Chapter 1: Introduction - intersectionality, integration and empowerment

> *This place means freedom to me because my husband didn't let me go to college, but I explained there are no men here… I travel over an hour on the bus even if I'm ill... I've sometimes felt depressed because of my illness as well but when I'm here I forget all the pain and I'm happy. I don't even know how the day is passing so quickly when I'm here. All I've done for six years is walk to the nursery and school and back but now there is something different.* (Mariam, women's project participant)

Mariam's statement that 'This place means freedom to me' represents the powerful impact of community engagement with some of the most marginalised groups in society. Mariam's story, before engaging with the women's project, is of a woman who had been several years in the UK but not yet learned English or made steps towards integration beyond taking her children to school and nursery. She was unable to communicate with their teachers about her children's education - or speak to her doctors about her health problems, without a family member or an interpreter present. She felt almost completely isolated. Other women in our research reported similar experiences of never having been able to shop alone, use public transport, learn to drive, or access services. Many did not socialise outside of their immediate families. Few of them took time to focus on themselves. One small grassroots community project became a place of freedom and empowerment for these women where they developed social solidarity, knowledge and resources, set goals for their lives, and became both more aware of the inequalities they face and more able to stand together to overcome them.

The women's project coordinator described a situation where many of the women 'bring their four walls of isolation with them' when they settle in the UK and at their point of first contact with the project (see chapter five). Some women were living with husbands and families that were complicit in their isolation. However, societal prejudice, structural discrimination and cultural insensitivity had largely compounded the isolation of the women, particularly when they had made attempts to 'integrate' or to access services or support. These challenges meant the women in our study often lacked a means of survival, or even any small part of their lives and identities, that was independent of their immediate families. Such freedoms need to be articulated as fundamental *rights* for all women, and not simply *privileges* for some. Policy and practice need to focus on protecting these basic human rights for refugee and migrant women (often a hidden and isolated group) and within this, to support them to overcome their isolation.

At the time of writing, a renewed humanitarian crisis is underway in Afghanistan, the country where around half of the women in our research were from, as well as being the country from where one of the authors of this book fled the Taliban with her family as a young child. A new UK resettlement programme is in place for displaced people from Afghanistan, a country where women and girls in particular are facing new challenges to

their rights, freedoms and safety. This makes ever more pertinent the need to consider how we can effectively support marginalised refugee and migrant women to be empowered and fully integrated in their communities and society, taking account of their needs and assets, recognising the traumas they have experienced and the strength they hold.

This book offers the findings of our research (undertaken by academic researchers and community development workers) over three years in one community organisation working with marginalised refugee and migrant women. The proceeding chapters explore a community-based, bottom-up approach to engaging with migrant and refugee women, drawing on our case study. The organisation delivers a model of practice that involves accessible and culturally sensitive English language education, practical/informative workshops, and social integration in a women-only community space, rather than these elements being accessed separately in formal spaces.

Some in the community development field, both in research and practice, may take issue with our inference that these women are marginalised – due to a turn away from deficit-focused interventions in community development in recent decades (McKnight and Kretzmann, 2012). However, we argue that our research demonstrates that the women's needs and challenges first need to be recognised and responded to, in order to work with their assets and potential. This is particularly important for work with the most marginalised, isolated and traumatised groups. We consider the debates about focusing on assets or needs in chapter four and argue for a balanced approach that is bottom-up and long-term, recognising the detrimental impact of top-down, short-term, deficit-focused policy and practice.

Whilst the women in our research have shown great resilience they have also experienced many traumas, and these require a trauma-informed approach that meets their needs (see chapter eight). The book argues for a bottom-up approach that centres on needs as well as assets, rejecting the binaries of current practice debates in community development. The research has significance in understanding the importance of grassroots needs-based initiatives for engaging marginalised communities. It highlights the importance of cultural relevance of services, and a long-term and holistic approach to integration and empowerment that acknowledges the full range of needs and experiences the women face.

