Chapter Seven

Australian citizens

Having begun this study with the concept of agency, the women's narratives lead me to conclude that this thesis is really about women's ingenuity in transforming reality to fit more closely with their own life's intentions and values. The construct of *creativity* allows for spaces for the incommensurableness of consciousness, love and other sources of life and energy. The previous chapter detailed how women's interactions with any number of the dimensions of Australian society was, for the largest part, not only helpful but indispensable in moving from positions of suffering of varying intensity towards the emergence of fulfilling lives. In Chapters Four and Five, I marvelled at the resilient personalities, cultivated in the collective societies of Lebanon, Russia, the Philippines and East Africa.

In this last "empirical" chapter, I will present the women's answers to the final three themes explored in the interviews: their current life as Australian citizens; their existential reflections about how life has turned out; and what they identify as their source of personal strength. In their narrating, the women wove the two first themes together and to facilitate a more analytical discussion, I will summarise all this information in two simple matrices with a third table including material about their contact with public services, which was covered in Chapter Six. The tables will assist in making visible emergent patterns and my concluding more theoretical reflections based on the women's experiences, to be presented in Chapter Eight. This present chapter will proceed under the following subheadings:

Australian citizens and existential questions
Sources of strength
Reliance on publicly funded services

Australian citizens and existential questions: How do you feel about life now?

The Vietnamese women

As already discussed, Tahn is still floundering around with circular reasoning cementing her in the quagmire of her helplessness. Her child provides her with the justification for living and for everything else, it seems. Soo separated from her husband within two years of arriving; he was imbued with traditional hierarchical expectations of her role as a wife and of her teenage children in terms of unquestioned obedience to him. Disapproving of her hybrid modern and Filipino patterns of interaction, he would use punishment by not speaking to her, not eating her food and behaving as if she were not present in the house, locking up the food and so on. She quickly resumed her professional agency by obtaining employment as an interpreter/welfare aide in the health field and rented a house with her children. She has recaptured her dedication to humanitarian service, is closely involved in her church and is obtaining tertiary qualifications. Two of her children have university degrees now and one of the boys still lives with her. She assists in caring for her grandchild and is devoting financial resources to helping her children in home purchase, while she continues to rent. She is satisfied with her choices and achievements.

The grandmother, Sen, is living very peacefully. She seems to epitomise a felicitous state of mind as an older person contemplating the end of her life. In the interview, she expressed a sense of inner harmony, quiet gratitude for the mystery of life and contentment for the role she has played in it. She does not interact with the world beyond the homes of her children, although she could have access to the lively expatriate community existing in the suburb in which she lives. She relies on her children to take her to any errands she may need, whilst her husband lives with the family of another child, a separation that she did not comment on.

The other Vietnamese women have attained the top priority of many migrants: home ownership. Mai Ho, after working very hard for 13 years in factories, has paid off her house. She is very happy and has stopped working by choice, as she now wants to develop her skills by studying dress pattern making. She and husband feel Australian, born in Vietnam, which they cannot forget but which she has no interest in visiting. Her life changed through her participation in the local Migrant Resource Centre and the Municipal Lady Mayoress leadership program for migrant women. She is feeling so empowered by her subsequent success in TAFE Information Technology Certificate courses that she is looking for opportunities to contribute to local public life. She encourages other Vietnamese women to venture beyond the home and wants to share the strengths of Vietnamese family mores with fellow Australians, because "*your children will have a better life if you keep them under your control all the time*".

Anh has fought off her depression by reasoning that, once her children attained entry into the university courses of their choice and she has a good occupation, she should not be depressed. This involved taking charge of her inner life and finding Buddhism as a powerful solace. She now feels that her sacrifices have been worthwhile and without Buddhist meditation, she thinks she would have developed mental illness. She has reached her goals and is deriving renewed professional fulfilment from working as a Vietnamese welfare worker. Wai Ling, finally, is continuing with her studies, completing a Master's degree and working in an ethno-specific organisation, which is one of the powerhouses of the Catholic Vietnamese community. To address the challenges of parenting in the Australian context and in collaboration with other Vietnamese professionals and elders, she developed a mode of parenting and communicating that serves to preserve the integrity of Vietnamese identity while enabling youth to comfortably work, mix socially and build a future in Australia. She excels in coaching Vietnamese parents to relate to their children, who are struggling with cultural contradictions and can adopt risky lifestyles if their deep needs are not being met by the family. She is frequently relied upon to deliver cross cultural training to human services workers and she speaks candidly and with simplicity:

W. *I feel very proud of what I did. I told my children to look at me as an example. They still say to me, "Oh Mum you are a very hard working person, very educated person". After finishing uni I felt very tired and didn't want to study anymore, but I continued working and studying and my children said "We really admire you Mum". This makes me proud of myself. Also with other people I get feedback about the service I provide for them and I feel very confident and proud of myself. I feel very confident and the confidence is always there surrounding me, with my children and all the people …*

O: *What do you think you have achieved?*

W: *I have attained good education in the skills I need to help people and I am very happy in my job, and all the people I help can see I have achieved it. For example, I worked for the Department of Immigration and the consultant told me how valuable my work is. I am very appreciated in the community … Many people ask me: "Why do you do so much, like 3 people?", I say "I am lucky to have the strength".*

O: *What drives you?*

W: *I compare myself with other people and I have good children, I can do what I like, I have a good job which I like. Everything drives me to work.*

O: *What do you think is the good life?*

W: *The good life is what is acceptable. I tell my clients that the key is to accept what life gives you, not to compare yourself, not to look down or look around, but to accept first, when you accept it you will be happy. That's the way I work with women who blame themselves, their husbands or children blame anything. Many people in Vietnam live in very bad situations but they still survive. Why do you want to destroy your life, try to do and you can do. If you try you can get out of trouble.*

Although these women articulated the positives of their resettlement in Australia to me, literature by Vietnamese writers emphasises that mourning and grief at the loss of home typify the Vietnamese psyche. The first mass exodus occurred only after 1975, despite the four millennia of difficult history (Nguyen, 2005:1). Nguyen (2005:148) observes:

Women revisit and reconstruct past lives while striving to define new identities in Australia … As Ien Ang suggests, "it is undeniable that the idea of diaspora is an occasion for positive identification for many, providing a powerful sense of transitional belonging and connections with dispersed others of similar historical origins".

The African women

Kiro's self-esteem rose as she received good feedback in her courses and students she was afraid of would come to her for help. She achieved high grades in finishing her course and applied to study nursing but was accepted only in a rural campus. She continues in her remarkable resourcefulness and is a source of information for the Ethiopian community, a role she values but finds trying in the context of running her café at the same time. She feels that Australia is her home:

O: *So what helped you make it through the IT course?*

K: *Ah, that is a very good subject* (laughs) *A very, very good subject that helped my stress management was leadership and psychology, time management, how to manage your stress, how to manage stress in society.*

O: *They covered all that in your course?*

K: *Yes I had good teacher, I had very good teachers always, and they were very helpful, and I ask them too. Because they talked just about the issues in my life, so I was interested and asked more. Like how to say no in a nice way (we laughed and agreed that is very important for women) Yeah, I never say no.*

O: *Was it part of your culture not to say no?*

K: *Only partly, it was also my personality. That was very helpful subject. Another good one was learning to set boundaries. Yeah all that. And when you get pressure on you, you have to get it out, those sorts of skills are very helpful.*

O: *That is all very Australian, you know Kiro.*

K: *It really helped and it really works.*

O: *It's Western knowledge.*

K: *Yes, they are good tricks, and I never used to say sorry, I thought I was perfect all the time and my husband taught me to admit my mistake, in a good way. The teachers taught me too. It makes me happy.*

O: *What are your goals?*

K: *To have a child by the time I am thirty.*

O: *How old are you?*

K: *Twenty nine. I'm old.*

O: *At 29 you are still considered part of the youth culture!*

K: *Oh my God!*

O: *At 29 I was still a kid, stupid ...* (we laugh).

