They’d just “flown away”

Reflections on shifting gender norms in the context of engagement with asylum seekers and refugees through community music

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Introduction: asylum seeking in Australia in the border protection era

At the 2014 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) consultations with non-governmental organisations (NGO) in Geneva, the then UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, commented on Australia’s persistence with “border protection” and deterrence of asylum seekers arriving by boat: “If you come to Australia in a different way, it’s fine but if they come in a boat it is like something strange happens to their minds” (Refugee Council of Australia, 2014). As of 2016, Australia’s Humanitarian Program offered 13,750 places through onshore (where asylum seekers apply for protection once they reach Australia) and offshore (where visas are granted prior to arrival) schemes. The former category attracts the most attention due to the mode of arrival (usually by boat). Additionally, the policy of mandatory detention while claims for protection are processed has been increasingly scrutinised over the past few years (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016; Fleay and Briskman, 2013; Lenette et al., 2015). Since 2012 in particular, the Australian Government’s third country processing measures for asylum seekers who arrive by boat (undertaken in Nauru or Manus Island in Papua New Guinea) have attracted considerable criticism including from the UN; concerns have been raised regarding inadequate camp conditions, and the lengths of time people linger in detention, compounding serious mental health issues (see, for instance, Basham, 2015).

In 2013, policy measures aptly entitled Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) were introduced, and media access to detention centres was restricted further. The Australian Border Force Act 2015 now makes it a criminal offence for workers to disclose information about detention centres. Australia’s concern with “deterrence” policies in the name of national security and border protection has increased alongside negative public attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees in Australia, which is at an all-time high (McHugh-Dillon, 2015). Despite occasional – albeit short-lived – shifts in such perceptions due to, for instance, photographs showing asylum seeker deaths while crossing borders by boat (Lenette and Cleland, 2016; Lenette and Miskovic, 2016), other events like terrorist attacks in France in 2015 and 2016 tend to cement negative views and fears – or “moral panic” (Martin, 2015) about asylum seekers travelling to Australia. Indeed, Bleiker, Campbell and Hutchison (2014) argue that the
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**ethic** of hospitality, underpinned by principles of fairness, openness, respect and generosity, has been replaced with a culture of anxiety and fear – or *inhospitality* – towards the “other” that feeds moral panic about asylum seekers.

Amidst polemic and ever-shifting national (and international) policy contexts, a community development initiative brings together musicians, asylum seekers and refugees in Brisbane, Australia, through music-making and singing. This chapter, written collaboratively by community musicians and an academic, focuses on the musical activities of Scattered People, a gathering of asylum seekers, refugees, community development practitioners, academics and kindred-spirited local musicians who use music as a vehicle for community building and fostering resilience. Scattered People activities range from collaborative music gatherings and public performances, to the production of CDs (see [www.sweetfreedom.org.au/scatteredpeople.html](http://www.sweetfreedom.org.au/scatteredpeople.html)). These activities represent a haven of sorts – for all involved – from precarious and at times hostile socio-political contexts, much like DeNora’s (2013, p. 1) concept of “asylum” as “respite from distress and a place and time in which it is possible to flourish”. The friendships, support and sense of belonging asylum seekers and refugees developed through their involvement in community music – in sharp contrast to dominant national discourses of border protection – were described as essential to their health and wellbeing (Lenette et al., 2015; Sunderland et al., 2015) and to the process of reclaiming their identity as human beings (see Humpage and Marston, 2005). Scattered People community musicians come from various backgrounds: some are community development workers, while others are singers and performers with a commitment to social justice. Together with academics, we form an “epistemic community”, defined as a diverse group of “domain experts dedicated to changing both policy and popular perceptions”, by using networks to expand the social justice reach beyond the immediate boundaries of community music activities” (Sunderland et al., 2016). The chapter outlines Scattered People community music facilitators’ perspectives on shifts in gender norms and interactions over time, and highlights some key principles, which we hope will be useful to practitioners in diverse settings.