This chapter offers the background to the women's project, within which our research was conducted over three years. It outlines the theoretical frame for the text, which is grounded in feminist intersectionality. It explores key concepts such as migrant, refugee, integration and empowerment, and highlights contested definitions and understandings of these terms. Finally, it presents an outline of the book and what the different chapters will cover.

The women's project

Our research took place over three years with a women's project delivered by a small London-based charity. The organisation was established in 2001 when its founder, a refugee

from Afghanistan who arrived in the UK with his family in 1999, began organising events and trips for other people from Afghanistan. The organisation has since expanded into a charity that helps refugees and migrants tackle the isolating factors which come with migration. The charity works primarily (but not exclusively) with refugees and migrants from Afghanistan and other central Asian and Middle Eastern countries living in London, providing a range of services that include English language classes, employment workshops, a legal advice clinic, a children's Saturday school and homework club, youth and family support services, drop-in and telephone support, volunteer placements, and cultural and social events

The women's project was one aspect of this range of support. For the three years in which our research took place, the project received funding centred on the delivery of monthly workshops on issues relevant to the women's lives (e.g. health, education, rights) and on the provision of one-to-one support for some of the women. However, the provision our research participants were engaging with was much wider than monthly workshops and one-to-one support. Much of the women's project work was delivered 'in kind' and by volunteers. The women's project ran weekly (rather than monthly, as funded) and provided English classes alongside workshops, as well as a range of regular social events, all in a women-only space. Children's classes and homework clubs were also provided during the times that the women's project was running. Many of the women also accessed other elements of the charity's provision such as the legal advice clinics.

The broad aims of the women's project were: firstly, to engage marginalised migrant women, particularly those from more conservative backgrounds or living isolated lives; to facilitate their involvement in practical workshops focused on topics that support their empowerment; to supplement this with individual mentoring support; and, ultimately, to move towards the women running workshops themselves and making broader changes in their lives that support their empowerment and integration. The project worked with both newly arrived women and those who had been in the UK for many years but had remained isolated over time. This book draws on the research data we collected with the women's project over three years. The study was dominantly qualitative and provided rich accounts of the women's experiences with the women's project over time. More detail on the research approach and methods is provided in chapter two.

A theoretical framing in feminist intersectionality

Feminism and intersectionality provide a theoretical frame for this text. Feminist theory emerged in the 1970s to pay particular attention to the structures and divisions of gender in society, in response to the context in which women's voices and experiences were marginalised (and often entirely absent) in traditional and mainstream sociological theory (Cree, 2010). The voices of migrant and refugee women are often still marginalised today in theory, research, policy and practice. For these women, while their gender often

exacerbates their marginalisation, other issues such as race, religion, culture, poverty and displacement all contribute to their invisibility and oppression. As such, an intersectional frame allows us to recognise the range of factors that impact on their lives and experiences. Critical race theories emerged at a similar time to feminist theory (Cree, 2010) and are also relevant in this context, again justifying the intersectional approach.

Critical and intersectional feminist and race theories present an appropriate frame because they emerged as a challenge to the marginalisation of both women's and racialized groups' voices and encompass an understanding of other factors that marginalise people. Intersectionality itself emerged from within critical feminist and race theories to recognise how gender and race are intersecting issues that cannot be viewed or responded to separately. In particular, it was developed to make more explicit that the experiences of oppression for Black women are unique and intertwined and cannot be simplistically divided along the lines of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989).

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) argued that being 'Black' and being a 'woman' need to be considered together and not as separate issues for Black women. Coming from a background in law, she argued that legal systems (not just academic theory) needed to recognise how these issues intersect rather than treat them as separate issues of discrimination. She introduced the concepts of *racialized sexism* and *gendered racism*, specific forms of oppression for Black women, that reflect the interactions between the intersections of race and gender and create unique barriers and forms of prejudice. She was interested in how overlapping (minority) social identities relate to systems and structures of oppression. Her theory is now used widely to understand how people face multiple and intersectional discriminations and oppressions.

