

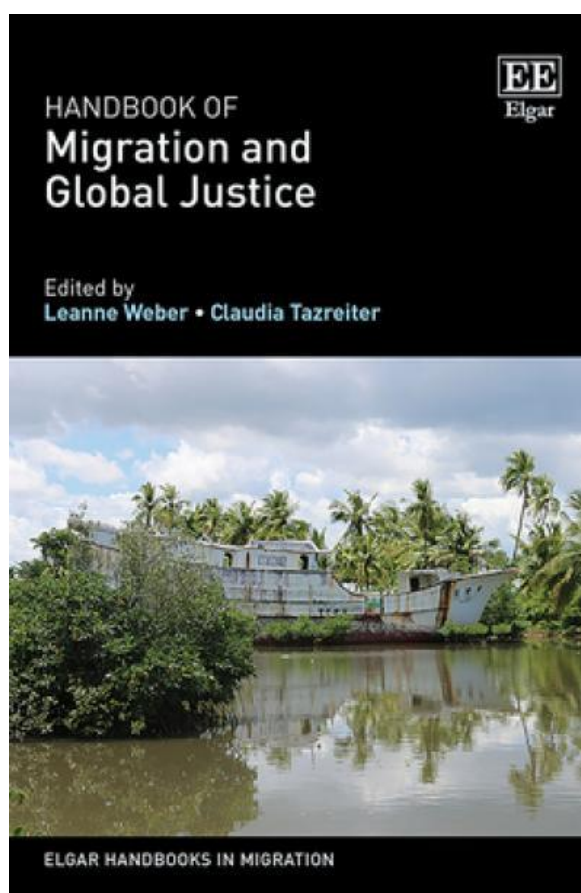
‘Doing something for the future’: building relationships and hope through refugee and asylum seeker advocacy in Australia

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Please note this is a draft chapter.

The final version is available in *Handbook of Migration and Global Justice* edited by Leanne Weber and Claudia Tazreiter, published in 2021, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd <http://dx.doi.org/10.4337/9781789905663>

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Introduction

This chapter reflects on an advocacy group in Western Australia that comprises people from asylum seeking backgrounds and Australian citizens working together to try to shift policies that impact negatively on people seeking asylum who came to Australia by boat. It reflects on the experiences of some of the members of this group who are from an asylum seeking background – Salem, Rohullah and Atefeh – who have chosen to make visible their ascribed identity of ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ in their advocacy with government officials and others in both private and public settings. The chapter also reflects on the experiences of Caroline, Mary Anne, Teresa and Kate, group members who are Australian citizens and have no lived experience of seeking asylum, who continue to learn how to enable the advocacy of people from an asylum seeking background.

Much advocacy and activism within Australia that responds to the country’s punitive asylum seeker policy landscape is led by people without lived experience, and their actions and perspectives have been the subject of a range of discussions (see, for example, Millwood Consulting 2015; Gosden 2006; Peterie 2018). In this chapter we understand advocacy to be a form of activism, efforts intended to bring about social and political change in order to remedy some social injustice or disadvantage (Burnett 2003, p. 141). We particularly see advocacy as ‘intentional actions aimed at changing policies and positions of decision-makers on specific issues of concern’ (Lenette et al. 2019, p. 3). In relation to the advocacy group we explore here, these actions primarily involve directly engaging with Members of Parliament (MPs) and other public officials.

This form of advocacy sees a government as a collection of individuals, some who may be approachable and potentially willing to work with an advocacy group in order to remedy particular social injustices. This is in contrast to seeing a government as a unitary actor that is separate from society, and as such may be considered in opposition to society and unapproachable (Gill 2010). Forms of activism that are more likely to be considered appropriate and effective from this latter perspective are public, oppositional actions. These actions are important in raising public awareness of social injustices and mobilizing greater societal support for the necessary political changes. Such actions alone, however, may serve to entrench divisions between a government and societal groups (Altman 2020, p. 3) and may not appreciate any potential allies within the political system (Gill 2010, p. 1057).

We also understand advocacy to have a collective component, involving the formation of a group whose members mobilize around shared concerns (Burgmann 2003, p. 4). Civil society groups can play an important role in building visions and practices that inform the development of a global justice underpinned by the lived experience of marginalized and oppressed groups, including people seeking asylum. This is an understanding of global justice that reflects a commitment to others beyond those who are ‘members of our own national community, simply because national borders are arbitrary and therefore morally irrelevant’ (Chandhoke 2007, p. 3017). It also acknowledges that globalization processes mean our lives have impacts on others both within and beyond the borders of the country in which we reside.