**Forming the orchestra**

In 2011, a small group of community musicians from Scattered People organised weekly visits to asylum seekers in an immigration detention centre in Brisbane. They were motivated by deep concerns for asylum seekers, and a wish to bring musical and singing activities to the confines of detention to counter the monotony, uncertainty and sadness that they had heard characterised this setting. At a recent community meeting, the musicians had witnessed the strong connections music created among asylum seekers who had arrived on Christmas Island by boat (then transferred to Brisbane) from countries like Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka, seeking safety and freedom from oppressive regimes. The community musicians hoped for similar outcomes at the detention centre. Not only did asylum seekers enjoy and deeply appreciate the musicians’ weekly involvement while living in detention, they also identified clear health and wellbeing benefits from ongoing participation post-detention (see Sunderland et al., 2015). It is not surprising then that many asylum seekers sought further opportunities to share music collectively with those who had given them a sense of hope through kindness, connection and musical encounters while they lived in detention, and who had helped them regain a sense of agency (Lenette et al., 2015). Scattered People musicians had extended a welcome to asylum seekers using the best way they knew how – through music.

The following year, community musicians responded to enthusiastic requests from formerly detained asylum seekers (mostly from Iran and Sri Lanka) to organise monthly music gatherings...
at a local neighbourhood centre. These encounters, which identified and celebrated commonalities among people from vastly diverse backgrounds, became a means to support individuals to “reclaim a respectful identity in an impoverished and reactionary political discourse dominated by a policy of ‘border protection’” (Humpage and Marston 2005, p. 137). In so doing, Scattered People musicians engaged in community development as a dynamic process that re-values identities, participation and cultural activities as integral to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees (Humpage and Marston, 2005). Without oversimplifying the concept of community by referring to asylum seekers as one “community”, the formation of an “accidental community” (originally coined by Malkki) by virtue of common circumstances of being detained, created a setting whereby:

[m]usic facilitators (consciously or unconsciously) took on a role of counteracting the indeterminacy of this accidental community and establishing a greater sense of social cohesion through reinvigoration, even reinvention, of the concept of community in the space occupied by asylum seekers.

(Weston and Lenette, 2016, p. 123)

In this way, the creation of a cultural and performative space yielded a “community within a community” where “themes of inclusion, humanisation and the expression of a democratic voice through music gave detained asylum seekers a sense of stability” (Weston and Lenette, 2016, p. 123). We acknowledge the uniqueness of this setting as a site to contextualise Scattered People community development activities and the musicians’ observations.

Over four years, community musicians documented and publicly shared observations of how asylum seekers responded to and engaged with musical and singing activities within and outside the walls of the detention centre, and how, from their perspectives, these interactions affected participants’ wellbeing. Community musicians also reflected on their ongoing involvement with people experiencing particularly precarious situations, and how such interactions inevitably had an impact on the community musicians’ own social health and wellbeing (Lenette and Procopis, 2016). Another recurring observation in the written narratives referred to changes in gender norms over time among asylum seekers actively involved in musical activities, particularly following their release from detention. The musicians, conscious that asylum seekers had limited contact with members of the broader community (most particularly within detention, but also beyond), questioned whether some of these observed changes resulted from ongoing engagement with Scattered People musicians and activities. They wondered if they had inadvertently modelled particular styles of interactions between men and women, and whether asylum seekers perceived these as a new set of gender norms in an Australian context. Given the deeply personal and community-oriented approach adopted by Scattered People, the musicians decided that reflecting on and learning from the links between engagement through musical activities and perceived changes in gender norms among asylum seeker men and women required closer examination as central to their community development efforts.

We chose to include the phrase “they’d just ‘flown away’” to this chapter’s title because, first, in our discussions on writing about music facilitators’ observations of gender dynamics, this phrase became a leitmotiv reminding us of the importance of sharing asylum seekers’ stories with broader audiences. Second, the phrase represents a way of including, or being led by, asylum seeker voices in our writing, as it refers to a Muslim refugee woman’s candid explanation of why she no longer wore headscarves post-detention. Besides the beauty expressed in the metaphor (as recorded in a community musician’s reflections), it also speaks to our shared understanding as collaborators, friends, migrants and co-authors of shifts in cultural and gender norms.
in resettlement contexts. Our aim here is not to argue that women were “better off” because of their engagement in musical activities, but rather to highlight that, inevitably, the contexts of these interactions shape men and women’s frames of reference about gender norms differently.

