

Article

## “This Group Is My Country”: Sri Lankan Tamil Women’s Narratives of Isolation and Connectedness in Australia

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### Abstract

Refugees lose their networks and support systems on their journey from their home country. In addition, they may experience torture, trauma, and socio-economic hardship. A critical question concerning refugee wellbeing is how refugee belonging, inclusivity, and community connectedness can be better understood, strengthened, and promoted. In this article, we discuss how members of the Tamil Seniors Group, supported by the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), develop social networks in Australia. Based on two focus group discussions, this article analyses their experiences through the intersection of age and gender to elucidate the challenges and affordances of networking and establishing social relations in Australia.

### Keywords

agency; belongingness; isolation; refugees; Tamil

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

People migrate for a host of reasons. The underlying force that drives migration is the desire to live a better life. For forced migrants—refugees and those seeking asylum—this desire is fuelled by conflict, fear of persecution, and the threat of imminent danger. The trauma they face in their home countries is compounded by the journey of their escape and the process of gaining refugee status in a foreign country that can provide asylum. The plight of refugees is arduous, full of uncertainty, lacks security, and often involves separation from family members.

The obstacles that refugees face do not end at the borders of the settling environment. The socio-political factors that govern the public perception of refugees significantly influence settlement. For a long time, essen-

tialist ontologies have been feeding into stereotypes by defining group identities based on the behaviour of individuals. This phenomenon has been a topic of interest in several circles of discourse, highlighting the relationship between elements of these constructed identities and prejudice. In the case of refugees, their identity is constructed by the community in the settling environment based on pre-existing social and political perceptions. Consequently, despite their trauma and the risk of isolation, refugees are most often viewed through a prejudicial lens (Hanson-Easey et al., 2014, p. 371).

For many reasons, public perception of refugees is motivated by xenophobia. The events of 9/11 in the United States were a turning point as they exacerbated Islamophobia (anti-Muslim sentiment), which has since extended to other groups. Refugees were readily assumed to be potential terrorists, with governments

securitizing their arrival and, in this manner, creating a dichotomy of “us versus them” (Poynting & Briskman, 2018, p. 213). The common ground across different groups of refugees is that they inevitably face challenges when settling in a new country. The existing trauma combined with the difficulties of resettlement can result in isolation and a decline in their self-esteem. As will be discussed in this article, the formation of social networks is a means of reducing harm and is a key factor contributing to their sense of belonging and connectedness.

Our research aims to understand how refugees form social networks, focusing on how formal and informal networks inform each other to promote refugee wellbeing. For this research, the formal groups associated with the New South Wales (NSW) Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), an organisation working with refugee groups from diverse communities in NSW, were our starting point. STARTTS has worked with refugees in NSW for more than 30 years and is the partner in this research. It is a specialist, not-for-profit organisation that provides culturally appropriate psychological treatment, support, and community interventions to help people and communities heal from refugee torture and trauma and rebuild their lives in Australia. STARTTS also fosters a positive recovery environment by providing training, services, advocacy, and policy work. When trusting community relationships are deliberately and systemically destroyed, cultivating new positive social relationships in a new environment must also be systemic. STARTTS groups are intentionally formed to provide safe spaces for refugees to connect through participation in trauma-informed group activities that are conducive to the formation of social capital, which profoundly increases resilience to the impact of trauma and increases the wellbeing of the individual, the family, and the community. Groups are facilitated by bi-cultural staff with lived refugee experience who fulfil the roles of setting purposeful group tasks and maintaining a safe environment.

We explored existing literature and conducted focus group discussions with members of formal refugee groups from different backgrounds supported by STARTTS. We heard about their experiences with establishing social relations and networking. In this article, we focus solely on the experiences of older Sri Lankan Tamil women through their own voices. In this way, we aim to position women’s agency through their stories and contribute to overcoming negative media discourse and government statements. The government and sections of the media have applied damaging discourses to Tamils fleeing Sri Lanka, some of whom arrived directly in Australia to seek refugee status. Despite negative media discourses and government statements, little research is available about the lived experiences of Tamils in Australia.