Iris Marion Young’s (2006) concept of political responsibility for structural injustice is a response to the recognition that our lives can negatively impact on the wellbeing and capacities of others who may be far from us in terms of proximity and/or relevant privilege. Through our actions in pursuing our goals and interests in our everyday lives, within the

bounds of accepted rules and norms, we may effectively reinforce the processes that privilege our ability to take advantage of a range of opportunities. At the same time, our actions may serve to further deprive others of their ability to access the same extent of opportunities. Thus, while harms to others can be caused by the actions of particular agents (for example, governments), they can also be caused due to the interplay of a complex range of actions by a number of agents which create structural injustice in which it is difficult to pinpoint particular blame (Young 2006). As Natasha Saunders outlines:

All the actors who actively participate in the ongoing schemes of cooperation that constitute these structures are responsible for them, in the sense that they are part of the process that causes them. But, importantly, they are not responsible in the sense of having *directed* the process or *intended* the outcomes. (2018, p. 859; emphasis in original)

These ‘structural social processes connect people across the world without regard to political boundaries’ (Young 2006, p. 102), including between people residing within a country, whether they are citizens of that state or not. Through this connection, obligations to respond to the injustices that emerge from the structural social processes arise. In other words, we have a responsibility to act in response to the harms caused by the processes that our actions serve to reinforce (Young 2006, p. 119).

In order to address structural injustice, there is a need for collective action by a diverse range of actors who act in solidarity with those who are harmed (Young 2006, p. 123). An act of solidarity involves the development of a relationship between people with a shared responsibility to respond to structural injustices, and those who are harmed by the injustices. It is ‘a collective commitment’ to work together to address an injustice (Hayden and Saunders 2019, p. 13) through ‘establishing a community of interest’ (Saunders 2018, p. 862). Importantly, however, there is a need for those participating in such collective action to reflect not only on their own roles in reinforcing structural injustices, but also on the power imbalances within this community of interest.

We reflect in this chapter on our involvement in an advocacy group that comprises people from an asylum seeking background as well as those who are Australian citizens, in order to explore how those with lived experience of seeking asylum and those who act in solidarity may work together to respond to structural injustice. We explore what we have learned and gained from our involvement in this advocacy group, drawing on the concept of political responsibility for structural injustice (Young 2006) as an act of solidarity between people seeking asylum and those who reside in their country of asylum (Hayden and Saunders 2019; Saunders 2018). Through doing so, this chapter contributes to the growing number of studies that explore the advocacy and activism of people from asylum seeking backgrounds (Fiske 2016; Lenette et al. 2019; Saunders 2018) as well as on the roles and experiences of people without lived experience who try to enable the advocacy of those who do (Godden 2017; Reynolds 2013; Hayden and Saunders 2019). We also hope to contribute to how visions and practices for global justice may be developed collaboratively and in ways that privilege the experiences and perceptions of people with lived experience.

Australian policy context

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there were more than 79.5 million people forcibly displaced due to conflict or human rights violations at

the end of 2019 (UNHCR 2019), including refugees and asylum seekers. According to the 1951 United Nations *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (as amended by the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees 1967), an asylum seeker is someone who has sought protection from a country as a refugee but has not had their legal case finalized. A refugee is a person who has had a determination that they cannot be returned to their home country as they fear harm or persecution for reasons related to their race, religion, nationality, membership of a political social group or political opinion.

Australia accepts around 18 750 refugees annually as part of the Refugee and Humanitarian program (Department of Home Affairs 2020). The majority of people in that program (around 17 000) are refugees and people in need of humanitarian assistance (Department of Home Affairs 2020). This comprises refugees resettled in Australia from overseas and people onshore claiming protection.

How Australia manages people arriving by boat has been the most controversial. There is a long history of punitive policy approaches to boat arrivals including the use of mandatory detention, removal to offshore countries such as Nauru or Papua New Guinea, and limiting access to welfare services and the right to work, among others (McAdam and Chong 2014).

The years 2012–13 saw approximately 25 000 asylum seekers arriving by boat, the highest number of boat arrivals seen in Australia. In response, the (then Labor) federal government introduced a policy that saw asylum seekers denied work rights after their release from detention. In September 2013, a conservative Coalition government was elected. Part of their election platform was to introduce harsher policies to deter future boat arrivals and to deal with the ‘legacy’ caseload from the previous government.

These policies included a new refugee status determination system known as ‘fast track assessment’ which meant that asylum seekers had restricted access to the review of any decision to refuse them protection. Another key policy was that those in the legacy caseload found to be refugees were to only be granted a three-year temporary protection visa (TPV). However, as part of a political compromise to pass legislative changes, the government created a new five-year temporary visa known as the Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV). Those in the legacy caseload found to be a refugee could opt for a three-year TPV or the SHEV. At the end of the five-year SHEV, the visa holder may apply for a range of nonhumanitarian visas, but only if they meet the pathway requirement which requires them to work or study in ‘regional Australia’ for 42 months.

These changes have been problematic. First, even though the new processing system was labelled fast track assessment, processing times have been slow, with many asylum seekers not receiving a TPV or SHEV until after being in Australia for five years. Second, many granted a SHEV were already working in areas not classified as ‘regional’ and encountered barriers to relocating to designated regional areas for work, including a lack of access to secure employment. Third, due to their temporary visa status, people have been ineligible for a range of services and entitlements. Finally, temporary visa holders are not eligible to apply for immediate family members to join them in Australia. The combination of these factors and the ongoing uncertainty of their visa status has had a significant impact on their mental health (Australian Human Rights Commission 2019; Procter et al. 2018), and forces people to endure the injustice of living in an extremely precarious state with no end in sight.