Gender considerations have gained importance in the literature on community development both in an Australian context (Lenette and Ingamells, 2015; Onyx and Leonard, 2010) and internationally (Donnelly, 2015; Leavitt, 2003), and involving migrant communities (Karidakis and Arunachalam, 2016). However, the ways in which the gender of community practitioners may inadvertently impact on interactions with community members requires more attention. Such an examination represents a step beyond practitioners reflexively considering how their gender “shapes” their practice approaches in community work (see, for instance, Williams and Lykes, 2003). The reflective process with Scattered People facilitators revealed, as a key unintentional outcome, that gender became one key consideration in their collective consciousness in relation to interactions with asylum seekers and refugees. The reflections presented here are intended to prompt students, academics and practitioners to think more broadly about gender in cross-cultural community development work, not just in terms of sensitive and culturally safe practices, but also in relation to nuanced gender dynamics that, currently, are not necessarily at the centre of those practices. The points we raise in this chapter therefore enrich the literature in more than one discipline.

Our approach

Community development as “bearing witness”

For Fleay and Briskman (2013, p. 114), “bearing witness” to detained asylum seekers involves “‘attending closely and openly’ to the expressions of the experiences of another, and then communicating this to others. The impact of this process on someone experiencing great suffering can be a sense that they are not alone”. Indeed, visitors to remote detention centres (although still small in numbers), are “independent of the immigration detention system [and] can provide a form of monitoring and be understood as an act of bearing witness to the impacts of mandatory detention” (Fleay, 2017). Those who bear witness “communicate what has been seen and heard in ways that encourage the receivers of the message to take action in response” (Fleay and Briskman, 2013, p. 114). Scattered People musicians took action beyond the regularity of their visits to the detention centre by writing and sharing narratives with a broader audience, organising community-based music gatherings and performances, and collaborating generously with academics with a shared concern for social justice and the wellbeing of detained asylum seekers.

What is particularly unique to interactions in this setting is how “intimacy” develops between visitors and those detained. We reflected on community musicians’ “attachment to some asylum seekers and their families, whom they could get to know in a particularly intimate way through music” (Lenette and Procopis, 2016, p. 61). In this context, “intimacy” has a different meaning, redefined by the detention centre’s walls, the rare (or else closely monitored) contact between asylum seekers and the “outside world”, feelings of isolation and yearning for freedom (Fleay, 2017). As such, intimacy can emerge fairly quickly in such an environment, and was integral to the community musicians’ approach to bearing witness to asylum seekers’ experiences.

The focus on community musicians’ perspectives on changing gender norms highlights an oft-neglected aspect of culturally safe practices, particularly in a unique setting like a detention centre. Our exploration uses two complementary approaches. The first is an analysis of observed shifts in culturally prescribed gender behaviours as recounted in the musicians’ written
narratives, from the detention centre context through to the local neighbourhood centre setting. Examples from the narratives include: gender norms about dancing in mixed-gender groups, interacting with members of the opposite sex and dress customs. This cross-cultural analysis of shifting norms not only illustrates some key gendered processes inherent to community-based approaches when engaging with asylum seekers, but also highlights nuanced cultural shifts as a key aspect of resettlement. The second approach involves two narratives from lead Scattered People community music facilitators and co-authors Brian and Paola, where they reflect on their engagement with asylum seekers and identify gender-specific themes. These gendered perspectives offer first-hand accounts of observed changes and the causes attributed to shifts in gender norms among participants over time.