Coincidentally, public awareness emerged preceding and during the time that focus groups were held in June 2021. This followed media reports of a Sri Lankan Tamil

family of four asylum seekers who had been living in a Queensland rural community (Biloela) where the adults (Priya and Nades) and their young children (Kopika and Tharnicaa) had formed strong social networks. They were forcibly removed from the community in 2019 by immigration authorities and placed in detention in Melbourne to be deported (Sharples & Briskman, 2021). The deportation was halted by legal action, they were relocated to remote Christmas Island and later released on temporary visas in Western Australia, which eroded the connection with their Tamil peers and Australian supporters. At the time of writing, and following a change in the federal government, the family is returning to the welcoming Queensland community of Biloela.

## 2. Background

Following Sri Lankan independence from the UK in 1948, and after the introduction of the 1956 Sinhala Only Act (the Official Language Act No.33 of 1956), which mandated Sinhalese as the only official language (replacing English), significant numbers of Sri Lankans of Tamil ancestry migrated. Initially, in the 1970s, Sri Lankan Tamil migrants were mostly professionals and university students in search of improved economic and educational opportunities. Persecution of the rights of Tamils in Sri Lanka by Sinhalese-dominated governments gave rise to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which emerged in 1983 and fought the Sri Lankan state for an independent Tamil state and homeland (“Tamil Eelam”) in the north-east of Sri Lanka (McRae, 2015; Parashar, 2009, p. 240).

From the 1980s, the migration flow from Sri Lanka altered as increasing violence in Sri Lanka led to Tamils seeking asylum due to fear of persecution during the Sri Lankan civil war (Hugo & Dissanayake, 2017). This conflict lasted from 1983 to 2009, ending with the state’s military victory over the Tamil Tigers. The UN estimates that between 40,000 to 70,000 people were killed in the final phase of the war (Hyndman & Amarasingam, 2014), with the Sri Lankan government army being accused of drawing civilians into a no-fire zone before firing on them, killing over 40,000 people, as well as of war crimes, including rape and murder (McRae, 2015).

After the war, minority groups, particularly Tamils and Muslims, continued to struggle to find security in Sri Lanka (Thiranagama & Obeyesekere, 2011). While the war has officially concluded, Tamils continue to seek asylum due to fear of persecution and violence in their homeland (Kandasamy et al., 2020).

A 2020 estimate placed Sri Lanka’s émigré Tamil population (the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora) at around 887,000. Most Sri Lankan Tamils are in Canada (over 200,000); however, significant populations are in Europe, in the UK (120,000), Germany (60,000), France (50,000), Switzerland (35,000), and under 10,000 each in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Australia is estimated at around 50,000, with populations concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne. Sri Lankan

Tamils have been coming to Australia as asylum seekers since the 1980s (Kandasamy et al., 2020), with arrivals accelerating during and after the civil war. The Sri Lankan Tamils who participated in this study arrived in Australia as refugees and migrants, and some were sponsored by their children. The number of years since their arrival in Australia ranged from 20 to 30.

### 3. Literature Review

Successful refugee resettlement is complex, as the capacity to develop effective networks is influenced not only by their experiences but also by socio-political factors and community perceptions (Pittaway et al., 2016). Community integration is significantly dependent on forming social networks that facilitate the exchange of information, knowledge, and resources, which empowers individuals to address their immediate and longer-term needs. Studies focusing on refugee resettlement reiterate the importance of social connectedness (Riggs et al., 2012; Sundvall et al., 2021). Strong social support networks, particularly those developed soon after resettlement, can improve access to health-care services, reduce isolation, increase life satisfaction, mediate stress from discrimination, and ameliorate poor physical and mental health outcomes, extending emotional, informational, and instrumental support (Hawkins et al., 2021). Thus, collectively successful resettlement has a lasting impact on refugee communities, rebuilding personal and social networks that support increased social, economic, and personal integration (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Trust, reciprocity, and the size of one's social networks may not universally predict wellbeing and quality of life, but social participation often corresponds with positive impact (Adedeji, 2021, p. 89).