K: *When I have a plan, I do it. I wanted to go home, so I went last year. I was so happy! So now I want to have a traditional wedding. After that I want to have kids.*

Kiro's contribution to Australian civil society, like for many of the women in the study, rests on her ebullient, generous personality which models a very different mode of being than one considered safe and appropriate for urban Australians early in the twenty-first century. A pillar of her community, she models for Ethiopians disillusioned by the monotonous repetitiveness of racist exclusion from mainstream labour markets (Gow, 2001:347) the possibility to overcome racism and live a fulfilling life.

Esther is in the final year of her Diploma at TAFE and is employed part-time. Her work is receiving accolades by service providers and she is held in high esteem in her field. She is feeling quite confident again and acknowledges that she is a role model and path breaker in her community. Her husband is pursuing his vision of bringing his community out of refugee camps and of being a political leader. He is encouraging Esther to continue her professional development and be the chief income earner. On a daily basis, Esther needs to repel accusations from men and women in her community that she and Australian service providers are motivated by an intention to break up families and take South-Sudanese children away. The playgroups she has established are a venue not only for mutual support, acquisition of vital information and enculturation, but they also provide frightened women and children with pleasant and benevolent contacts with the Australian life-world.

Nia has been reunited with yet another daughter and her children. She says, however, that she wants real participation as an Australian citizen, not to be classed as refugee. She is

taking out citizenship and is waiting for opportunities to begin contributing to Australia. She still finds life painful because the loss of two grandchildren in the forest fire still haunts her.

Fatima is waiting for her second son to finish VCE and next year will resume her own studies. She says that she will no longer need to sacrifice her educational and professional goals for the sake of ensuring her children are admitted to university. She still finds life at home with no transport very frustrating. Her husband is involved in a small co-operative making garden furniture from recycled timber. He seems to have graciously accepted the humble nature of this work, while maintaining what I perceived to be his statesman-like dignity. Fatima is also creatively resisting racial and material oppressions and creating an alternative civic culture:

> *O: How what have you noticed about Australian culture?*
>
> *F: You see I found something I did not expect in Australia. I found Australian people very innocent, naïve, very, very helpful. I did not know there are people so kind. I found one drunk woman. There was an old man who asked me if this bus goes to Thomastown. I told yes, and we started talking and laughing. We got on the bus and there was a drunk woman who yelled at me "F … F … you are going stay and then to drop bombs on me and kill me!" I told her, "Don't generalise, all people are not the same, don't say that, don't be prejudiced". Then she started laughing and made a big joke. Sometimes people talk because of the political things, but you cannot generalise. It's my habit, my children too, never to generalise. Even if I see a drunk, before I talk, I always give excuses. I never generalise. What I got from Australia, I want to give it back. Because as soon as I came, I got given a lot. Even this study, it was given to me. I had no money to do Family Day Care, I had no money. The other two courses I did, Centrelink told me they would give me $500 even though I asked for $200.*

Fatima is eager to begin contributing to improving Australian governance. She believes that our attitudes to senior citizens entail a waste of human talents needed by young people:

> *F: This is what I believe. That is one point and that's worries me very much. That's why young people are going to drugs. Pressure comes because people don't want to talk. The old people don't want to talk and the young people want to hear … In our community, no, no. There was a boy who had Playstation, everything technical and electronic. He was in a lot of trouble. His mother told me one day that he told her that he didn't really want to read books, he preferred her to tell her stories herself. My boys read a lot of books, but they told my*

husband that the best thing he did was to tell them his stories, what happened in your youth, what happened to you.

O: *Everyday you tell stories to your children?*

F: *Every day, we sit down and I talk to them. Without TV; we sit together and talk. Yes, there are two problems in this society, extended family and the time… I want to do volunteer work through writing, through Islamic Women's Welfare. I go to the women's groups and educate them about various matters. I am the one that makes them laugh. "Ah, Fatima is coming" they say and they come. That's the most important for the stress. I educate them about a lot of things, they ask me to come to the doctor. I tell them most important is to give time to their children … I want to write. If you don't have the language, you don't talk, you can't send the message.*

The other two Eritrean students, Zeinab and Naima, are employed as professionals in the ethnic community services. Zeinab began an African women's group in the inner city Ministry of Housing high-rise flats some years ago, with a no-interest loans co-operative among the women, inspired by the Grameen Bank model originally developed in Bangladesh. The women now are able to loan each other up to $1000. Her two children are achieving well at high school, whilst she is doing a Master's degree herself. Her husband comes and goes to Africa where he still has an active business. She struggles to juggle family and her own career but acknowledges satisfaction with having been able to undertake post-graduate study, having good relationships with many Australians, having most of her family around her, being confident about navigating the service system and having a lot of the Eritrean community trust her. She is also happy that she has empowered the women in her community and she now participates as an observer, with rotating leaders. She does not feel life has turned out as she had hoped, however, and she feels very burdened by many issues. She is not satisfied to not have attained the professional heights she had aspired to, nor is she mixing with people of her perceived intellectual and moral leadership level. She has her sights set on international horizons and with her husband and other close relatives has businesses and homes in the Middle East as well as Sudan; Zeinab is an example of a person living trans-nationally, where families maintain a number of households and avail

themselves of mass communication and ease of transport to create a most advantageous life for themselves and their families (Al-Shamarni, 2006).

Naima is appreciative of Australia because those who put her down are a minority and the culture here is to appreciate the person you are. She wants "*the label 'refugee' erased from my file*", however, as people use it to put her down, particularly in work environments. She made a lasting impression on me because of her articulation of the seismic properties of her life history and her capacity to integrate such adversity into a coherent system of spiritual values enacted through a basically loving and critical engagement with the world around her. Her child born 14-weeks premature will soon be home to join her three-year old brother and Naima is beginning to enjoy family life. She is on maternity leave, while her husband is developing a small computer business. All of the Eritrean women in this study wish to participate in formal political life and Naima talks about her responsibility and desire to give to the society which gave her much. She takes the initiative by looking for opportunities to connect with people and educate them about Africa, and thus dispelling barriers and stereotypes:

> N: *OK, in that sense, I don't have a clear defined identity, but I am proud of who and what I am. I could have ended up mad, or on the street, taking drugs. So that's the frustration, what's the difference between the drug addict and me? It's the power to turn everything into something positive, all the bad things you have gone through, into power. How do you feel proud? Of being a woman and going through all this, being Muslim and going through all this, being African and going through all this. We suffer a lot here to prove ourselves … but the power I've got takes me along in my journey. What I am saying, it's not an identity of a specific country. I belong as an Eritrean, as an African, as a Moslem as an Australian carrying citizenship. This is an identity carrying all this but saying this is it … I cannot … can you say I am Russian today, pure, or Australian? No! It's where you belong, looking for your identity. Because I have lived everywhere, in Sudan, you try to pick something from here, in Kenya, in Egypt, in Australia. It didn't occur to you that you would live in these places and cultures. You are searching for your identity, where do you belong, and how do you connect it all? You have to look at the positive side not the negative side, although sometimes you ask yourself, why do I have to go through this? But your belief is that you wouldn't have been the same person if you had not been though all these cultures. No, you would've been an ordinary person. Because when I went back from Kenya to Sudan, the*

> *friends I used to have I couldn't communicate with any more. They had been in a certain place and doing certain things, I couldn't go back because you struggle a lot to fit somewhere. It teaches you, you wouldn't learn that if you were in the same place. It teaches you to learn a lot. Being in one place never teach you anything, I believe.*

The Lebanese women

Wafa expanded the local Lebanese women's program and put her children through school. She said: "*I carried on as if everything was normal. I did not give in to the pressure of going back to join my husband*". This was in the face of community and extended family pressure, cultural expectations and financial hardship, and she is amused at her audacity and tenacity in maintaining her freedom as a woman by pursuing professional life in Australia. Although still struggling with financial and other pressures, she is satisfied with what she has achieved. She is highly regarded in the field as a cross-cultural trainer and Arabic-speaking community development professional. All other Lebanese women in the study, except Delal who lives in another part of Melbourne, have been using the Lebanese women's groups run by Wafa at the local, universally available Neighbourhood House, as a lifeline to varying opportunities over the life cycle.

Delal has one son at university and one still at school. Her four daughters are married but two are studying at university. She has brought all of her relatives and neighbours over to Australia and has helped them settle. She is running a women's group enabling this community, which is very isolated from the Australian world, to learn English, drive, use computers and begin to venture beyond Lebanese relationships. She now wants to get involved in contributing to public life as she is able to follow current affairs and she aspires to being elected as a local councillor.

Sosa is enjoying her growing independence and is pursuing the acquisition of skills and freedoms, such as driving and having a job, against her husband's wishes. She says she does not care that he does not approve, and laughs. Mariam has reconciled herself to her exile from Lebanon and to the loss of the protection of her birth family, saying that she is fine now

because she has a child to care for. With a car, she can visit relatives or go to church when she wants to. The child is the fulcrum of her life and his developmental delay entails more intensive caring, which contributes to the meaningfulness of her mothering role. Ramida was feeling quite emotionally flat and lonely when we met because the last of her daughters had married and she was in a household of males. She misses the liveliness of Arabic women's companionship, as documented in literature (Deen, 1995). She is feeling nostalgic about her lack of education and the times that she worked in a factory. Her only source of enjoyment is attendance at the Neighbourhood House-based Lebanese women's group. Mifsud, finally, is looking after her child and recovering her aplomb and sense of humour, having resigned herself to the marriage but evading its surveillance as much as possible. All women referred to here were able to recover by being connected with the local ethno-specific Lebanese worker, Wafa.

The Filipinas

Linda, like so many, feels that home is in Australia. Although she talks of conforming, assimilating, integrating and very much changing herself to continue living with a man who is barely able to meet her needs, she says that she has not lost any core values:

> *when you ask me, do I lose a lot of myself by conforming, I don't think so. I reckon I'm adding up what I have. I'm not losing because I refuse …*

Linda says her husband has not changed, rather she has; he treats her exactly the same way as earlier, but now she is able to rationalise his style and understand that he is a genuine and a loving person. She finds that the whole growth has been up to her and feels good about what she has achieved, putting it in terms of being useful and accepted, using her skills to give to the world around her, which returns to her in a feeling of acceptance and belonging.

Linda is one of the women whose struggle took my breath away; she certainly underwent the most precipitous plunge into the misery that is potentially concomitant with the migration experience. Of all the women, she most dramatically showed how essential

Australian governments' past bi-partisan embrace of multicultural policies of accessible family reunion was, as her mother provided the only bridge to shift her from imminent suicide to accessing the universal health and support services. It is well known among professional social workers and other counsellors that entrenched dysfunctional communication issues between couples and families require counselling over significant time (Compton *et al*., 2005; Miley *et al*., 2001; Alston & McKinnon, 2001). Such counselling was only possible *prior* to the decade long of rule of the radically neo-liberal coalition government in the state of Victoria throughout the nineties, which significantly curtailed universal social services. Linda's life illustrates the generosity of ordinary Australian neighbours and her local girlfriends, who were genuinely attracted to her culture, showing the operation of multiculturalism at a grassroots level. With such resources, Linda was able to provide a stable, nurturing family background for two future citizens.

Having already noted her personal growth, her employment in the primary labour market enabled her to begin her contribution to Australian civil society. By exercising unswerving generosity of spirit and professionalism, she continues to educate fellow Australians by enacting a practice that in itself contradicts the racist assumptions which frequently surround Asian people. She transforms situations of hostility or fearful anticipation of hostility by other Filipinos by creating a reality of acceptance, respect and even friendship. Such contributions to a nation's social capital are, of course, un-costed, uncounted and inestimable in value (Waring, 1999). Freed from her own anguish, she is again the demonstrative, affectionate person who plays freely with the children at the school her children attend. Such lack of emotional inhibitions is not typical of Australian urban culture and is even more rare at this point in history. Linda, therefore, is facilitating local children's sense of trust in belonging to a safe community, also known as protective factors in building personality resilience (Wise, 2000; Mustard, 1999, 2000). Again, state-based welfare services were necessary for her tap into this enormous agency.

Teresa has also found inner resources that had only been partially developed prior to coming here and today she feels more on top of things. She cites government services and connectedness with the local neighbourhood as well as with an activist Filipina organisation as keys to her recovery. The weight of her personal tragedies and poor marriage were too enormous to enable recuperation of her strength and at the time of interview, she said that all of her children were doing quite badly. The opportunity for rebuilding life, however, came from the capital inherent in the publicly funded infrastructure of Australia's welfare state, its universal services and the lively civic culture of her neighbourhood, resources which prevented the total disintegration of her family. The existence of an activist feminist Filipina organisation reliant on very modest government grants enabled her to re-connect with her lifelong source of meaning and dedication. Nevertheless, Teresa is enriching the civic culture of Melbourne by adding her skills to a grassroots organisation which is a lifeline to abused Filipinas and which has led to changes in immigration regulations related to overseas brides in situations of domestic violence (Marginson, 2001). She also combats racism and ignorance by enacting an educated and generous Filipina mode of being. With no money to buy a car, living in a rented house with some disabled children and an ailing marriage, this feisty woman is not only resisting but creating a counter-culture around her of solidarity and altruism.

Mary studied a Community Services course in Aged Care; although initially reluctant to work with this population group, she found the warmth and emotional connectedness of the elderly reminiscent of her family relationships back home. She feels fulfilled because she has grown though the hardship of migration and appreciates the citizenship rights of Australia, referring, for example, to available and accessible health services and laws around domestic violence. Melba exercised enormous fortitude in arriving here and her successful battle in eking out a respectable life was only possible because of the existence of Australian laws and resources dedicated to compensate for the ills and consequences of patriarchy, the existence of public housing and income security. She was thus enabled to provide a stable home for two future Australian adults, while not contributing any more nor less than ordinary

Australian-born citizens. She came from a background of greatest poverty and had to have recourse to the sexualised avenues available for women in her country to survive. She married a man who seemed to show her little respect from the beginning and was rescued by welfare workers. Of all the women, she is still living in the greatest poverty.