We have deliberately combined relevant narratives from a larger data set that candidly referred to shifts in gender norms from music facilitators’ perspectives (first approach) with more recent reflections captured from Brian and Paola’s perspectives in the context of academic writing (second approach) as a reflexive methodology to “bear witness” to the experiences of those involved in Scattered People. We wished to focus on gender in our content but also as an integral part of the writing process, to acknowledge differences in perceptions that might emerge. As lead Scattered People facilitators, Brian and Paola both reflected on the topic from their own perspectives, framed by distinct cultural and practitioner backgrounds. Consequently, the chapter contributes unique insights into gender considerations in cross-cultural community development work that may have been inadvertently minimised to date.

**First approach: documented narratives**

A selection of the Scattered People narratives documented and circulated from February to December 2012 were thematically analysed to draw out specific references to gender-prescribed behaviours and observed changes over that timeframe, and these narratives are reproduced here for further analysis. At that point, Scattered People community musicians had visited the detention centre for six months, and had just begun organising monthly gatherings with formerly detained asylum seekers at a neighbourhood centre. This timeframe was specifically selected as it offered the best “snapshot” to identify key changes in gender norms, given that written narratives over that time document community musicians’ involvement in detention as well as initial post-detention music gatherings at the neighbourhood centre. The thematic analysis of documented narratives identified three relevant topics: musicians’ consciousness of gender prescribed behaviours, cross-cultural (mis)understandings and visible expressions of change.

**Gendered dimensions of engagement: melodies and dissonance**

**Consciousness of gender-prescribed behaviours**

There were instances in the musicians’ written narratives where they described how conscious they were of the differences in gender-prescribed behaviours between the group of asylum seekers and the music facilitators. For example, Brian refers to their sensitivity to such norms:

> We men hug one another and shake hands with the ladies – careful not to breach any cultural protocols. Scattered People women have no such restrictions. Embraces are warm and vigorous.

*(May, 2012)*
At other times, the musicians recounted how asylum seeker and refugee participants found themselves in unfamiliar territory, which may have challenged the dominant gender norms from countries of origin. For instance, Brian recounted the story of an Iranian asylum seeker:

The gathering identified a dancer among their own and began their slow clap. His resistance was excruciating. In front of all of these strangers – it’s one thing to dance for fun among the boys but here among a line-up of relative strangers – not to mention attractive young women... The dancer stated his case: “In Iran we men need to know how to dance to entertain ourselves – weddings would otherwise be boring for us”. Males and females are apparently separated during such celebrations – men on one floor, women on the other. Never the twain shall meet.

(September, 2012)

Sensitivity to such aspects of gender-prescribed behaviours ensured that participants were given sufficient time and space to consider and adapt to differing norms in a new context. As the community musicians’ ultimate aim was for participants to engage in activities as much as they felt was appropriate and culturally safe, they developed an acute sense of awareness of the gender dynamics at play. This aspect became central to how they conceptualised their engagement with asylum seekers and refugees through community music, both within and beyond the detention centre setting.

Cross-cultural (mis)understandings

Despite their sensitivity in relation to prevailing gender norms, Scattered People musicians also acknowledged instances where they inadvertently overstepped the boundaries of culturally prescribed gender behaviours. As experienced community practitioners, they were able to write about how participants could be affected as a result of such incidents, as Aleathea (female facilitator) recounted in this example:

The first time I had seen [a young man and an older man] (a few weeks ago), I had gone over to welcome them to the music session. The younger man smiled in return, but the other took a step back and looked to the floor. In my haste to make them feel welcome, I forgot that these men come from cultures that have very different “interaction” rules between men and women. It was an awkward moment between us, and the men eventually wandered back outside to walk the grounds.

(September, 2012)

Such reflections also revealed the community musicians’ perceptions about gender roles in different contexts. They were aware of subtle shifts in behaviours that resulted from an ongoing commitment to visiting detained asylum seekers. On that same example, Aleathea noted that despite that awkward first encounter, she witnessed incremental changes over time:

The next week, these two men came in halfway through the music session and sat to the side, but closer to us. The younger man smiled at me making me feel a little better about our last meeting. The older man still very solemn and making sure not to make eye contact. This week, the men were already in the room waiting for us. They sat at the back, but this time both men made eye contact with me and smiled. It felt like a breakthrough moment.