As such, framing our research in feminist intersectionality allows us to recognise the multiple identities and oppressions experienced by refugee and migrant women. It also emphasises gender as a key issue for these women that exacerbates their isolation beyond that experienced by refugee and migrant communities more broadly. Their isolation and oppression are often compounded from both within and without their communities. The intersectional framing, however, allows us to develop broader intersectional understandings of refugee and migrant women's lives, with potential to understand the complexly inter-related roles of factors such as class and poverty, religion and culture, race and ethnicity, as well as gender.

Our approach to conducting the research is grounded in this theoretical frame as we use qualitative narrative research to draw out nuanced understandings of refugee and migrant women's experiences in their own voices. In their book 'Telling Stories' Maynes, Pierce and Laslett (2008) advocate for this approach to draw out marginalised voices and to provide counter-narratives, such as those of women in male dominated institutions. This book is our attempt to present the marginalised voices of migrant and refugee women, who have been neglected in the discourses informing policy, practice and research, including in our field of community development.

We have deliberately not over-emphasised the positions of already dominant theorists in community development. Instead, we focus on drawing out newer and more marginalised perspectives that problematise some key assumptions in our field. Our engagement with the community development literature occurs primarily in chapter four. However, most prominent and important to the theorising we do in this book, are the voices of migrant and refugee women themselves. We hope the women's stories in this book help to shape community interventions with them, and academic discourse about them, and that it contributes to addressing the absence of their voices and experiences in both policy and academic debates in our field.

Migrant, refugee or asylum seeker?

Migrant people are categorised in different ways. Labels are often applied by others, through policy definitions, from the outside – and contribute to the 'othering' of migrant and refugee communities, particularly where they are bound up in problematic discourses about them.

In the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is defined as 'someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' (UNHCR, 2021a). However, whether someone is considered a migrant or refugee has become increasingly defined by the host countries, with governments and their agents reserving the right to decide whether the person's 'fear' is 'well-founded' or not. Right-wing governments and populist calls to become tougher on migration mean such decision-making processes have been changeable over time.

In the current context, UK and international policy retains the right to determine whether someone is legitimately a refugee or not. Governments have implemented processes of deciding whether someone will be granted 'refugee status' after they seek asylum in a particular country. As such, prior to their application being successful, they are considered by policy to be an 'asylum seeker' rather than a refugee (Refugee Action, 2016). Even whether someone can legitimately be considered for asylum is bound up in complex rules around when and where the individual first claims asylum after their displacement, during their migration journey, and/or after arrival in the UK.

As such, an 'asylum seeker' is defined by policy as someone whose asylum claim has been submitted and is under consideration, whereas someone with 'refugee' status is a person within the first four years of a successful claim (Taylor, 2009). Following this, they can apply for 'indefinite leave to remain' but rights to family reunion remain restricted until a person is granted 'exceptional leave to remain' (ibid.). As such, a person's status as asylum seeker, refugee, or citizen is entirely validated by the host country (in this case, the UK) and not the individual.

Asylum seekers in the UK are not allowed to gain paid employment but they can claim a restricted level of welfare and healthcare (Taylor, 2009). Those refused asylum lose this limited access to support though they retain very limited access to urgent healthcare if and while they remain in the country. These people whose claims have been refused may be deported or become undocumented migrants without recourse to public funds, unable to gain legitimate employment, and living in fear of deportation. The UNHCR (2021b) emphasises that when a person is refused asylum, it does not mean that their claim was 'bogus' or 'illegal' and argues they should not be framed or treated as criminals. Despite this, over the year ending in March 2021, the UK entered almost 13,000 asylum seekers at various stages of their claims into detention and this was a 44% reduction on the previous (pre-pandemic) year. While this figure represents the number of entries into detention over a one-year period, there were a total of 1,033 individuals in detention at the end of March 2021 and this was also lower than pre-pandemic figures (ibid.).