Some of the first connections refugees form are within their own community. Social support from ethnic in-group members and others has been linked to an increased sense of community, belonging, and access to practical assistance (Menjívar, 2000). Ethnic in-group support has been shown to be important when people from refugee backgrounds experience discrimination by providing a buffer against alienation and loneliness (McCoy & Major, 2003). Friends, participation in ethnic associations, religious institutions, refugee support organizations, and alike can foster networks of people with similar ethnocultural backgrounds. Such groups that interact regularly and are trusted "as you would [trust] family or people known over a long period" (Brettell, 2005, p. 859) act as a substitute for the extended family, where "rights and obligations associated with family ties are replicated" (George & Chaze, 2009, p. 267). These networks provide a safe space for those with experiences of prejudice and discrimination (George & Chaze, 2009, p. 276) and enable mutual experiential recognition in one's native language (Slade & Borovnik, 2018). Such associations offer friendships, rituals, and traditions that provide "communities of memory," nurturing familiar-

ity and a sense of place, and reaffirm localised cultural identity (Brettell, 2005, p. 859). These bonds of similarity facilitate setting down roots in the new country. The question is whether they preserve original cultures in the new country or foster intercultural links (Brettell, 2005, pp. 858, 877). In a study by Doney et al. (2013), participants acknowledged the need to understand the Australian culture and considered that their own cultures and values must be respected within the wider community. Faced with upheaval entering a new country, refugees, to foster a sense of belonging, prioritise being adaptable and flexible while maintaining their culture, which creates safety and continuity (Marlowe, 2014).

To explore the formation and processes of older women refugees' social networks, intersectionality is useful to critically investigate the complexity of groups with multiple similarities and differences through lenses such as age, race, and gender as refugees grapple with the challenges of establishing themselves and their families. Older refugees may "face more losses than gains during resettlement compared to younger as they face rebuilding their lives over in years left before retirement or death" (Slade & Borovnik, 2018, p. 102). Their challenges intersect or can be circular, reinforcing each other. In their new country, language difficulties impede access to information, services, and public transport; constrain socializing, interaction, and freedom of movement—exacerbating loneliness and isolation and complicating language acquisition and integration (Hugman et al., 2004). Older refugees' culture and customs contextualize their resettlement and sense of belonging in their new country as they "seek to assign new meanings to place" in a culturally unfamiliar environment (Lewis, 2020, p. 104). The activities and orientation of networks and organizations regarding wider society help determine whether segregation or integration ensues.

Studies focussing on women specifically highlight a range of socio-cultural factors that support their adaptation as they juggle day-to-day challenges and opportunities (Lenette et al., 2013; Vromans et al., 2021). Hawkins et al. (2021) suggest that refugee women, particularly older women, face unique resettlement challenges in relation to their experiences of past trauma, including war, displacement, and recovery (Hyndman & de Alwis, 2004). In a health profile of newly arrived refugees, women acknowledged the importance of social support but noted barriers in maintaining their networks, such as their perceived low status, traditional gender roles, poor education and over-reliance on male family members (Sudhinaraset et al., 2019).

A review of the literature on Sri Lankan Tamil communities in Australia identified six studies. Three focused on their health-seeking behaviours (Samuel et al., 2018; Silove et al., 1998; Steel et al., 1999); one was on "generation 1.5," who had migrated to Australia as adolescents and thus had different ideas of homeland, and different experiences of identity and family displacement when compared to first generation migrants (Kandasamy,

2018). One study explored the reasons Sri Lankan Tamils choose to migrate and the strategies used to adapt to a new culture while maintaining Sri Lankan Tamil identity (Arasaratnam, 2008), while Kandasamy et al. (2020) brought together life stories and experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil women to investigate the concept of “home” and what the (re)creation of “home” means. There is limited literature focusing on older female Tamil refugees and social networking, and this article seeks to fill that gap in research.

#### 4. Methodology

The article is based on focus group discussions with the Tamil Seniors Group (simply referred to as “the group”) supported by STARTTS. Information about the project and its objectives were shared with the group two weeks before the focus group discussion. Seventeen members were present at their local community meeting place on the day of the focus groups, 15 women and two men. To facilitate effective discussion amongst the group members, participants were invited to divide into two groups and move into two separate rooms. Each group was accompanied by a bi-cultural facilitator from STARTTS who also provided language support. There were two researchers in each room to facilitate the focus group discussion. The age of the members ranged from 65–89 years. A large proportion of the women in the group were widows. Regarding their educational status, most had completed an equivalent of the Senior Secondary Certificate of Education. The group’s newest member joined as recently as seven months previously and the oldest member had been there for five years, since the start of the group. A few of them had been connected to each other and the facilitators through other STARTTS programs for about 15 years. The focus group discussions were transcribed and thematically analysed based on the common themes that emerged from the narratives. Notes taken by the researchers during the focus group also formed part of the analysis. The questions and discussion points for the focus group were based on existing literature on networking and social relations amongst refugees as well as discussions with STARTTS based on their experience of working with refugee groups. The questions ranged from understanding the duration, nature, and reasons for participation in the group and other community groups, to barriers and challenges to participation, as well as the value of different kinds of networks and connections. Given the number of participants, the analysis focuses only on their narratives, which aligned with the conceptualization of the research on themes of belonging and connectedness.