(September, 2012)
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At other times, there was an unspoken but mutual recognition that musicians and participants had different social frames of reference. Concurrently, some asylum seeker participants may have slowly become aware that adjusting some of their beliefs about gender norms was part of the experience of being in an Australian context, albeit in a detention centre. For instance, the narrative below refers to an unexpected point of amusement among participants, arguably symbolic of different worldviews:

An old man is determined to comment on/send up Leathy’s short hair: “He was obviously bewildered – the first time perhaps he has seen a young woman with such short hair. He began talking animatedly in Farsi gesturing towards his own head, to my head and back to his again. Eventually he just shook his head in light-hearted disbelief and threw his hands in the air. The surrounding men were laughing by now. They had an obvious affection for this older chap and one of them got up and offered his chair. I couldn’t help but laugh with them. I don’t know what he said about me or my haircut but I can imagine. I was happy to provide a little amusement to these guys who probably don’t have a lot to laugh about”.

(June, 2012)

The initial discomfort was quickly replaced by shared humour: while a relatively minor issue, it was nonetheless indicative of the new norms to which participants were adjusting.

**Visible expressions of change**

Perhaps the most notable observation was in relation to the way women of Muslim faith in particular changed from wearing traditional dress and headscarves to adopting more “Western” clothing styles (such as jeans and t-shirts) once they left the detention centre. This prompted one facilitator to ask why such a change had taken place, and the response was telling:

Headscarves worn by the women while in the Detention Centre had disappeared. [The women] whispered . . . that they’d just “flown away”.

(February, 2012)

As the headscarf represents a visible expression of the women’s faith, the fact that they felt comfortable without one while in the company of male and female Scattered People community musicians speaks to the inevitable shift to norms relevant to newer contexts, particularly where relationships of trust emerged. It would be simplistic to infer that women benefitted from Scattered People activities to a greater extent than their male counterparts because of the more obvious changes in culturally prescribed gender norms the facilitators witnessed among female participants. Rather, the poetic language describing how the headscarves had “flown away” once they were outside of detention suggests that this change was not a source of struggle for the women.

**Second approach: community practitioners’ reflections**

To add to the themes identified in documented narratives, we wanted to capture more generic reflections from Brian and Paola’s distinct perspectives four years on. The next section highlights some of the more salient aspects they identified about shifting gender norms based on their interactions with asylum seekers and refugees over time.
Brian

Brian recalls how the first encounter with asylum seekers in detention, involving a male and a female facilitator, set the tone for subsequent gatherings in terms of gender dynamics:

Yani [female facilitator] takes most people by surprise – she’s outspoken, fun loving, cheeky and full of confidence. Listeners swiftly calibrate their responses to Yani and a banter spontaneously combusts (in the good sense). It’s always interesting to be in the room when this happens. Perhaps I should have warned the gathering of asylum seekers in the common room at the detention centre – people from cultures where men and women had defined roles – female outspokenness most likely not being one of them.

Yani introduced herself to the group then asked their names. The men were more responsive; the women in veils were more reticent. Yani repeated their names as they were spoken, persisted in her pronunciation until she got closer. People started to giggle. Before long we were all laughing.

It was the perfect introduction.

It was then time for me to take over and speak about the origins of our music, tell a few stories and together with the other musicians, play a few songs. Mine is a very different personality – different style. Nobody can compete with Yani. I didn’t feel the need to.

The session continued with both of us seguing seamlessly and intuitively, neither vying for attention. It was an effective partnership. We were oblivious to the impact of this relationship portraying equality on our audience as we teased each another, laughed and played.

People were watching.

In those first series of sessions, men sat in the front while the women sat to the side of the room or behind their husbands. In time, that changed too and the formula that we’d inadvertently showcased became reflected in the gathering. Women began to take the front seats. Yani’s persistence and invitations for the women to participate had its impact. The women always embraced Yani, Aleathea, Paola, Lou and Pepita when it was time for us to leave.