In addition to refugees arriving in the UK and seeking asylum after arrival, some refugees are proactively brought to the UK through resettlement schemes, though these schemes settle relatively small numbers of people overall (UNHCR, 2021b). Recent examples include the schemes for vulnerable persons from Syria (for refugees fleeing ISIS) and Afghanistan (for refugees fleeing the Taliban).

The broader term, migrants, is used to refer to both economic and undocumented migrants – as well as often, erroneously, also for those who have fled to the UK for safety, creating the sense of a homogenous group of alien invaders that seek to benefit from UK society. Populist fears about exaggerated influxes of economic migrants are often conflated with fears over arrivals of asylum seekers, as seen in the Brexit campaign when the UK Independence Party's poster contained an image of a line of non-European refugees, confusing migration from the European Union with those seeking asylum from other countries and continents. Grouping all migrants together in media and populist discourse, whether asylum seekers and refugees or not, serves to purposefully disregard their reasons for migration. Banded together, these migrants are viewed as a burden on welfare and the taxpayer and/or as 'taking jobs' from British people (Philo, Briant and Donald, 2013). This is despite limited rights to welfare and to gaining employment, particularly while seeking asylum or, even more so, after an application is refused (Taylor, 2009).

In a climate of increasing right-wing populism, those risking their lives to seek safety are often referred to in derogatory ways. For example, they have been referred to as 'terrorists' and 'cockroaches' by public media in recent years (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 2018). Such framings are racialized, and serve to criminalise those fleeing harm. Overall, the terms and categories relating to migration have arguably become 'othering' definitions, often framed in negative ways and used to distinguish between who is a 'legitimate citizen' and who is an outsider. This is reinforced in policy, media and populist discourse.

Integration (and identity)

Shaping positive identities and facilitating integration are key government priorities for marginalised and migrant groups who are settled in the UK (Home Office, 2015). However, evidence suggests that developing a positive sense of identity and engaging with communities and society can be particularly challenging for many migrant communities. Hall (1995, p.8) argued that identities 'actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognitions which others give us'. This creates a conflict between internal identification and external grouping, particularly when negative labels are present, such as those associated with migrants, in the current global context of political populism.

Rostami-Povey (2007, p.241) found that women from Afghanistan displaced to the US and UK were 'constantly engaged in mediating between Western values and their Afghan/Muslim cultural identities'. Similarly, Mandaville (2009) argued that Muslims in Europe with transnational identities are viewed with suspicion. This clash of identities affects not just migrant groups but Muslim groups more broadly. For example, UK research has found that both migrant and British-born Muslims perceive a tension between their identities where they feel that society wants them to choose between being Muslim *or* British (Ahmed, 2015; Casey, 2016).

Policy approaches to integration reinforce this identity clash (Haverig, 2013; Kortmann, 2015). Haverig (2013) argues that since 2001, policies have been driven by a fear of migrant communities, and often Muslim communities in particular. Integration policies over recent decades have tended to focus either on multi-culturalism and creating cohesion through celebrating diversity, or on acculturation and requiring migrants to assimilate to their host culture (Haverig, 2013; Kortmann, 2015). Based on research with migrants in the Netherlands and Germany, Kortmann (2015) challenges this binary and argues that integration policies need to allow both for migrants to retain their religious, ethnic and cultural identities as well as to make some adaptation and be included in the host culture. UK integration policy has shifted sharply towards the acculturation form of integration since 2010, with its focus on conformity to a vaguely articulated set of 'British values' (Home Office, 2015).

Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda and Abdulrahim (2012) outline how a sole focus on the need for acculturation obscures the structural factors that compound difficulties faced by migrant communities. Through focusing on perceived cultural dissonance (and indeed cultural differences) of the migrant group, policy can effectively obscure how society reinforces the intersectional discrimination, marginalisation and other problems faced by migrant groups.