Nenita was empowered by industrial laws and regulations and is enriching the local church community, based on affective ties. She has just had her first baby, her mother has joined her and the family is waiting to move into their own home. Having attained and maintained her dignity, she is likely to nurture well-functioning future citizens. She repeatedly used the phrase of aspiring to "*just a simple life*" as a caveat to the descriptions of her contentment. Bernadette arrived quite clearly and fully espousing the affluent materialistic values of colonising nations and, as she identified with the upper-class in Australia and the Philippines, she practised indomitable resistance to and challenge of institutional and personal racism. Her material wealth and class snobbery were, however, not sufficient privilege on their own; she is recovering from having lost her pilot husband to cancer and angrily criticised the poor health services available through their private health insurance. In the end, they needed to use public hospitals as that was where the expertise was. She has been invited to become a member of the Australian Psychological Association, has a small private practice in one of the most fashionable suburbs of Melbourne and is looking for opportunities for professional and personal advancement.

The Russian women

Karina is undertaking a Diploma of Education on a full-time basis; the family had moved into their own home and her husband and son were energetically discovering the art and science of landscaping a garden. She is still working part-time as a carer for people with disabilities and doubts that she will ever be employed as a professional again, even with an Australian teaching qualification. She says she does not to have any plans for the future, but just keeps on going, not being afraid of anything because she has nothing to lose. Zina is ready to find work in her profession in information technology; she is very pleased to be in

Australia. Her husband has a job in his own field and of a level of seniority commensurate with his career in Russia. Her son has been accepted into an elite sporting association which prepares possible Olympian athletes, seemingly representing the pinnacle of acceptance by Australian society and Zina enthuses about feeling very much at home. Varvara is contented materially, saying that she cannot complain about anything. She is looking for another challenge in order to be stretched professionally.

Antonina is beginning to look for opportunities to re-enter the labour market but says that her life is still very quiet, and a little lonely. Her marriage seems stressed and the highlight of her week is still teaching at the Saturday morning Russian school and the Russian playgroup offered in her neighbourhood. Anastasia is working as a teacher of English to immigrants, is paying off her house in a modest lower-middle class suburb, had two additional children in Australia before separating from her husband and is a regular member of the Russian Orthodox Church:

O: *How do you see your future?*

A: (tone lowers considerably, almost inaudible talks without emotion) *Just bring up kids, earn a living its good to teach adults English because in normal schools it's very stressful …*

O: *It sounds to me like in thinking about your future you just think about plodding on, just doing your duty and that's all, is that how you feel?*

A: *Yes, you're stuck … you're stuck …* (Starts crying quietly for about half a minute; I keep silent)

O: *What would you like?* (I ask softly. Quite a few seconds later she answers very softly in a little girl voice)

A: *Go back home* (continues to cry quietly; gets tissues; a couple of minutes elapse)

O: *Is it just survival?*

A: *Well you have food …* (a few seconds later) *…You end up loving this country too, if I go back, I might miss Australia too. It becomes part of you. But if I had the money to buy a flat in Moscow or on the outskirts I would go back.*

O: *So Russia is home.*

A: *But then you think that your children will be Australian, and your grandchildren will be Australian and they will be like strangers to you.*

O: *What keeps you going, where's the strength come from?*

A: *My personal interests. If I feel depressed I do something I like, like gardening, doing something I enjoy helps me to get over feeling depressed, read books, just push myself, read religious books about saints lives that helps or talk to people like parents in the Russian playgroup and you realise that your problems aren't as bad and consider how lucky you are. Can't always look on the bad side. Religion helps a lot … maybe the way life has turned out that's the way it is supposed to be.*

O: *Do you blame yourself?*

A: (Teary) *Yes everyone makes mistakes.*

O: *Isn't that a heavy burden?*

A: *I feel guilty because when you bring up children with grandparents and other family, they learn by observing the attitudes between members of the family. I miss my mum and my sister's children and they miss us too … We don't know if it's God's will, or if it's a punishment for leaving my family. I really don't know …*

Larissa is very unhappy in Australia and her experience has been covered in the previous chapter. She encapsulates all of the above themes with a different twist. She seems certainly stuck in a rigid and uncompromising inability to perceive anything outside her cherished predispositions and *habitus*, whilst at the same time undeniably being powerfully intelligent and able to maintain her dignity as a competent agent. She took her daughter to auditions for the Melbourne Conservatorium and was referred to a leading professor of music. Here, the independence of her discourse was maintained as she critiqued what she saw:

L: *I was really surprised at the standard of the auditions. I am not saying that the young people were not talented, but here, they were just not of a professional standard. We would never have a musician not try out and listen to the instrument upon which he/she will play. It is just laughable. Here was a competition and you had to play on an unknown instrument! … It's just simply comical! Because before you can perform, you have to listen to the instrument because each one has its own tone and quality*

O: *Tell me about yourself, how did you feel?*

L: *Well after the competition, we went up to the jury and asked them where she could study … A professor at university, he is a famous pianist in Australia and he travels to Russia too. We came to him and Sonia played. He made some comments while she played which I thought were very strange. And that was the greatest blow, that a famous pianist was making comments that were not of a professional standard. He didn't understand … He himself could play, but he played in some strange way … Maybe it's an inaccurate perception … But for me, I studied with a professor at the Moscow conservatorium and even though I didn't get in, I had a fabulous teacher, she taught me a lot, a lot! So that's why I can say that I have a professional approach to this. What he was saying was very strange to me, and then I understood that here everybody has a not quite right approach. The approach or perception that people have here in Australia with respect to professional musicianship will never be acceptable anywhere else, because it is based on a lack of education in people. And here I just fell into horror, dismay: here I am not needed by anyone. Here no one will understand me and no one needs it, because here there is not a system which is of a professional standard. At home, we have intense competition, we have many musicians, we actively pursue advancing forward and forward, but here, such effort is not required. Here people play music for pleasure, a bit here a bit there, so far as I understand it, here many aren't even interested in classical music, but at home we did not relate to music in such a strange way.*

Larissa's critique is a frequently encountered example amongst migrants of total resistance to the hegemonic discourse of the country. She refused the epistemic violence inherent in her status of being an "other" in a minority and a stranger who cannot speak English properly. Her analysis of medical practice also reflects a frequent migrant perspective about the distorting influence of the profit motive.

Concluding remarks

Table 2 below attempts to summarise and compare the various expressions of the women's experiences as citizens in the country they have chosen to settle in, however reluctant and unexpected their migration had been.