We boys embraced the men.

The learning was for all of us.

These facilitators were initially unaware that they were “modelling” male-female interactions in what could have been, for these asylum seekers, indicative of a different set of norms. However, they soon noted shifts, particularly in women’s willingness to participate more actively over time. This shift in engagement was perhaps due to the female facilitator’s confident approach as a first introduction to music sessions. In other words, it may be that increased participation occurred as a result of female asylum seekers’ shifting conceptualisations of cultural frames of reference, based on how they perceived Yani’s approach during that first encounter (and subsequent ones). Brian’s concluding comment acknowledges the element of mutuality at the core of their engagement: asylum seekers and music facilitators alike learned different ways of connecting with one another through community music.

Once a number of asylum seekers from that detention centre were released into community detention in Brisbane and other capital cities in 2012, the facilitators were pleased about this outcome but also disappointed that they did not get a chance to say goodbye to the people they had grown to know very well through ongoing musical interactions. So when they received a phone call from formerly detained asylum seekers living in the same neighbourhood asking, “can we all meet and play music again?”, they did not hesitate to extend their community engagement through music beyond the walls of detention. This request led to a new
They’d just “flown away”

A location, date and time were subsequently arranged. We arrived early and tuned our instruments. At first we didn’t recognise our asylum seeker friends when they arrived. The veils and long flowing dresses had been replaced by jeans and t-shirts. The women were putting together sentences in English to express how happy they were to see us again. They’d prepared food and enthusiastically joined in the singing and dancing. Their men came too but only for a short time. We embraced again but then they disappeared. The women explained that their husbands were embarrassed – they had no jobs, very little language and couldn’t look after their families without assistance. They felt immobilised and unwilling for the most part, to participate in activities that were not directly linked to their finding work. We understood that but missed having them around.

The women however seemed to recognise the importance of belonging and of securing friendships, being able to express themselves and have their expressions valued. A broad base for their future life.

Brian’s observations suggest that gender differences became more distinct post-detention; the changes in dress, communication styles and English language abilities, as well as the new dynamics with community music facilitators (including women being more engaged in Scattered People than men) were indicative of the shifts occurring in the asylum seekers’ and refugees’ cultural frames of reference. The women’s approach to adapting to new situations differed markedly from that of male counterparts: the former seemed to value the opportunity of partaking in more musical activities to a greater extent post-detention, despite arguably experiencing similar everyday life difficulties to male asylum seekers.

Furthermore, the facilitators were particularly conscious that some of the women’s involvement in music initiatives might have unintended consequences that could jeopardise their personal circumstances and wellbeing (particularly when visa applications were still being finalised). For instance, they became aware in one particular case that a female participant’s husband was unhappy about the sense of independence and agency his wife was acquiring through her engagement with Scattered People music gatherings. However, this situation did not deter her from participating even more actively. Additionally, the community musicians encountered among some of the women a strong willingness to challenge the gender norms that had defined their lives thus far, as in the example below:

Saha is a singer from Iran – young, attractive, with a clear vision for her future as an ambassador (using music) to advance women’s rights. On the basis of her gender, she was unable to sing in public in her country. Her level of frustration reached a crescendo and she escaped on a boat to Indonesia and then Christmas Island.

After many months she found her way to Brisbane and into the Scattered People music sessions. She was warmly welcomed. She told us her story, which involved her father introducing her at a very young age to the music of Pink Floyd. He did this very quietly of course as such Western music encouraging defiance against unjust systems was banned in his country. Saha was mesmerised and inspired.

Opportunities arose for her to tell her story to media both in this country and internationally as well as in an emerging documentary. Her vision to become an ambassador was slowly unfolding.
I took my role of coordinating the Scattered People seriously and recognised a potential health and safety issue with Saha’s enthusiasm to tell her story in detail and with honesty. I advised her to adopt a stage name (like Madonna or Pink) so that her identity could be protected, her application for protection could not be hindered and her father’s life could not be jeopardised.