#### 5. Findings and Discussion

In keeping with the research objective of understanding experiences of inclusivity, belongingness, and connection, focus group discussions concentrated on a range

of experiences, which we have classified into three broad themes: (a) structural barriers, (b) continuum of isolation and connectedness, and (c) collective agency.

##### 5.1. Structural Barriers

Networking and social relations are often represented in literature as a genderless aggregation of individuals in some geographical space or civic association and not necessarily as a form of collective agency that women may use to provide resources for themselves, their families, and the wider community (Bruegel, 2005). Limited attention has been paid to the relations of power at the macro and micro levels that systematically fail to consider the diversity of socio-political locations of people and their access to resources (Lin, 2001). The need to look at the micro and macro structures was affirmed when the group members spoke about several structural barriers to their participation in the broader Australian society. Several circumstances and experiences prompted the group members to join the STARTTS group. To begin with, the members often did not know where to start when they first arrived in the country. One of the members said:

So when we come here [Australia], language is a big barrier. We don’t know anybody. And we thought, okay, when we are coming together, we can get to know more things. That is the reason we are coming to the group.

Lack of access to information and awareness of systems and laws in Australia jeopardises their situation further and makes their integration in Australia more challenging. This issue is compounded when viewed not only through the intersection of language and culture but also age and gender. This is particularly relevant for this group, where the average age of the members was above 75 years, and most were women. The group acts as a reliable source of information for the members and helps them connect with existing institutions and structures in Australia. Members remarked that they did not know about the services available to them in Australia:

We don’t even know what happens in Australia. When you come to the group, you can get information from each other, from the facilitator—and get to know about the rules and regulations.

The members shared that sessions by professionals on aged care facilities, social security provision, and the public health system benefited them in understanding the eligibility criteria and process for accessing these services. The sessions on health issues such as diabetes, blood pressure, and heart ailments were particularly useful for them as it was personally relevant to a number of members of the group. Besides financial and health issues, some members discussed their difficulties finding employment when they arrived:

When I came here, I went to TAFE and I studied aged care and hospitality, but I was not able to get employment because I didn't have a driver's licence....Then what I did after that was I started going to the aged care centres and volunteering in different places.

The challenges associated with not having an essential document such as a driver's licence are known to impact the employability of refugees and migrants in Australia. In addition, the inaccessibility of public transport due to linguistic differences or the expenses involved makes it difficult for the elderly in the group to access other groups or go out without waiting for someone to accompany them. This immobility caused due to transport being inaccessible also hinders their access to medical facilities. The members stated that, as older people, they often forget where they need to get off when travelling by bus or train. They would prefer to take a taxi, but it is very expensive and alternative community transport options were unavailable. Covid-19 further exacerbated the challenges experienced by the elderly members of the group:

I have been running continuously here and there to participate in groups and other things. I used to be active those days and was able to catch the train and bus. Now, my age, as well as the environment, Covid, and other things stop me from catching trains and public transport, so I'm always waiting for someone to take me.

Members reported being part of another seniors group that stopped its activities due to the pandemic and limited funding availability. This leaves them with only this group to meet and "see our people." The pandemic led to reliance on telecommunication platforms such as WhatsApp, Skype, or Zoom, but most said they found it difficult to access such tools. Moreover, they felt that digital platforms "could not match up to face-to-face meetings."

These challenges and structural barriers reflect what Yuval-Davis et al. (2018) refer to as technologies of everyday bordering into social institutions. They control diversity and discourses and impact the politics of belonging. Access to basic facilities such as education, health, employment, and transport directly affects the sense of belonging of an individual and community. In the context of Covid-19, access to technology has become an essential question to address to enable communities to remain connected and able to access essential public services.