The advocacy efforts of a range of refugee support agencies and others to persuade the Coalition government to change its punitive policies around the processing and granting of temporary protection have not been successful to date. The government remains committed to the belief that these are election-winning policies (Loughnan 2019). While border protection was a central component to the Coalition's 2013 and 2016 election strategies, however, that rhetoric featured less prominently in policy pronouncements prior to the election in May 2019.

Western Australian refugee and people seeking asylum network overview

An election in 2017 resulted in a change in the Western Australian (WA) state government from a Coalition-led government to one led by the Labor Party. Given the ongoing difficulties in advocating for changes in asylum seeker policies at the federal level, the WA network arose to collectively discuss opportunities for advocating for change at the state government level. While the WA Government is not responsible for broad immigration policy, it has responsibility for services such as transport, health and education.

The network initially consisted of academics, local church organizations, representatives from non-government organizations working with refugees and asylum seekers, and individual advocates. It commenced with a focus on a number of key issues including access to transport concessions for asylum seekers and affordable access to vocational courses for asylum seekers and refugees. Another key issue was to get the WA Government to request the federal government to declare the Perth metropolitan area 'regional' for the purposes of the SHEV pathway.

The network developed a long-term advocacy strategy that became increasingly informed by listening to and involving people with lived experience, and engaging with allies within the political system. Network members, including people with lived experience of seeking asylum, wrote to and met with officials from government departments and MPs. Public events, seminars and lectures helped build momentum and support from other members of the WA community. Through these efforts over a two-year period, the network has secured successful outcomes on all the key issues outlined above. This includes obtaining the support of the WA Premier to request that metropolitan Perth be designated a SHEV region. At the date of writing this chapter, however, the federal government is yet to make the required legislative change. The network has now shifted some of its advocacy efforts to focus on the federal government, in addition to continuing to engage with the WA Government on other issues of priority to refugees and asylum seekers.

This chapter was conceived and written collaboratively by members who have taken leading roles in the network. Caroline and Mary Anne are coordinators of the network and academics who have engaged in collaborative research and advocacy projects with people seeking asylum in Australia over the past few decades. Other network coordinators include Teresa (Riverview Community Services) and Kate (Welcoming Australia formerly of the Social Justice Unit, Uniting Church of Australia). Teresa and Kate are both involved in community organizations that provide direct support to asylum seekers and refugees in respect of employment, legal, psychological and welfare needs. Atefeh, Rohullah and Salem are all from an asylum seeking background and living in Australia on a SHEV visa. They have all taken leading roles in some of the advocacy activities. Atefeh became involved in the network after working with Caroline on a research project at Curtin University. Rohullah and Salem became involved after attending information sessions at Riverview.

Method

This chapter is based on the findings of guided conversations that were held between Caroline and Mary Anne and the other co-authors in January 2020. Caroline and Mary Anne took the lead in organizing these conversations and the writing of this chapter.

Similar to the methodology design followed by Fleay et al. (2019) and Lenette et al. (2019) in their explorations of the advocacy experiences of people from a refugee background, Caroline and Mary Anne devised a list of open-ended and semi-structured questions that guided conversations held with co-authors Salem, Atefeh and Rohullah. These questions also guided the group conversation between Caroline, Mary Anne, Teresa and Kate. All of the conversations were fluid, however, in recognition that they were to privilege the experiences, priorities and views of all co-authors. As such, the conversations often deviated from the initial questions to further explore issues raised by each co-author. The conversations were recorded and transcribed. Caroline and Mary Anne edited each of the conversations. Salem, Atefeh, Rohullah, Teresa and Kate all reviewed the edited versions to ensure their intended meaning was retained. Caroline and Mary Anne developed the first draft of the chapter drawing on some of the themes that were evident in all of the edited conversations. This draft was sent to all for further discussion and editing.

Following the design of the collaboratively written article by Fleay et al. (2019), each co-author's views are shared here in two forms. When discussions represent the shared experiences and views of all co-authors, 'we' and 'our' are used to illustrate this. Individual co-authors are also directly quoted in parts to elevate the particular perspectives and experiences of each of us. This recognizes our aim to respect the diverse experiences of all of us in this advocacy group.

The following discussions draw on two prominent themes emerging from the conversations about our involvement in the advocacy group – the learning we have all gained about advocacy, and about how to do this work together; and the sense of hope we have each derived from being involved in this group.

Learning how to advocate, together

All of us have experienced the past two years as a period of learning about how to advocate in ways that may bring about policy change, and how we might best work together to do this. We reflect here on the importance of the relationships we have built with each other, with the allies we found within the political system, and what we learned through these relationships. In doing so, we draw on the components of the political responsibility for structural injustice.