She was having none of this though she was grateful for my concern. She said she’d had to submit to men’s demands and requirements all her life. She did not want to bow to that system any more.

She’s courageous.
I’m still nervous.

Such encounters with women who displayed agency in relation to their participation in Scattered People activities provided new opportunities for community music facilitators to reflect on their own conceptualisations of gender norms associated with women from particular backgrounds. As such, the relationships of intimacy developed through music and in a polemic context through the creation of “accidental communities” in detention and beyond, yielded opportunities for shifts in gender perceptions for both community musicians and participants.

Paola

Paola’s reflections relate specifically to post-detention contexts. When Scattered People community gatherings began, she observed how participants engaged in musical activities in ways they may not previously have felt comfortable with. However, as relationships of trust with music facilitators continued to develop, men and women alike were willing to partake in activities in new ways because of the benefits they experienced from such engagement. Paola recalls:

Yani [female facilitator] used to invite the group to get into pairs and try to replicate a body percussion exercise following her movements and the sounds she was creating by tapping on different parts of her body, clapping and singing. She asked the group to shift partners every couple of minutes. Even though this warm up activity may have been perceived by some participants as a challenge to their cultural norms particularly as it encouraged physical interactions between men and women to produce the sounds when mirroring each other, the group seemed comfortable enough to recreate the actions. Men and women alike enjoyed the collaboration as this led to feelings of joy, relaxation, camaraderie, and connection among them.

What’s more, the regularity of the gathering on a weekly basis and the use of music as a tool to communicate, interact and create, were both valuable aspects for the Scattered People venture as the benefits became visible each week, when people started to embrace a feeling of membership, to develop their own networks and to have a more open approach when interacting with cultures different from their own.

From my perspective, having a respectful approach when working cross-culturally can be determined not only by the knowledge and acknowledgement of the characteristics and skills each individual brings to the group, but also by the interactions that organically grow between team members and participants; in that sense, the capacity to sensibly observe and act in accordance with the group’s verbal and non-verbal communication that evolves as the interaction develops, becomes a valuable skill for practitioners to embrace whilst the synergy emerges.
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Sensitivity to cross-cultural aspects of interactions, particularly when participants were unfamiliar with musical activities, yielded positive outcomes for those involved. Paola attributes participants’ willingness to try new Scattered People activities to ongoing engagement over time and attention to non-verbal aspects of interactions. For example, even if it was initially uncomfortable for participants to join in because of the familiarity involved in the body percussion exercise, they were able to overcome such reservations and benefit from the activity.

Paola also observed how children played a key role in transcending some of the gender distinctions (and language barriers) through interactions with different group members:

For a few months, the gathering organically moved from the space generously offered by the Neighbourhood Centre to the local park located behind the library and across the road from the school. The new venue in the midst of nature increased the accessibility for the community, as it was more visible for everyone within the vicinity; therefore, it allowed a better opportunity for the neighbourhood to come together and mingle. The kids from the asylum seekers and refugee families became increasingly busy and attentive to the demands of adult participants to help them to communicate with each other when the “language barrier” was in the way; it was clear that the kids’ presence and more developed “new language” were vital to facilitate their parents’ connection as they translated messages back and forth.

The youngest generation in particular was bringing a sense of freshness and camaraderie that implicitly offers the group the opportunity to communicate using their mother languages as well as experimenting with other forms of communication with creativity and humour; kids and teenagers were finding ways to settle into new dynamics at school and elsewhere, and these daily adventures were implicitly adding value to the Scattered People collective, bringing to the setting a lighter yet powerful opportunity to develop a sense of community that did not feel “threatened” by differences in the group.

It was astounding how girls and boys, no matter which culture they came from, easily related to other kids and adults, playing, singing and creating without problems; there was a feeling of sharing a nurturing space full of respect and fellowship. That non-intentionality inherent in the youngest participants also helped their parents and other adults to sit together, to communicate about their everyday lives, and to overcome pre-conceived ideas about others who share meaningful commonalities like being a family member, a community member and a country representative among others.