The narratives from the focus groups reflect the diverse range of issues the Tamil elderly women face in Australia. The functionalist ways in which they bond with each other are indicative of deep-rooted systemic problems they are confronted with in their everyday lives. The narratives reflect their experiences with both macro and microstructures in Australia.

## 5.2. Continuum of Isolation and Connectedness

Narratives from the focus group suggest a complex continuum of isolation and connectedness that the members of the group navigated. This was reflected in the reasons they stated for how and why they joined the STARTTS group and how membership benefits them. Apart from the structural barriers discussed above, members also navigated the sense of isolation and loss of community. This was further exacerbated once their children and grandchildren started living an independent life, as one of the women narrated:

I have only one son, and he's married, and he's in his own world. I feel really isolated and alone; I wanted to get rid of that isolation and loneliness. So, I wanted to go to a group, and I searched for this, and I joined this group. Here I find friends and friendly people. They have a structure, and there is a culture in this group.

Another member said:

I have been in Australia for 20 years. Throughout my life, I have spent my time with my grandchildren and children and fulfilled all their duties. I didn't go out, and I thought that was my world. And like, all of a sudden...children went to work and...to classes and schools. Now, I think this is the first time I'm coming and joining a group, and I'm really enjoying being here.

Several women in the group carried out caring responsibilities for their children and grandchildren and did not necessarily feel isolated and lonely until they lost these roles and responsibilities. They felt a void once they were no longer required to devote their time and attention to their children or grandchildren. One of the women from the group put this succinctly: "We felt we had some time [on our] hands, and we didn't know what to do." The women's narratives in the group suggest that their role in social reproduction limited their opportunities to go beyond the confines of their home and family. The external networks offered them opportunities to recognise and value alternative ways of being.

The group presented them with new roles, prospects, and connections. The members echoed that they gained opportunities to engage in different activities and physical exercise, giving them a reason to laugh and talk to each other. Every Friday they also go for a walk, which was appreciated, since "it's not a part of our culture, going for a walk." As one of the members said:

We forget what is happening at home, at least once or twice a week we come here, we forget everything when we are outside, we can be ourselves and be happy.

Joining the group provided the members with a community of people they could relate to culturally and linguistically. As one of the women said:

I was happy, but not to the extent of being with [one's] own people. So I was really craving for a group to join. Then, at the CMRC [Community Migrant Resource Centre], I met a Tamil-speaking community worker. That is where we found [STARTTS group facilitator]. And after that, we came to join this group and, yeah, now I feel I am somewhere, [a] belong[ing] sort of feeling, because this is a Tamil community—Tamil people—and I brought my husband who is also really keen in coming every week, but today he didn't come.

For a few, the pathway to the group was through the STARTTS counsellor; others found out about the group through friends who were group members. The group creates a sense of community for the members and serves several emotional and functional purposes:

Most of us are widows. We feel lonely. So when I come to the group, it makes me feel better [to meet everyone].

While a number of members lived with their children, others lived alone. One of them said:

If something happens to me, you won't know anything. If anything happens to me, nobody will know. It's very important for me to call and keep in touch with my friends [from the group].

The members came together to help each other financially and emotionally at times of death or illness of a family member. They also celebrated birthdays and other significant achievements in each other's lives. There was reciprocity, solidarity, and trust amongst the members. The disconnection from the broader Australian society was expressed through cultural differences and the loss of a way of life. As one of the members expressed:

Because back home we were used to talking even to unknown persons. They talk to you when you meet each other. So, trust is there. But here, even your neighbours don't talk to you. Loneliness is there. When you come here [to the group], it feels like we are back home.

The group helps them make social connections in a place where they find it difficult, beyond their own community members, to connect. According to Anthias (2006, p. 21), "a sense of, or concern with, belonging becomes activated most strongly when there is a sense of exclusion." The sense of identity that this Group brings them and the sense of exclusion within Australia was further affirmed in one of the narratives:

And the other thing is, when we come here [to the group] as Sri Lankans, we talk about our country, this country [Australia], our stories back home and stories here, so it's a full-on thing for us. So, it's so fun to be here.

The differentiation between "our country" and "this country" indicates the distance felt from the latter. Another member shared the same sentiments saying:

We are all one nationality; a Tamil-speaking group. That's also a big thing for us. Because the language connects us all. So for us, it is easy to connect to each other, to talk, and you know we simply share the same wavelength, so it's easy for us.