As outlined above, in mid-2017 a WA-based network was formed to collaborate and advocate to bring about policy changes. Building a network meant there would be agencies and individuals with particular expertise in a range of professional areas, for example, law, social work and health. In the first six months, the network met monthly to share information about policy developments and to develop a plan to advocate to the WA Government. Most of the early network members, including Caroline, Mary Anne, Teresa and Kate, had close links with people with lived experience and sought to be guided in decision-making around advocacy priorities by what they knew of their friends' or clients' experiences. In other words, the decision-making process in the early days of the network did not directly involve people with lived experience. Thus, while the network had developed out of a shared sense of

responsibility by Australian citizens to respond to the injustices of Australia's asylum policy landscape, it was yet to develop into an act of solidarity that was underpinned by relationships with people from asylum seeking backgrounds.

The development of the network to more actively include people with lived experience happened gradually. A small number of people from asylum seeking backgrounds participated in public events to raise awareness of their issues in 2017. This involvement began to deepen following a series of information sessions that Teresa, Kate, Mary Anne and Caroline organized in 2018 for people who had applied or been granted a SHEV or TPV, in recognition of the complexities of the visa and that little information was being given by the federal Department of Home Affairs. During these sessions, the information flow was from service providers to SHEV holders. The ineffectiveness of this top-down approach quickly became evident, however, when questions were raised in the sessions that could not be answered by even the migration agents. As Teresa remembers about those evenings:

The frustration of that was very much felt on those nights because we're holding something to give information and people were coming expecting that information to be there and then they're asking what really were simple questions regarding 'this is my situation, I want to meet the pathway, I live here, I work here' and the answer was 'I don't know'. The legislation doesn't tell you, the department doesn't tell you, and where do you go with that?

While there were not answers to all their questions at these meetings, for SHEV holders there was access to a reliable source of information. For Salem:

The meetings helped fill the gaps in information from the Department of Immigration. There was a little bit of information, so it was better than having no information or just getting it from somebody who doesn't know or just found from the news or newspaper or something.

Teresa, Kate, Mary Anne and Caroline realized they needed to gain a better understanding of these issues from the perspectives of those with lived experience before any further efforts were put into developing an advocacy strategy. Evening meetings were planned, this time with a focus on hearing directly from asylum seekers and SHEV holders about their concerns living on the visa in WA. These experiences were documented and became the basis of briefing papers. Teresa, Kate, Mary Anne and Caroline also asked if anyone wanted to continue to meet to develop an advocacy plan. Salem and Rohullah were among those who were very keen to visit MPs and directly express their experiences of living on a temporary visa.

For Salem, the environment in the information sessions was key to his decision to become involved:

The people around me were so friendly and you could talk with them, you could ask as many questions as you have and professionally there were a lot of good people around you that you could ask for relevant information, and you could get the information that you needed and you couldn't get it from anywhere else. So that's why I thought this is the best place to get involved and to get the proper information that you need, and also it's a good cause. If you get something it's going to help you and your friends and anyone who is in your status, in your situation. So that's why I got involved in the whole thing.

Rohullah became involved in the hope that working as part of a group would help to bring about policy change:

Like everyone, I was just worried about the future. I thought through this meeting we might get something changed like our visa, or at that time we were focused on convincing the WA Government to announce Perth as a SHEV region. We had a group goal, so I just tried to engage and do something.

The network progressed into two streams – monthly meetings continued to be held during the day with service provider representatives and advocates who preferred to or could not meet in the evenings, and monthly meetings in the evening commenced with temporary visa holders who could not attend meetings during the day due to work commitments. Caroline, Mary Anne, Teresa and Kate continue to collectively organize and attend both sets of meetings.

Atefeh had felt hopeless about the prospects of policy change but she was willing to try anything and so she began to participate in the network's advocacy efforts. Her involvement in the network also reflects the reasons why she has long engaged in advocacy on behalf of her family since arriving in Australia:

I learned long ago not to hide, not to hide, not to ignore who I am, not to ignore where I came from. When I was a kid I remember I always felt shame that I have a disabled sister and a lot of time it prevented us from being in social areas or I felt shy to bring friends home because my sister was sometimes not talking appropriately in front of strangers. But later on I realized that this is me, I came from this family, this is my sister, I can't hide it. I took her even to my university here, at orientation I brought her with me, she was the one that came with me. I try to take her as much as I can and then tell everyone that she's my sister.

Being a refugee is part of me. And while the government puts so much pressure on us that it can make me scared to advocate, being involved in this advocacy has helped me to raise awareness about my situation and not hide that part of myself. This is who I am.

Joining the efforts of the network in advocating to the WA Government provided Atefeh with another avenue through which she could advocate for her sister's and family's rights. Caroline and Atefeh first met through a research project into the experiences of people seeking asylum accessing higher education (Hartley et al. 2018). Around this time, the WA Network was beginning to engage with the WA Government about the supports that people seeking asylum in WA needed to access. As Atefeh said to Caroline:

Then you asked me to come and talk with the Minister with you. My sister was in the middle of it, she needed to get to the rehab centre in Bentley hospital. So I told the health professionals 'I'm going to see the Minister' and I asked them for a letter that I could bring up with the Minister, maybe he can help or understand our frustration and the situation that we have right now. That was a little bit of hope that maybe I can talk to them about it.