Table 2: The women's narratives: Citizenship and existential questions

Women	Citizenship: Moulding cultural cpaces	Citizenship: Conforming	Existential: Contentment	Existential: Ambivalence	Existential: Regret/ discontent
Africa	Esther, Naima, Fatima, Kiro, Zeinab. (Nia wants to do this)		Fatima, Kiro, Esther, Naima, Nia	Zeinab	
Russia	Zina	Karina, Varvara, Anastasia, Antonina, Larissa	Varvara, Zina, Karina	Anastasia, Antonina	Larissa
Lebanon	Wafa and Delal	Mariam, Mifsud, Sosa, Ramida	Sosa, Wafa, Delal	Ramida, Mariam, Mifsud	
Philippines	Linda, Theresa, Mary, Bernadette	Melba Nenita	Nenita, Melba, Bernadette, Linda, Mary,	Teresa	
Vietnam	Mai Ho, Wai Ling, Soo, Anh	Tahn, Sen	Soo, Anh, Wai Ling, Mai Ho, Sen	Tahn	

The table shows that all African women were actively transforming their environments towards dispelling mistrust and increasing the spaces for human generosity and acceptance. Similarly engaged and caring citizenship is practised by two Lebanese women, four Vietnamese women and four Filipinas. Interestingly, the Russians, the group deriving from a European tradition, were mostly conforming to the predominant consumerist lifestyle with caring focused on their own (nuclear) families, in step with a majority of their fellow Australian citizens. Zina was re-creating a Russian expatriate community and its needed resources but she did not give me instances of having taken action to challenge dominant values. Given the de-legitimisation of communism, these Russian migrants have tended to devote their energies to enjoying the citizenship – as well as economic - benefits that were ostensibly missing from the former Soviet Union. Possibly significantly, the Russian group

also contained the least contented women, whilst overall the most engaged women tended to be more fulfilled. The ambivalent Lebanese women and the Vietnamese Tahn and Teresa were all in oppressive marital relationships. Teresa's ambivalence also related to her significant personal tragedies and Antonina was largely socially disconnected and may have had a strained relationship with her husband. In addition, Teresa, Zeinab, Anastasia and Larissa were ambivalent or totally unhappy, because they thought that their quality of life was superior back home.

The next section will describe what the women identified as the sources of their strength. As a tentative comparison and in addition to their reflections, I will present the patterns which I identified as probable significant underpinnings of their resilience in a table.

Sources of strength

Exploring the sources of the strength or energy the women so obviously displayed in the course of their sojourn and settlement, seven dimensions emerged from the women's stories. The **emotional legacy** of women's large, extended and lovingly intimate families were named as a primary source of strength by all the African women, four Russians, four Lebanese, all Filipinas and four Vietnamese women. As Table 3(a) indicates the names of individual women, the reader may well recall the family interaction paradigms practised in the various life-worlds, as covered in Chapter Four.

Family values of philanthropy, love, generosity, dedication to liberation, education, ethics and/or wealth acquisition drove more than half the women whilst the richness of their **life-world** or cultural milieu was named by some women as central in explaining their resilience. A **strong mother** was a significant source of inspiration for 8 women, namely, 4 African, 2 Russians, 1 Lebanese and 1 Filipina. For over a third of the women (eleven), **male relatives** including fathers, grandfathers and uncles were central in affirming their identities. **Spiritual life** was named as the principal source of strength by ten women and deriving

existential meaning from a sense of **mission and dedication to humanity** energised another nine. Interestingly, no Russians expressed such an interest.

Table 3 (a): Sources of personal strength as identified by women

Group	Family: Emotional legacy	Family values	Life-world	Mother role model	Male figure	Spiritual life	Mission: Love for humanity
Africa	All named their extended loving families	Fatima, Naima, Zeinab	Fatima, Esther, Nia	Nia, Naima, Fatima, Esther	Zeinab, Esther, Kiro, Naima, Fatima	Nia, Naima, Kiro	Fatima, Esther, Zeinab, Naima
Russia	Zina, Larissa, Anastasia, Karina	Zina, Antonina, Karina, Larissa	Karina, Larissa, Anastasia	Karina, Larissa,	Karina	Anastasia	
Lebanon	Delal, Wafa, Sosa, Mariam	Delal, Wafa, Mariam	Delal, Sosa, Wafa,	Wafa	Mariam, Wafa	Delal, Mariam,	Wafa, Delal
Phillipines	Linda, Teresa, Bernadette, Mary *Stressed*: Melba, Nenita	Linda, Teresa, Bernadette, Nenita	Linda, Teresa, Mary	Teresa	Linda	Nenita	Linda, Teresa
Vietnam	Anh, Wai Ling, Soo, Tahn,	Anh, Wai Ling	Anh, Wai Ling		Anh, Wai Ling	Anh, Sen, Soo	Anh, Wai Ling, Soo

In looking for patterns to understand women's agency, I note in Table 3(b) the women's location along dimensions of symbolic and material capital, education and quality of relationship with their partners. The majority of women came from culturally and materially privileged families, were mostly tertiary educated and all the Africans and all but one Russian had very strong, affirming marital relationships. This illustrates again that the group of women I talked with is not representative of all migrant women, which can partly be explained by the sampling procedures as elaborated earlier. The African women derived

from the uppermost echelon of their societies, except for Nia whose life story nonetheless evinced considerable admiration from me. Significantly, only one Lebanese and one Vietnamese woman had a supportive marriage. These tables will be followed by some elaborations of individual life narratives with particular portent for the understanding of agency and what factors facilitate or inhibit it.

Table 3 (b): Patterns identified through the author's analysis

Group	Class: Symbolic capital	Class: Material capital	Education	Relationship with husband
Africa	All but Nia	All but Nia	All but Nia - self taught skills	**+ve**: all strong **–ve**: none
Russia	All	All but Karina	All part of education elite	**+ve**: all **–ve**: Anastasia
Lebanon	Wafa, Delal, Mariam	Delal, Mariam	Dela, Wafa, Mariam	**+ve**: Delal, Mifsud (ex) **–ve**: Mariam, Mifsud, Sosa, Ramida, Wafa,
Phillipines	All but Melba	Linda, Bernadette, Mary, Teresa	Linda, Mary, Bernadette, Teresa, Nenita	**+ve**: Bernadette, Mary, Nenita **–ve**: Teresa, Linda, Melba,
Vietnam	Anh, Soo, Wai Ling	Anh, Wai Ling	Anh, Wai Ling	**+ve**: Mai Ho **–ve**: Anh, Than, Wai Ling, Soo

(**+ve** = positive; **–ve** = negative)

Family interaction paradigms, values, life-world and sense of mission

In her book *Resilience*, Ann Deveson (2003) covers the multiplicity of resources, circumstances and factors which might explain how some people are able to survive unspeakable horrors. The anvil of adversity is often referred to as the answer to such imponderable questions, but family life again is critical. The recently published book *Voyage of Hope* (Nguyen, 2005:144-5) quotes a child who came to Australia by boat from Vietnam with her parents:

> "If you survived what happened, you know, how life was in Vietnam after 1975, if you survived that, and the journey from Vietnam to Australia, you had to be a strong person. You cannot be weak because such a story cultivates strength, courage, and resilience in a person, and because your parents were like that, you too have to have a bit of that, because you are a child of these people."