The group draws them out of the sense of isolation and enables them to make meaning of their lives in Australia by drawing on the experiences of the collective. It provides them with a safe space to discuss their experiences and contributes to their mental wellbeing. One of the members said:

Coming to this group is helping me to relax and be happy and reduce isolation. Meeting and seeing other people has so many other benefits for mental health. When I'm at home I always think I'm the worst; I have a lot of depressed feelings. When I come to the group, and when I see other people, I think their problem[s] [are] much bigger than mine.

Some members of the group attributed their mental wellbeing to the care that they receive from members of the group:

It's sort of taking our attention away from the bad things and mak[ing] us feel active. The people are showing care, the kind of care you get from a mother; that kind of care. Yesterday I had the injection [vaccine for Covid-19]; people called me and asked me "how are you, how do you feel?" So they show some kind of care. There is genuine care in the group.

The group also helped its members process memories of war in Sri Lanka and the associated trauma:

Back home, we were living in fear throughout the time—bomb blasts, more problems, shell attacks, and all those things. We hold our lives and come here and feel...sort of a relief and safe and happy environment. We are safe meeting in this place; this country provides us with a lot of opportunities, a lot of things. Because of this group, we forget what we had in our country—the bombing, the shooting.

One woman recollected how the house she used to live in was bombed while her daughter was inside. On her way back from her teaching job at school, she was

informed that her daughter had been taken to the hospital. She said:

I was crying and sat down at that place, and someone carried me back home. My daughter got nine stitches on her nose, but by the grace of God, she is alive. I came from that kind of environment to here, and we are sort of okay here.

These statements reflect the resilience showcased by so many refugees who have experienced war as they move from their country of origin and endeavour to establish their lives in a new country. The trauma of these experiences combined with the experience of loneliness and isolation in Australia created this complex continuum of isolation and belongingness. While the group members referred to Sri Lanka as home, they constantly referred to feeling safe and secure in Australia. The feeling of home, connectedness, and belongingness was associated with Sri Lanka and the Tamil community. When asked what comes to their mind when they think of the word “home,” one of the members replied: “The community, the Tamil language, and the culture that brings us together.” Isolation marked their lives in Australia, which the group helps the members navigate. According to Humpage and Marston (2006, p. 125), “the politics of belonging is always unfinished business because the processes of inclusion and exclusion are social [struggles] where social identities and selves are being made and remade.”

The group increased its members’ social connections and networks, alleviated their stress, contributed to a sense of self, improved their mental and physical health, increased their access to information, and contributed to a decrease in loneliness. While these are important functions of the group, it is also indicative of the limited opportunities for members to meet and engage with other communities within Australia despite having lived there for 20 or 30 years.

### 5.3. Collective Agency

The group provided support and valued the women’s talents and what they produced—an acknowledgement of who they are and their value as individuals, and it fostered pride in their achievements. When asked what they did in the group, immediately there was a clattering noise of bags being opened, and the women brought out and laid valuables on the table, including striking colourful embroidery, sewing, beautiful drawings, artwork, and coloured pictures.

The group also gave them the confidence to resist the perceived norms of social behaviour expected of them. A group member hesitantly spoke about the judgements from members of her community when she first actively started travelling around the city alone and participated in group activities. Initially, these judgements from community members impacted her, but gradually

she learned to ignore them. The women in the group harnessed a collective sense of agency; they extended solidarity and cared for each other. They went beyond their roles as mothers, grandmothers, and caregivers. They resisted and challenged ageist and gendered norms of mobility and participated in group activities. The group contributed to their positive sense of self and provided a space to be creative and re-imagine their role in their community and broader society in Australia. According to Kannabiran (2006, p. 54), “the politics of belonging encapsulates within itself the politics of becoming.” She refers to the politics of belonging/becoming as a transformative process that forges a larger community of belonging beyond borders and merges histories of oppression as well as those of resistance, creating new measures of solidarity and shared citizenship (Kannabiran, 2006, p. 57). The women in the group challenge the everyday processes of bordering and exclusion through their politics of belonging/becoming.