Arguably, conceptions of integration have been dominantly framed in othering discourses. Narrow policy definitions of integration can serve to emphasise the outsider status of those whose intersectional religious, racial, cultural and other identities do not reflect the norm for what is considered to be 'British'. This is reinforced in research, as demonstrated by

some of the studies outlined above where groups were found to feel under pressure to choose between national, religious and other identities (Ahmed, 2015; Casey, 2016; Mandaville, 2009; Rostami-Povey, 2007).

Alternative definitions of integration frame it as more than merely acculturation, suggesting it is a two-way process. Valtonen (2004) recognises the need for those who are required by their new countries to integrate, to also maintain their own identities that reflect their lives and cultures to date. She defines integration as 'The ability to participate fully in economic, social, cultural and political activities without having to relinquish one's own distinct ethnocultural identity and culture' (Valtonen, 2004, p.74). This definition recognises the intersectional experiences of migrants and how these will continue to shape their identities post-migration. This more nuanced understanding of integration as a two-way process has been embraced, at least in theory, by policy in Scotland. The 'New Scots: Refugee Integration Strategy 2018 to 2022' defines integration as 'A long-term, two-way process, involving positive change in both individuals and host communities, which lead to cohesive, diverse communities' (Scottish Government, 2018, p.10). Such conceptions of two-way integration processes place responsibility not just on the individual but on the society and communities they are becoming part of.

This reflects a progressive approach to integration in devolved Scottish policy. However, such a definition is not popular among conservative governments and is not adopted by English or UK-wide policy. The Conservative-led government since 2010 has focused primarily on people's conformity to 'British values', a shift away from New Labour's focus on multi-culturalism. Such policy that reinforces people's 'otherness' and their individual responsibility to conform, has dominated in an increasing climate of right-wing populism that has seen the UK leave the EU, largely fuelled by fear of migration.

Empowerment

Perhaps more helpful and person-centred than a focus on integration, the broader concept of empowerment frames people's increased participation in their lives, community and society as for the ultimate purpose of achieving greater social justice.

> *Empowerment is a social-action process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice.* (Wallerstein, 1992, p.1)

Empowerment is recognised widely as a key value of community development, in literature and practice, as well as by UK national endorsement bodies for the sector (ESB, 2015; CLD Standards Council, 2021).

However, it is also a contested concept within the field, with critiques bound up in questions around who has (or should have) the power to give, thus disputing how far it can be viewed

as a means to pursue social justice. It is problematised by those who argue that the notion of workers giving power to others is top-down or even colonial in nature (Belton, 2009; 2017). This reminds us to be wary of how such concepts can be gendered and racialized and to remain reflexive about the dynamics of power between practitioners and the groups they work with, particularly in relation to their intersectional identities and oppressions, ensuring that practice supports rather than obstructs social justice.

Others argue that skilled community development practitioners support marginalised groups to draw out their own power, rather than them being empowered (or given power) by those working with them (Fitzsimons, Hope, Cooper & Russell, 2011). Sadan (2004) draws on Kieffer's idea that the process of empowerment is usually borne out of a sense of disempowerment: 'The empowerment process in most cases begins from a sense of frustration: people's sense that there exists an unbridgeable gap between their aspirations and their possibilities of realizing them' (Kieffer, 1984, cited in Sadan, 2004, p.151). As such, it is widely viewed in the field as a process of rebalancing power, particularly for disempowered groups.

From a Foucauldian perspective, marginalised migrant women are a group with little power in influencing discourses about them, because of a lack of knowledge and status in the societal hierarchy (Foucault, 1970). In this book, we argue there is a deficit of knowledge capital among migrant women, who lack language proficiency and understanding of UK systems, and that isolation cements this knowledge deficit. As such, they may feel powerless in their interactions with society because of a lack of information and resources to engage successfully.