Linda's agency encapsulates the life giving energies of several dimensions simultaneously. Her family ethos and unconditional love were identified by her as great gifts which prevented her from "*going berserk*". It required the highest level of moral integrity to remain faithful to her family values about divorce despite her emotional agony. Agency as *freedom from the constraint of others* reflects an individualistic ontology and to interpret her life as exemplifying the constrictions of traditional cultures would be to miss a gem of agency. Linda's oppressions in Melbourne's empty suburbs were mediated by the symbolic capital of her childhood and family of origin; she also did not suffer from poverty within her marriage. Her moral integrity, university education and social life in the Philippines as host of a radio show, in addition to active youth group membership, meant that the negative representations of Filipinas in the public space were not applicable to her or those who are part of her. Hence, her story is one of finding and walking a line of hope and love in the morass of depression, disappointments and a fundamentally incompatible marital alliance. Linda certainly found her voice, her own dance, her unique, original creation of life out of the almost total destruction of her previous world and identity. She picked up recipes from everyone around her, added her imagination and flair and produced a way of being that is nourishing to herself, her family, the Filipino community and the neighbourhood.

Teresa's background was of the greatest social, material and cultural capital of any of the Filipinas; one may have expected her to be able to draw on vast resources and reserves of internalised power in dealing with her adversities. I found, however, that she was just as vulnerable to loss of identity as the other women in the study when deprived of her web of connectedness to people and to a human cause far beyond individual domestic sorrows. She is drawing again on a source of enjoyment in life after her creativity helped her in her struggle to keep the family together through the forced acquisition of life skills she did not

have. Her former privilege became a liability in this context as did her more advanced age and consequent depleted energy reserves in comparison with the much younger Linda.

Bernadette's class privilege, modern identity and English fluency were not sufficient to help her overcome the depression which ensued from the excluding practices of the Australian Psychological Association (APA). The stepping stone which prevented loss of dignity for this capable woman and offered re-entry into professional life was the existence of the one-stop shop Commonwealth-funded Migrant Resource Centres (MRC). Placing herself in routine encounters with other professionals as equals by working as a volunteer, she was able to indirectly access the information, affirmation and support all migrants – and indeed all people - need. She was thus able to maintain the power and clarity of her discourse, rather than cowering under the hegemony of the majority embodied in the APA. Because of the avenue offered by the MRC, the support of her family and her husband's status as a commercial airline pilot could act as additional privileges enabling her to sustain her own discursive construction of meaning.

Mary's and Anh's stories are about the anguish experienced when a well functioning adult is blocked from participating in society in a meaningful manner; the spaces available in local and low-cost Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges for mature-aged people to make a career shift, enabled them to make their current professional contribution. Again, their previous education, and position in middle-class families with caring friends and relatives were capital that enabled them to avail themselves of resources and make serendipitous career changes. Their cultural capital of authentic expressions of affection and empathy enabled them to meet the emotional needs of often neglected senior Australians, as in Mary's case.

Similarly, the emotional legacy of their families of origin can be seen in the two women who had the most constricted lives; Than and Mariam were family members who needed protection. Nenita frequently used the phrase "*just a simple life*" as a final caveat to her

descriptions of the themes we explored and I wondered what was being unspoken in this choice of words. Who was she comparing herself to? What question was she answering in her repeated assertion that she was contented with her simple life? The repetitive caveat led me to surmise that here were echoes of the subliminal colonialist discourse this Filipino family was oriented to live up to.

Cultural and material capital

The women whose capacity to overcome was so developed that they were able to assume a participatory citizenship, actively moulding Australian society, all came from privileged, leading families either through wealth, social prestige, education or political clout. Wafa was an example of this group:

> O: *So, you seem a pretty determined woman* (laugh) *where, what made you able to do all these things independently, just go ahead and do it?*
>
> W: *My family and the way we were brought up … I humbly say that we used to feel very special in my family. My father used to be needed by all, he was a very important person in our neighbourhood, and everybody would look at our family differently, high. We were brought up to know that whatever we do, people look at us differently.*

The factor of class, whether defined according to material capital or symbolic - such as political or educational - or social capital, which identified the family of origin as belonging to the higher echelons of the society, in addition to closeness to their fathers, carried a long lasting legacy on their daughters' ability to pit their strengths and wills against the contingencies of life. The Vietnamese professional women, Soo, Anh and Wai Ling and the very self-determining Filipinas, Linda and Bernadette, are clear examples of the role of class as are Nenita's and Melba's very modest expectations of life. Zina, Varvara and Antonina came from affluent families and Naima, Zeinab, Esther, Kiro, Fatima, Anh, Wai Ling, Linda, Wafa and Karina were close to their fathers or other male relatives. Mariam's closeness to her father probably immured this sensitive personality to some of the rigours of life.

Irresistible influence of a strong mother

Naima's mother left her with an indelible legacy:

> N: *My life is from my mother's family … My mother was a fighter in the Eritrean Liberation Front, ELF. She was a very strong woman. I consider all my personality was built on her as a role model. She gave me courage, I would say that 90% I got it from her. Everyone is born with a character but being tough to fight against anything, I took from her. For example, when I was little, I was her only little daughter and so she would be concerned, but because she was in the field she used to see younger girls dying, so she would consider that I was better off in a safe area … For instance, I give her the credit to develop in me the responsibility to decide for myself what I wanted to do in life. This is not normal in my country. The conversations we used to have where she would ask me what do you want to do. She wouldn't tell me what to do as parents do.*
>
> O: *And tell me more about the power you felt when she was with you?*
>
> N: *A person who is dedicated to what they are doing, that gives you the courage; that's where the power comes from. To see one day to have the country free for the next generation. Not for herself, because she may not be around, but it's for the children. The power she has to do what has to be done for the next generation. You wouldn't ask a woman to go and fight for her country. It's very hard emotionally to be separated from her family and children, to sleep anywhere, and any minute a bullet can come and take her life, it's a power! It's powerful when you see a person like that, you feel the power around you. It's people who are really dedicated to lose their life. She could have said that she wants to enjoy her daughter. And me, having my daughter with me, it's a connection again. I don't want to stay one day without her, I have to come and see her. So she managed to stay away from me for so long, only a strong person would do that! It's not even sleeping in a luxury place. It's worse, having the guns around her, and all this. This is the power, the aroma you have around them. I feel very lucky to have had her. So I look at the positive side. I haven't seen her for ten years. And she was very emotionally strong, I wanted to be next to her and feel her. And feel her. You cannot do that. So spiritually, I am very strong.*

Both South-Sudanese women had uncharacteristic role models in their mothers: Esther's mother would not resile from her opinion and will, leading her husband to despair of her as an "*uncontrollable*" woman. Nia's mother, through the necessity of widowhood, took Nia, as her eldest, to assist in "*learning to do all the things men could do*". Nia continued her expanded skills repertoire by learning veterinary practice from her husband, taking over upon his death. Karina's mother's Spartan fortitude was covered earlier.

Family values and ideals

The families of Larissa, Anastaisa and Karina were members of the intelligentsia or artistic classes. Both Wai Ling's and Anh's families' values of charity and love of their community were key to their *enormous* agency. Similar upper-class family traditions of fearless community leadership and philanthropy were cited as the sources of inspiration for other Vietnamese women who pioneered service organisations in Melbourne (Nguyen, 2005:134). For the Eritrean women and Teresa, political commitment and solidarity in resistance to injustice were rich resources which enabled them to surmount life problems by reconnecting with sources of meaning and fulfilment. Self-expression in engaging with the broader human community in pursuit of values or ideals beyond self-interest prevented sinking under the weight of domestic frustrations of everyday life, and instead enabled women to soar beyond them, restoring zest for life.