The bonding between the group members should not be misconstrued as inward-looking and conservative. While they may be experiencing isolation and exclusion in Australia, this does not limit the group from looking outward and connecting with other groups and communities. The group was eager to connect with and learn about diverse cultures and religions. Before the pandemic, they participated in a few multicultural events organised by STARTTS. One of the members stated:

We chose to go because we wanted to know what other religions are talking about. What is their policy? What are their beliefs? We wanted to know, particularly in this age. We wanted to know—this is our belief; what do other people believe? We wanted to go and see things. That’s why we went.

They now have plans in place for future activities:

We are going to bring the other seniors from other cultures, with their foods and cultural things, and pair them with our people’s food and their culture; we are going to do an inter/multicultural program.

The members showed an openness to other religious and cultural beliefs. Some indicated that they would be comfortable adopting other ideas and belief systems if they helped them live better lives. The support from members within their group gives them the confidence to reach out to other groups.

Besides connecting with other communities, the group also highlighted their role in supporting newly arrived migrants and people seeking asylum. They want to be more proactive and support people based on their own experiences of migration to Australia. The following was echoed by both men and women in the group:

There’s a huge gap between the Tamils who come as refugees and Tamils who have already settled here.

If we seniors have an opportunity to go and meet those newly arriving asylum seekers, refugees, and newly arriving migrants, we would be able to share their experience, one thing. Second thing we can teach—most of them are having a problem with the language and the culture and the tradition of a new country. Sometimes we can help because we have been here for a while, we would like to do that. The third thing is [that] this is a multicultural country; most of the cultures are different, so better to mix up with other cultures.

While group members provided narratives of the challenges they experienced, they also highlighted their resistance to the structural barriers to social inclusion. They take the initiatives to connect with other groups and are eager to extend support to newly arrived migrants. In this way, they harness their collective agency to fill a systemic gap and make a public investment by reaching out to other communities, especially newly arrived refugees and those seeking asylum. They also dispel the notion that only women utilise neighbourhood and informal social networks by extending their networks beyond their families and their own community networks. The women's narratives in the group require broadening our understanding of political participation by showcasing their capacity for supporting new migrants in Australia. Their narratives foreground hope against a backdrop of social exclusion and isolation.

## 6. Conclusion

The notion of belonging needs to be understood from the differential positions from which it is viewed and narrated (race, gender, class, stage in the life cycle), even concerning the same community and the same boundaries and borders (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005, p. 521). This is evidenced by the fact that although not all group members had arrived in Australia as refugees or were from refugee-like backgrounds, their experiences were very similar even after having been in Australia for several years. Social inclusion is about emotional and affective ties, but it is also about feeling safe and accepted in a community and feeling that one has a stake in the community's future (Anthias, 2006). In this context, the idea of home for group members remains complex. The passage of time did not erode their connections to their homeland while aspiring to make a home in a new land. The term "home" is used in a multivalent sense by the women both in past and present terms and in terms of safety and risk (Perez Murcia, 2019). Memories of what they left behind in Sri Lanka and the need to connect with a country that has provided them with a sense of safety create a continuum of isolation and belongingness in the two lands. The group acts as a bridge for these experiences, where they can find a sense of their home in Sri Lanka while also sharing the experience of being in Australia. The group collectively navigates experiences

of isolation and the constant search for belongingness. The tension between the "home" left behind and the "home" in Australia may never be resolved, but the group functions as a support system for those who have experienced displacement.

Our exploratory project provides a springboard to further research opportunities which continue to explore questions of belonging and how government and community responsiveness might be facilitated by groups experiencing dis-connection in their aspirations for inclusion. There is increasing exploration of ethical dilemmas of university research and the means to ensure accurate representation of refugee voices, accountability to participants, and reciprocity (Dantas & Gower, 2021). Rather than being an inhibitor of research, ethical considerations provide opportunities for research that emphasise collaboration, privileging voice and co-production as normative. Our research is contextualised to Tamils in Sydney but offers some leads for conducting research with other refugee groups. For the specific participants of our research, co-production can be built from the grassroots, including the Tamil community and an organisational support base, such as STARTTS. This would focus on ensuring that the research questions posed are relevant to aspirations and include the intersections, where appropriate, of race, gender, and age. Clearly, the women who participated in our research face significant challenges that can continue to be highlighted from their own perspectives over time and the geographies of settlement.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.



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