Children’s ability to adapt (arguably faster) to culturally prescribed gender norms in new contexts was seen as a strength or resource that their parents could draw on; the latter could navigate cross-cultural interactions at their own pace, but following the lead of their children. Due to their young age, children’s behaviour in the group may not have been guided by culturally specific gender norms to the same extent as adults.

Discussion: the music goes on

The “intimacy” developed between community music facilitators and asylum seekers through a repertoire of songs composed externally, songs written by detained asylum seekers, and western pop songs, was made possible through the creation of a cultural and performative space (Weston and Lenette, 2016). This intimacy, as Fleay (2017) outlines, emerges from an emotional connection and engagement specific to experiences of asylum seeking and detention, and extends post-detention through activities like community music. This unique
approach challenges “simplistic and rhetorical notions of inclusion and exclusion” (Humpage and Marston, 2005, p. 145) in community development practices and is critical to culturally safe approaches when engaging with asylum seekers and refugees. As identified in facilitators’ accounts, paying close attention to the intricacies of interactions across cultures and genders can yield more enriching and meaningful levels of participation. Community development practitioners are de facto immersed in a context where such micro changes can be observed and considered for more nuanced practices.

Concurrently, as Brian emphasised, music facilitators themselves experienced a greater awareness of diverse cultural frames of reference. As they bore witness to asylum seekers’ experiences in detention and beyond, they recognised the potential impact of their deeply personal approach on participants in terms of shifting gender norms. Beyond their ethos of striving for socially just outcomes for asylum seekers and refugees, Scattered People community musicians were conscious that inevitably, facilitators could not remain unaffected by such interactions (Lenette and Procopis, 2016). Likewise, male and female participants did not remain the same once they witnessed prevailing norms among community musicians. Such insights can be easily overlooked because of differing worldviews, and can only emerge through reflexive conversations (see William and Lykes, 2003).

Returning to Humpage and Marston’s (2005, p. 145) idea of “community development [as] revaluing identities, participation in policy making and service planning and other cultural activities”, we suggest that part of the revaluing process involves reinventing oneself to a certain extent by looking towards the future and adapting to new contexts. This reinvention can be conveyed through modified cross-cultural and cross-gender norms – among other ways – and can be expressed through, for instance, changes in dress and visible expressions of religious beliefs. It can also mean encouraging (or at least not discouraging) younger generations to embrace contextually specific norms even when (or precisely because) these are different to adults’ frames of reference. We argue that such subtle aspects represent equally important changes resulting from “intimate” engagement, and need further acknowledgement in the literature on reflexivity in community development practices.

Conclusion

Bearing witness to asylum seekers in detention in Australia “is still the domain of the relatively few and telling the stories is a way of providing increased transparency and overcoming the prevailing secrecy” (Fleay and Briskman, 2013, p. 115). This approach is even more critical in the Operation Sovereign Borders era with restricted access to information on detention centres. Our shared concern for asylum seekers and refugees guided our decision to write collaboratively about the experiences of men and women who engaged in Scattered People’s community development initiatives. These activities represent an innovative and culturally safe approach to engage with asylum seekers and refugees in meaningful ways, to rebuild identity and belonging. The community musicians continue to be “movers and shakers of the world” in an increasingly difficult context.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge all Scattered People music facilitators and participants who inspire us every day, including Naomi Sunderland, our fabulous project leader. We are grateful to the editors for their helpful suggestions and to Samantha S. Murray for editorial assistance.
They’d just “flown away”

Notes
1 This number is set to rise to 18,750 from 2018 (SBS, 2016).
2 In April 2016, PNG’s Supreme Court ruled Australia’s detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island as illegal. The detention centre will close, although no decision has been made yet about where asylum seekers currently detained there will go.
4 (Malkki, 1997, p. 92): “people who have lived in a refugee or internment camp together for a certain period”.

References
Caroline Lenette et al.