Having a mission: Love for humanity

Viktor Frankel co-founded existential psychology on the basis of his observations of fellow Jewish prisoners in Nazi concentration camps during World War II; he theorised that commitment to noble values enabled transcendence over extreme suffering and thereby offered psychological and moral coherence in the survivors. A dedication to love of humanity was an absent motive in only the Russian group. On the subject of having a mission, the Lebanese Delal spoke eloquently:

> D: *Every year about 20 came from my village … My husband filled applications. They came to stay at my house for a couple of months. About 10, 12 families stayed with me.*
>
> O: *You have always wanted to be involved?*
>
> D: *Yes, I like to be involved. I like to touch … I like to be friendly with other communities … My feeling that pushes me to be involved. I believe in God; I believe in helping. I believe in humans … The first I learnt from my religion. I have to do that. Then some feeling pushed me. I feel I have more understanding … I feel I have energy. I have more in my brain that carries me. I feel I look for the good things always, not the bad things. What good I can do I do it. I feel happier then. I feel like someone helps me more, gives me more. Believe me when I*

feel something coming to me more and more. Even if I spend one dollar I find coming another two dollars. I feel who spends and gives good things. Someone gives him more.

Fatima also referred to her source of strength as having a cheerful, creative temperament, naturally inclined to enjoy helping others:

F: *Always happy, I always make people laugh, I was fun. Everywhere, even in the refugee camp, even here, everyone is around me. I made people happy. Everybody, I don't believe anybody is bad. My brothers and sisters are like that too. Some are more kind.*

O: *The war didn't turn you off people?*

F: *I have a friend who was so clever in Year 12, and a boy was very jealous so he spread bad stories about her so that her parents stopped her from finishing school. Then after the war, I saw him with his leg and arm amputated. He told me who he was and what had happened to him. We cried and I took him to my house and treated him like my own. Some people become generous and more kind, I overcome everything. With kindness and generosity, you overcome everything. Your approach. Love overcomes everything, and smiling … you get through everything.*

Such sense of mission was evident in the young lives of all the women who named this issue, except for Wai Ling, in whom such a drive could be seen as burgeoning in her early predisposition to sacrifice her inclinations for the good of her family.

Spiritual life

A third of the women named this as their primary ongoing source of energy for daily living. A direct relationship with God was articulated most eloquently by Muslims Naima and Delal and Christians Kiro and Nia. The other women referred to church membership as a source of consolation and there were two Buddhists, Sen and Anh. I spoke to Kiro about her faith:

O: *Where do you get your strength from?*

K: *From God, that's for sure. Because you always think of His teachings. Today is not all right but the next day will be good. When people come here and admire things here, I feel happy too.*

O: *How does God help you?*

K: *Because I pray, and He answers all the questions, He gives you all the energy*

O: *Is church life important for you?*

K: *ery, very important, that's my priority.*

O: *What does it give you?*

K: *Peace. You carry all the stress for 6 days and then you go there and it's a big relief. And God.*

Nia's cosmology is the source of her confidence and capacity of acceptance:

N: *I believe that comes from God, because He made you the person you are, to reject anything bad and to accept only good things. So don't ever feel bad about doing that because you know that is the right thing and it doesn't just come from you. I tell my children and grandchildren don't be a coward but don't be an attacker. Just live according to what God has given you and He will help you.*

O: *What has helped you the most in life?*

N: *I don't think anyone can ever make me feel better. I do it myself, with myself in my heart and that is God. Nothing anyone can ever tell me can help me live freely and happily in this country, but I do that … I have two things that keep me going. The first thing is God who looks after my soul wherever I go. The second thing is my inner self, the things that come out of my mouth.*

Naima's conversations are habitually interspersed with references to Allah and her daughter's amazing survival has led her to express continuous thankfulness and praise of His might:

Being in different places you pick from here, you pick from there, you learn the hard way … So spiritually, I am very strong. I say it's God's will. If I gave into my feelings, I would be powerless. She could have died in the field. But God saved her for me.

I have noted that a minority of women and all the Russians, except for Zina, expressed the sadness and listlessness of having lost some of the root of their being. This loss is related to the homeland and those without extended family felt it uniformly. Karina expresses it with emotional blandness, being able to endure hardship, almost unflinchingly and without any

self-pity. In response to my question, she said that nothing drives her, she just does not have anything to lose. She does not think that she has achieved anything significant and she does not think about such things.

Reflections about the women's existential reflections

The women's existential reflections are expressions of their choices about how they wished to describe their identities and life trajectories at an interlocutory moment in time with me, a person to whom a range of significations were attached. For example, I felt that Nenita and Melba perceived me to be a woman of some authority and, while not doubting the honesty of their self expressions, I acknowledge that women and men can choose any discursive position that is useful and meaningful to them in a specific historical moment (Weedon, 1987:131). A particular choice of words, or the application of a particular lens through which a woman might enunciate her reality is more than likely expressive of her need at that moment to protect, reaffirm or resist alternative articulations of who she is and what her life may be about. As Stuart Hall (Osborne & Segall, 1999) points out, however, while identity is a position that we choose at a point in time and it is not fixed, this does not mean that identity is nothing or does not exist or is irrelevant. He proposes specifically:

> Identity for me is the point of suture between the social and the psychic. Identity is the sum of the temporary positions offered by a social discourse in which you are willing for a moment to invest. It is where the psyche is able to invest in the public space, to locate itself in a public discourse, and from there, act and speak. It's both a point of enunciation and a point of agency, but it won't be repeated, it won't be the same position that you will take up later on; or at least it won't be the same position that you have in relation to another discourse … You come to a situation and the enunciation is always in the light of an existing terrain... Even if you're not wanting to say that again, the new thing you say has to make sense in terms of the things you said before … (Osborne & Segall, 1999:401-404).

A linked concept is diaspora, which, far from referring to a life lived within fixed enclaves of imagined nationalisms frozen in time, encapsulates the movement that migrants - and more and more of the earth's population - are journeying along, from the narrower to the broader

and this cannot be reversed, again, according to Stuart Hall (Osborne & Segall, 1999:402). The women's narratives illustrated Hall's framing of diasporic life as the process of gathering from the constantly shifting environments. The ensuing hybridity is more aptly used as an adjective to depict the knowledges, ways of being and self-understandings that we appropriate in a manner that is seemingly incoherent to the observer, but with an internal integrity for us as we juxtapose the discourses and interpretations in ingenious meaning making. Stuart Hall (Osborne & Segall. 1999:402) argues for a substitution of the search for our roots to a more contemporaneous articulation of the routes we are traversing, with a harkening to Derrida's movement in *"diférance"*.

Multiracial feminism, synonymous with Third World feminisms and international or multicultural feminism, is an emerging theoretical framework which:

> asserts that gender is constructed by a range of interlocking inequalities … People experience race, class, gender and sexuality differently depending upon their social locations … (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1999:104).

The heuristic value of this literature is in identifying the ubiquity of systems of power relations and accompanying discourses operating in systematic ways with and through each other, dependent on a person's privilege and subordination. In other words, intersecting forms of domination produce both oppressions and opportunity. The life stories reported in this study reveal the women's agency in negotiating the junctures of these matrixes, for:

> Women of colour have resisted and often undermined the forces of power that control them. From acts of quiet dignity and steadfast determination to involvement in revolt and rebellion, women struggle to shape their own lives. Racial oppression has been a common focus of the dynamics of oppositional agency of women of colour (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1999:108).

