challenged as western customs and values impact on their lives. Nevertheless, they still maintain strong links with their cultural heritage. The physical house provides the conduit for this expression.