Powerful global discourses about Islam exacerbate the powerlessness of marginalised Muslim groups in particular (Coppock & McGovern, 2014). Muslim women in the UK face multiple intersections in their identities leading to multiple oppressions; ethnic, cultured, religious and gendered (Thompson & Pihlaja, 2018). For migrant Muslim women from conservative backgrounds, these intersectional oppressions are more pronounced, and their marginalisation can be reinforced by both cultural practices and societal prejudice.

For groups who clearly lack power, such as refugee and migrant women, empowerment may be a transformational process. Such a process needs to be embedded in practices that recognise the inequalities and intersectional oppressions that have contributed to the stripping of power of certain groups in society, as well as how institutions such as governments, media and others are central to marginalising such groups in the first place. As such, empowerment should not only be concerned with an individual empowering themselves but with challenging the structures that reinforce the disempowerment of certain groups.

Outline of the book

This first chapter has introduced the book, offered some background to the women's project that formed the case study location for our research, presented our theoretical frame in feminist intersectionality, and introduced key concepts and their underpinning tensions.

Chapter two outlines the research approach and explores the value of insider research when working with marginalised groups, outlining how the research involved project staff and volunteers working alongside the external researcher to help gather the research data. It explores the need for reflexivity in research and considers the positionalities of researchers and notions of power in research.

Chapter three presents contextual information on migrant and refugee communities in the UK, and also provides contextual data on the specific community of women who used the women's project, including demographic details and characteristics as well as additional details such as levels of literacy. The chapter draws on both secondary literature and primary data from the project.

Chapter four presents a literature review that offers a critical analysis of community development practice in the austerity era, and how it relates to community engagement with migrant and refugee women. The chapter explores the current context of disparate and under-funded practice, and the need for bottom-up engagement with refugee and migrant women, drawing on key debates in community development such as those relating to focusing on assets vs. needs and on bottom-up vs. top-down practice. It argues for a bottom-up approach that focuses on both needs and assets so that women's needs are not ignored and they are empowered to draw on their own potential in responding to them.

Chapter five presents the thematic findings from the first year of the research. The key themes that emerged related to the women's happiness and wellbeing, confidence, knowledge and skills, integration, freedom, and empowerment. The chapter considers how change began to occur in the first year of the project through sustained engagement and positive relationships between the women and project staff and volunteers. However, this change was more aspirational than tangible in the first year of the project.

Chapter six presents the thematic findings from the second year of the research. The key themes that emerged related to the women feeling safe, reducing their isolation, building positive relationships, living healthy lives, learning English, accessing services, and engaging with their children's schooling. The chapter outlines how the impacts in the women's lives moved from being largely aspirational in year one to becoming more concrete year two.

Chapter seven provides case studies of women's empowerment gathered towards the end of the third year of the women's project. It demonstrates the grassroots nature of the women's project in that women who engaged over time often became volunteers or even staff. It demonstrates the importance of long-term engagement with vulnerable groups in that empowerment and change in the women's lives became more sustainable over time. It

also recognises the impact of disruption and precarity in community engagement with refugee and migrant women.

Chapter eight explores the need for a trauma-informed approach in work with women from refugee and migrant backgrounds who may have experienced multiple traumas including displacement, isolation, violence and abuse, and health trauma, among others. The chapter explores experiences of trauma that emerged in the narratives of the women over the three-year project and the themes that emerged from a pilot of creative 'body and mind' workshops in year three that drew on movement and art therapy methods.

The final chapter draws out the key implications for policy, practice and research from across the text, and argues for an integrated model of practice for community engagement with refugee and migrant women. It outlines the challenges to successful engagement with refugee and migrant women that emerged in the research. It develops a model of long-term empowerment, that illustrates the process observed in the women's project case study over time, and that has potential for wider application. It brings together the key arguments of the book and explores how they might be applied to research and practice with migrant and refugee women as well as other marginalised groups.