Atefeh's motivation for advocacy is propelled by her commitment to her family, but it also reflects her sense of responsibility to everyone else who endures her situation. Salem and

Rohullah's involvement in the network similarly reflects their felt responsibility to those who share their situation. For Salem:

I do feel responsible for my people, and not only for my people, but for all those people who have a SHEV visa. So if we could bring a change it will definitely affect all SHEV visa holders. So it's not about my community or myself. I just feel that the difficulties, the challenges that I face, it's going to be double and triple for the people who don't have the ability work or to speak English.

Many times I was like, 'I'm just giving up, there's no way you know, just give it up it's not going to work, just leave it'. But then you see some of the people who just don't have anything but the hopes of us working together, in the hope of bringing a change. So that's the reason that keeps you working. Let's do our best. If we can get something out of it, it is such good news. If we can't, then tomorrow you wouldn't be regretting we didn't ask, we didn't go for it.

Rohullah sees his involvement as:

doing something for the future to get some positive change in our life. And it is not all about me, it's about 20 or 30 thousand people. After we are meeting together and talking, I have lots of phone calls with friends who are living in Sydney, Brisbane and here to talk about these things and what we are going to do. After the meetings I always keep trying to keep them updated.

The important things I've learned from the meetings, I have been able to use to help others. If I know something, I can use it to help others.

We all see our involvement in this network as reflecting a shared sense of responsibility to try to address the injustice of Australia's punitive asylum policies. As Atefeh, Rohullah and Salem outline, this responsibility emerges from their commitment to others who share their experience of living on a SHEV. For Caroline, Mary Anne, Kate and Teresa, it emerges from their privileged positions as Australian citizens whose lives are not constrained by asylum policies, as well as the deepening relationships between all of us in this network.

All of us have learned significantly about how it may be best to advocate on these issues given the particular political context, and how to work together to do so. Some of this learning has been from each other. We have learned considerably from Atefeh's experiences of continuously advocating for the rights her family have been denied due to their temporary visa status. As she outlines:

I believe everyone has got a dark side and a bright side. Most of the time people are good but sometimes I try to bring that bright side up. I like to explain to people what happened to us. Before the opportunity to take part in these meetings, you know how much I was frustrated, I was willing to even stop my studying, give up my future, just to concentrate on what's happening for my family, the financial problems and everything else that puts pressure on us. I could see how much my sister needed, and my parents couldn't do anything. I was very frustrated and sometimes I was feeling like someone's putting their hands around my neck and trying to stop me breathing. So I tried to find a way to help my family, and to help the larger refugee community.

I was thinking to see what rights other people have here that we don't have, and I see the simple example of my sister who has a disability and I see other families who have a disabled child and how they have been supported. So I thought that I have to try to get this simple right and I try different ways and call a few people and I see that no one is interested to helping us. I tried to convince the doctor we were not lying about my sister. I found out when an interpreter is involved, they translate everything, and a lot of things can go wrong in the communication with the doctors. Because I grew up with my sister, I can understand her, I can tell if she means something different from what is translated, I can understand what she's saying plus what she means. So I realize I have to be in every single appointment to transfer the meaning right and I have to convince a lot of psychiatrists about what is happening. I educated myself in these meetings. I took a pen and paper with me to each doctor's appointment to take notes of my learning.

But after you convince someone once, you have to then convince a second and third person and so on. No one knows about our visa status. It's so complicated. I have to do it every time I see a new person, unless they go and do their own research but people are too busy to go to look for the SHEV visa. And if they found it they probably still wouldn't understand it. That is what I have to do to convince people.

Atefeh's experiences highlight the tenacity and commitment needed over the long term to find allies within the health system, and the political system, in efforts to bring about policy shifts. We understand allies here as people who

belong to groups that have particular privileges, and work alongside people from groups that are subjected to power in relation to that privilege. The role of the ally is to respond to the abuses of power in the immediate situation, and to work for systemic social change. (Reynolds 2013, p. 56)

We have learned the importance of persistence, and collecting evidence of injustice and finding allies within the system who can help us take this evidence to decision-makers.

Our learning about how to advocate has also emerged from our encounters with those who have become political allies. The network extends beyond those who come to monthly meetings. Members link in with others with expertise and willingness to act as an ally when needed. We learned a lot in the early months from allies close to and within the government, and learned not to give up when our early attempts were met with negative responses. Building relationships with these allies has become important to the network's efforts.

As Salem experienced it:

I have never been in a situation like this. I have never been in a group who does this kind of work. For me it has been a school where I have learned all the way through. I've learned from the MPs, and I have made some good friends along the way. People that showed us the way, what we should do. That shouldn't be taken lightly. Because that is the foundation of what we have done today. What we are doing today is based on people's suggestions and the advice that we got at the start, and it worked, and we've improved so much from that point, from that starting point.

Rohullah also considers that building this network of allies has been important in order to enable access to decision-makers:

We are all hoping for a secure future, we are just trying to get a permanent visa and a better life here. But it is not possible for us to talk directly to the government. The best way is to get the support from people who are supporting us, the people who are interested in supporting refugees. And then through this we can get more support for us from the parliament or from the government.