Reliance on publicly funded services

At this point, I need to return to the information presented in Chapter Six about the processes which facilitated the emergence of the women's self-determining energies. As we saw in detail in that chapter, contact with cost-free or very affordable social and other public infrastructure were stepping stones that were *absolutely essential to the retrieval or re-emergence of agency for these women.* An additional level of significance is the fact that the majority of these women were from the elite ranks of their societies, with their level of privilege corresponding to the highest echelons of Australian society. Even these unusually resilient women would not have been able to surmount and begin to participate as citizens without the public services of Australia's welfare state, however rudimentary some of them were and have increasingly become. I capture this information visually in Table 4:

Table 4: Indispensable reliance on public infrastructure

Group	Govt income support	Public health	Public housing	Tertiary education	Employment programs	Local public services
Africans	All	Naima, Esther	All	All but Nia	None	All but Nia
Russians	All	All but Larissa & Antonina	None	All but Larissa & Antonina	Varvara Zina	Zina Antonina
Lebanese	Mifsud's & Mariam's husbands only	Mifsud Mariam	None	Wafa only	None	All
Filipinas	Melba, Teresa & Linda's husbands	Linda, Teresa, Melba	Melba only	Linda Mary	Linda Mary	All but Bernadette
Vietnamese	Than's husband Tahn, Sen	Than Sen	All	Mai Ho Anh Anh husb Wai Ling	Mai Ho	None

It is important to note that *all* the women named *government income support benefits as the first essential stepping stone*. This was at a time prior to the introduction of a policy barring income support to new migrants for two years, except for refugees, a policy based on the rationale

Group	AMEP	Ethnic service organisation	Specialist services	Laws	Government policy
Africans	All but Nia	All	None		+ve: All- Family Reunion
Russians	Zina, Varvara, Anastasia	Varvara, Zina, Antonina	None		–ve: All- no Family Reunion
Lebanese	Wafa Sosa Mariam	All	Mariam – disability		+ve: Delal Family Reunion –ve: Mifsud no Family reunion
Filipinas	None	All	Teresa- disability Melba- DV	Nenita- IR Melba- DV	+ve: Linda, Bernadette Family Reunion +ve: Melba-DIMIA's spouses in DV policy
Vietnamese	Anh	All	Than – DV	Than – DV	+ve: All Family Reunion

that sponsors can support newly arrived families or individuals fully. In reality, however, these sponsorship arrangements, more often than not break down, because of sponsors" own material and social fragility. Few established families would be able to endure another family co-habiting with them for two years, nor could they afford to fully support them financially. Researchers (Australia Parliament, 1998) lobbied for a Senate Committee Enquiry into the impact of the two year waiting period policy in 1999 and 2000, presenting evidence of malnutrition, suicides, mental illness and homelessness ensuing from the implementation of this government policy. In the present study, the women who were most vulnerable to domestic violence (Tahn, Mifsud, Mariam) lacked basic information and monetary resources as they were entirely dependent on the perpetrators, that is their sponsors. As we saw in Chapter Six, when this group of women did access government income supports and other relevant community services that their husbands had concealed from them, they were able to escape their abusive conditions.

All the African and Vietnamese women relied for some time on public housing. The much maligned high-rise estates are the fulcrum of lively, supportive communities for these refugees, in spite of the dysfunctional effects of some other tenants' substance abuse and

criminality and, indeed, the often poor amenities available in those estates. All the women whose citizenship participation was most active through their transformative intervention in negative Australian cultural spaces had relied on affordable or free university or TAFE education. It is worth noting also that almost all the women relied upon ethno-specific services of various kinds, including the wealthy, English-speaking Bernadette, who used the local Migrant Resource Centre as her lifeline in a way that maintained her dignity. Only Larissa is absent from this list and her alienation is in marked contrast to the others. The life-giving reverberations of Esther's growth are of inestimable social, cultural and economic value with likely positive implications for the next few generations. Refugee children and young people who have never been to a school at all exhibit unruly behaviours viewed with alarm by teachers and professionals eager to apply clinical labels of dysfunction (Foundation House, 2006; Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2003). The liaison and community education roles of ethno-specific professionals like Esther are a most effective method for enabling the integration of communities and avoiding such stark problems as the predominance of some groups of youth of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in the correctional system. Government investment into the one place Esther occupied in the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP) has translated into a positive cost-benefit ratio far beyond the norms of accounting. We have traced Bernadette's successful overcoming of institutional racism through the stepping stone of the local MRC. At the time of the interviews, during 1999-2000, there were 32 MRCs nationally, providing information, a cost-free migration agent service, community education, community development programs, support groups for women, young people and the elderly, and professional casework support. The MRCs were managed by locally elected CALD community and professional representatives. The total funding for such valuable integration support was only $31 million (Department of Immigration & Indigenous Affairs, 2001). In 2006, these services are being tendered out on a fully commercial basis, with funding withdrawn for core organisational functions. Large "mainstream" welfare agencies, such as

national church-based charitable organisations often capture this funding due to their financial critical mass but lack the relevant expertise, experience and social context.

All the women relied to some extent on services provided by their local governments; however, no Vietnamese woman availed herself of such mainstream services and it would be interesting to speculate about this in geographical and access terms. Government immigration policy with respect to family reunion had a dramatic and direct impact on the fortunes of the women. The Russians, who practise the least engaged citizenship, arrived after the liberal family reunion policy had been replaced by a much more restrictive one and all referred to the hollowness of life without their extended families. The new policy also forced Mifsud to marry a stranger in order to remain with her only living relative, a sister. The most contented citizens had been able to surround themselves with their extended families, namely the Vietnamese, the African refugees, the Lebanese who arrived early, and the Filipinas. Linda might have succeeded in her suicide plans without the presence of her mother in Melbourne, who took the initiative to speak to the regularly visited Maternal and Child Health Nurses.

Nevertheless, Australia is not generally perceived to be an "El Dorado". Indeed, as part of their creative self-determination, a minority of the women were practising trans-national citizenship. Although few of the Russian women spoke about this, such practice this will in the future include more Russians, who once they have established themselves financially are known to sojourn periodically back home where they often develop commercial ventures with links to the Australian market. Larissa sent her daughter back to Moscow to finish her high school education and many migrants return home to find a spouse.

Mulki Al-Sharmani (2006) discusses Somali women who, having become citizens of Western countries, construct their lives by regular sojourns in their countries of origin or elsewhere to take the opportunities for work, family and community life which suits them most. She argues that such strategies are used to resist and renegotiate a range of oppressions,

including escaping racist and subordinate positions assigned to them in labour markets, to renegotiate aspects of their culture which compromises their sense of competent agency and to avail themselves of opportunities for greater dignity and future security. Al-Sharmani (2006:73) notes that the defining characteristic of such families is complexity:

> a particular consciousness and behaviour that migrant families and communities espouse to resist marginalisation and form more equitable multilayered membership in society.

I now shall leave the women's narratives. The next and final chapter will recapitulate the themes and intentions enunciated at the beginning of the thesis about the research process and the uncovering of subjugated knowledges. I will end the work with a discussion of social policy dealing with my second research question which concerns the intersection between migrant women's agency and contacts with Australian public infrastructure.