For those of us without a lived experience of seeking asylum, building relationships with people who do over many years has influenced how we engage in this network as well in other forums. In particular, the regular group and individual meetings that Caroline, Mary Anne, Teresa and Kate have participated in over the past few years have provided important spaces for learning through deep listening to the experiences of people forced to endure Australia's punitive policy landscape.

These meetings have also served to keenly sharpen the thinking of Caroline, Mary Anne, Teresa and Kate about the priorities facing the network's members with lived experience. For example, the utmost priority for many people on temporary visas in the network is to be able to get their families to join them safely in Australia, currently denied to them due to their temporary visa status. As Caroline expresses it:

When I am in academic or advocacy meetings beyond the network where the impacts of Australia's harsh asylum policies are being discussed, I hear the voices of many of our network members in my head, telling me of their loneliness and desperate worries for their families. In situations where we haven't been able to enable their access to any particular meeting, I think my contributions have become much more robust and centred on what they have told me and I feel that at least I can help to magnify their experiences and focus discussions on their priorities.

Teresa, Kate, Mary Anne and Caroline see their roles in this network as allies who have developed relationships with those enduring injustices and work together in a community of interest. To work together means to work collaboratively, being informed by people with lived experience and not diminishing their agency.¹ We understand collaboration here as being 'open to listen, learn from, share with and negotiate with others' (Godden 2017, p. 6). But we also recognize the challenges in truly being able to do so. In particular, working together in this way requires consideration of how to sustain the involvement of people with lived experience in decision-making, which includes making appropriate resources available, and going beyond the involvement of just a few people who may become gatekeepers (Refugee Council of Australia 2020). As the Global Refugee-Led Network and Asylum Access (2019, p. 7) outline, this is meaningful participation:

When refugees – regardless of location, legal recognition, gender, identity and demographics – are prepared for and participating in fora and processes where strategies are being developed and/or decisions are being made (including at local, national, regional, and global levels, and especially when they facilitate interactions with host states, donors, or other influential bodies), in a manner that is ethical, sustained, safe, and supported financially.

Ensuring meaningful participation continues to be an important aim of the network but is also challenging. Members of the network include people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas, but other than a small number of women and families who have attended some of the meetings and are in regular contact with Teresa, Kate, Mary Anne and Caroline, representation is mostly constituted of men and most from the Hazara community in Perth.

Sourcing funds to enable members of the network with lived experience to participate meaningfully also continues to be challenging. Funds have mostly come from some agencies involved in the network to cover interpreting costs for meetings. Donations from network members have helped to ensure members with lived experience can participate in meetings with MPs without sacrificing their earnings, and the participation of at least a small number of members with lived experience in some national advocacy meetings. Attempts to secure funding to meet all these costs and help to expand the network's efforts continue.

Despite efforts to enable the meaningful participation of those with lived experience of seeking asylum, there are substantial imbalances of power that inevitably remain. There are significant challenges to achieving equal participation when power imbalances exist (Godden 2017, p. 11). For example, Teresa, Kate, Caroline and Mary Anne all experienced challenges in moving on from the initial consultation phase of engaging with people with lived experience to something they hoped is more collaborative.

In relation to the early consultation meetings, Teresa recalls that:

Our role was very clear. We were going to collect this information and then we were going to feed it back to the rest of the network and then to different politicians. But when it shifted to working with SHEV holders around the advocacy, I often found it quite challenging, particularly around power. I was aware of my positional power, in terms of the knowledge I had, and in terms of being someone that was born in this country. I remember often thinking, 'What do I do with this?' How do I neutralize this in some way so that the space we create is one that is highly participatory, so it's not something that's directed by us but instead very much a collaborative effort? And I think probably two years down the track I don't necessarily know if I feel any different than I did at that stage.

Kate, Caroline and Mary Anne also grapple with this, and an example of the dilemma this imbalance of power raised for them is when they became aware of information from government sources in 2019 that was potentially very worrying. They were unsure whether to mention it to the others in the network, or wait until more information could be gained in order to not trigger unnecessary angst among those with lived experience. As Mary Anne expresses it:

One of the things I've really struggled with is knowing that we've got a negative letter from the government about what we have been asking them to do, or when that's becoming our sense of the situation. We have that knowledge. We know that if we share frankly everything we know with the others at the time that we become aware of it, that it is going to cause a huge level of distress. And it may be that further information could yet be gained that will minimize or change what we have heard. But we are in a position to make that judgement.

This has also arisen on a number of other occasions given that Mary Anne, Teresa, Kate and Caroline often have access to policy developments before anyone else in the group. There are challenges in deciding what, how and when to provide information, and being in a position where they can make these decisions. For Kate:

That tension has been really hard to juggle because we are wanting to balance working collaboratively and be transparent with all of the information and not be the gatekeeper of that knowledge or information, but at the same time not wanting to create false hope or not wanting to send people into despair.

This relates particularly to the extremely limited prospects for most SHEV holders to be able to access a permanent visa even if they do meet the SHEV pathway. Given the complexities of the visa, and the challenges in communicating these given language barriers, there is concern among us all that many SHEV holders attending the regular meetings do not understand how difficult it will be to access a permanent visa even if Perth does become a SHEV region. While the rest of us continued to grapple with how this might be addressed, Rohullah knew it needed to be addressed and took the opportunity to lead the way. As Mary Anne remembers it:

Rohullah managed it perfectly by saying, ‘This is the reality, we have to speak up and tell them what that reality means for us because they don’t know. They don’t hear us so we have to do it, we’ve got a responsibility to do it’. He was very firm on that. Even though he wasn’t holding out any false hope that we’re going to have any changes, he was saying our stories are still powerful and our stories still mean something and they may change people’s minds.

Other aspects around the privileges of decision-making evident to Caroline, Mary Anne, Teresa and Kate relate to their involvement in the network. Kate highlights that:

We have the privilege of choice. We choose to do this work, and we can walk away at any time and it doesn’t actually affect the rest of our life. Whereas for the people that we’re working alongside, they don’t have that choice.

All recognize the impossibility of completely removing the imbalances of power that exist within the network given the current political, social and cultural landscape in Australia. Working with people who continue to live in such precarious conditions inevitably creates unequal relationships and the responsibility resides with those with privileged positions to try to minimize these imbalances of power as much as possible.

One response to this, shared by Caroline, Mary Anne, Teresa and Kate, has been to recognize the importance of maintaining a commitment to being involved in this work and to maintaining the relationships that have been built between network members. This is especially so since the re-election of the Coalition government in May 2019, which heralded the continuation of Australia’s punitive policies, and elevated the difficulties in trying to advocate for policy change. As Caroline sees it:

A lot of this work is about unsettling professional boundaries and it’s built on relationships and it’s built on commitment. And getting to know people over the long-term. A number of times some people have said in those meetings ‘thank you’ in appreciation that you just keep coming back. There’s a role to be played there as a

fellow human being who actually cares about them and their situation. And I feel the same way. Being in those meetings when I'm not feeling great has given me an important sense of belonging to this community, and a realization of how much I get out of these relationships too.

For Kate, this is

a relationships thing, and an integrity thing. Because I have relationships with people who are directly impacted by cruel policy, and knowing that because of the privilege and power that I hold I can attempt to effect change in things, I don't feel that I can do the day to day stuff about trying to help people apply for travel cards, for example, without doing the work to try to change what needs to happen in the first place.

Over the two years of meeting at least once a month, relationships have emerged through the deep listening to each other that many members of the network have engaged in. As Salem observes:

It is not only that they are expecting these information sessions will be about Perth being a SHEV region, but because we are a group of people now who are almost friends with each other. It's quite a friendly environment, everybody can feel free and can talk and share their stories. And secondly, even some of them said that 'when I feel low or feel like I don't want to talk to somebody, or I just feel bored, I come here and talk to somebody'. Some of them said, 'When I have difficulties or any problems, regardless of anything, when I have any problems I come here and talk to these people and they find a way for me, where to go, what to do'. So it is, you know, not only about the lobbying group.

For Rohullah:

Sometimes I think we have lots of problem, like the visa, but I wish we had a very good life and good achievement we can share with everyone in the group so it would be very happy rather than sharing our sadder stories or problems. So sometimes I am thinking it's strange to share our life experience which is not really fun. But still we're human, we are understanding each other. Sometimes we will miss one month, we are just waiting for the meeting to meet with you guys and spend time together which is good. When I am meeting with you guys I feel like we are meeting with family, we are just having a good time.

We consider the development of these relationships, through attending to each other and sharing experiences of pain as well as moments of fun, as a necessary step in advocacy that seeks to build a community of interest comprising people with lived experience and those without it. We also highlight the importance of the development of these relationships to us all. The development of social connections for people from a refugee background who have recently arrived to a country is often highlighted as important for their wellbeing. A range of benefits that can result for new arrivals through these social connections, including self-esteem and confidence, and access to important information to help navigate their new environment (Behnia 2007, p. 3). There are also benefits to people more established in the host country who develop friendships with new arrivals. For example, volunteers involved in refugee friendship programmes describe the experience as 'deeply rewarding' and see

‘themselves as participants in a mutually satisfying two-way relationship’ (Peterie 2018, p. 402).

In contrast to the aim of friendship programmes to develop mutually beneficial relationships, however, the initial aim of our collective was focused on what we could do to address at least some of the impacts of the punitive asylum policy landscape in Australia. The development of the relationships between us emerged through these efforts as we met regularly to understand the impacts of Australia’s policies and how we might best try to address them. We now consider these relationships, and the community of interest we are co-creating, as being imperative to this work, and a reason for it to continue.

Working together in this way resonates with Iris Marion Young’s (2006) concept of political responsibility for structural injustice. We recognize that it is possible to trace responsibility for particular policies to governments and this is where we have focused most of our advocacy efforts. However, we also recognize that those of us who are Australian citizens have benefited from the racism inherent in the Australian settler colonial state and enjoy levels of security that come with our privileged positions as citizens in this country, in contrast to those who have arrived seeking asylum. Salem, Rohullah and Atefeh see that their English language skills position them in a more privileged situation than others in their family or community. In this respect, we all recognize that we have a political responsibility ‘to intervene moving forward in the processes that produce unjust outcomes’ and in ways that show solidarity with those who are harmed by these outcomes (Saunders 2018, p. 861). As outlined above, this includes forming a community of interest that is underpinned by the development of relationships between us all. But it is also important to attend to how we are working together, critically reflecting on the positions of privilege that some of us enjoy within this network, and acting to try to minimize these imbalances of power as much as possible.

A sense of hope

As we finish writing this chapter, we are in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Some of our network members have lost their employment, particularly those from an asylum seeking background who work in industries impacted by job losses and are often employed on insecure contracts (Dale 2020). For those that have worked hard to get jobs, the impacts of the severe economic downturn will mean many are going to return to square one.

Being forced to live on a temporary visa means they are also excluded from accessing some of the financial supports recently introduced by the Australian Government. Many are desperately worried for the health and wellbeing of their families who remain in countries where healthcare and other supports are severely lacking. The virus is intensifying uncertainty about the present and future. Hope for a future that will provide visa security and access to family reunion is more important than ever. So we reflect here on the sense of hope that we have all experienced through being involved in this network. As Salem expresses it:

Once you lose hope, then you lose yourself and it’s so difficult to then cope with the life that you have. No families, no friends, no relatives, and then you don’t have hope. Then you don’t have a life.

For Atefeh, meeting network members meant finding people who might be able to assist her advocacy, providing her with some sense of hope:

I don't feel I have much power but I feel like here there is just a little bit more freedom than where I came from. Still a lot of things are similar, there is still a lot of restriction, but here there is hope for change. In my country there is no hope for change. When [Caroline] you told me we can go and talk to the people, it might change something, I didn't believe you to be honest. But I thought because you are from here, you know the system, you know everything, so I will just try. You just give it a try. You hope that something will change. I don't feel more power, but I feel that little bit of hope for change here is more than what I used to see. That's all that makes me just go for it.

While realizing the difficulties in trying to bring about policy change, Rohullah sees his involvement as a way of working towards a better future:

A lot of my friends said it's useless to attend the meetings because we're not going to change anything. My view was a bit different. Everyone can expect this reaction from the local government or the federal government when we are asking something which is opposite to their promise during the election. It is very hard to get the changes very quickly. I thought that by coming to the meetings, we will learn about the system and then we will know how to talk to the politicians, how to engage the community, and it's good for our language. I thought at least we can learn something from going to the meetings or talking with the people, even just the socializing. It means for me we are doing something for the future to get some positive change in our life.

Salem came to realize that other members of the network drew feelings of hope from their involvement, which motivated him to continue:

Many times I was like, 'I'm just giving up, there's no way you know, just give it up it's not going to work, just leave it'. But then you see some of these people who just don't have anything but the hopes of us working together, in the hope of bringing a change. So that's the reason that keeps you working.

I think what we are doing is not only a professional advocacy group that comes together and does some work. We also come together to give people the hope that we are there, that there are some good people out there for you.

Teresa similarly sees the hope that others have drawn from the network:

Somehow this group functions as hope for these individuals. Somehow it's part of their mechanism of resilience because that's what they are saying. And I think, 'How is this hopeful when every time you come here we tell you the SHEV region hasn't changed, you're probably not going to get a permanent visa?'

Being part of this group, based on the relationships that have built, has become a source of hope for Kate, Caroline, Mary Anne and Teresa as well. They agree with Kate that our 'energy and hope and importance is that group'.

At a time when 'social distancing' is crucial to prevent the spread of the virus, social connection is important for mental health and wellbeing in a time of uncertainty (Farmer et al. 2020). Continuing to meet via video meetings provided an opportunity to keep working

together in the current COVID-19 environment, until more recently when we have been able to recommence meetings in person. In this way we have sought to maintain our relationships and try to motivate each other to find hope.

Conclusion

We have explored here how a group of people, some with lived experience of seeking asylum and some who are Australian citizens, have worked together over the past few years to advocate for a shift in Australia's punitive asylum seeker policies. Motivations for our involvement have included shared responsibilities for seeking to improve lives both personally and collectively, including family and communities.

We have learnt from political allies about how it may be best to advocate to bring about policy change, as well as the learning we have gained from each other about how to work together to do this. Relationships that have developed between us have been important to keeping us all working together over the long term. The sense of hope we have all experienced by working together in the network has also been a major source of motivation. Our respective roles and privileges within the group have also been examined, and how this informs what we consider to be our political responsibilities that underpin our continued work in response to structural injustice.

As the injustice experienced by SHEV holders and other temporary visa holders has deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic, the network has increased its advocacy efforts that engage with the federal government where immigration policy responsibilities directly lie. We are also contributing to the development of a national advocacy collective that we hope will be underpinned by the meaningful participation of people with lived experience of seeking asylum. Given the intransigence of this government in shifting the punitive policies imposed on people seeking asylum, now more than ever there is a need for collective action by a diverse range of many actors to address these structural injustices in an act of solidarity. There is much work to be done.

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ⁱ As Shukufa Tahiri articulated it during the Refugee Alternatives Conference in February 2020 (Refugee Council of Australia 2020).