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## Locked out, but not disconnected: multilingual community engagement in Australia

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### ABSTRACT

At the onset of COVID-19, many Local Government Areas (LGAs) indicated they were struggling to communicate effectively with multilingual migrant communities. Communities were isolated from vital LGA support due to factors including the digital divide, barriers to language access, and top-down communication strategies. The pandemic also provided insights into the ways migrant communities mitigate hardship by engaging in placemaking and place-shaping, using existing networks and resources to provide vital support during crisis, which requires significant invisible labour. In this article, we present three case studies from a larger community-based project which began in early 2020 with an LGA in Western Australia. We use case narratives to illustrate and analyse three common actions migrant women used to engage their communities prior to, and during, COVID-19 recovery. These simple, yet profound actions, which include visiting communities, acknowledging challenges, and identifying opportunities further evidence the ways community leaders facilitate culturally sustaining placemaking, even during crisis; they underscore the intense emotional, cultural, and linguistic labour required to enact support in contexts where resources are inaccessible or misaligned with community stories. We argue it is only in partnership with communities that LGAs can learn to address some of the long-standing issues COVID-19 highlights.

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Multilingual communities; isolation; local government areas; community engagement; placemaking

## Introduction

Alienation is one of the many faces of modernity. The cure is communication and community - a new sense of togetherness. (Somé 1994, 1)

Alienation begins with a border, either real or imagined. While the inequalities migrant and ethnic minority groups face in Australia are not new, COVID-19 has exposed these inequalities more overtly (Wang 2021). At the onset of COVID-19, it was clear that certain communities were not only vulnerable to racism and verbal abuse (Esses and Hamilton 2021), but appeared isolated from vital Local Government Area (LGA) support that could link them with essential services and COVID safety information

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(Settlement Council of Australia 2020). In Western Australia, where this study took place, multilingual communities experienced challenges around access to mental health, medical, translation, housing, financial, domestic violence and educational support during COVID-19 (Cortis and Blaxland 2022; Mental Health Commission WA 2020). Due to the lack of materials in languages other than English and a reliance on digital applications, including telehealth, distance learning, online-only access to Centrelink (for income support), LGA information and COVID guidance, many multilingual communities also experienced elevated anxiety, stress, and social isolation (Seale et al. 2022; Cortis & Blaxland). Pre-existing systemic failures to recognise intersectionality when developing and connecting individuals with resources, combined with racist perceptions of marginalised communities created a perfect storm, perpetuating existing borders and border-making (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018).

The pandemic also highlighted long-standing issues with resilience-informed governance (Bowles 2022), resulting in an over-reliance on communities to navigate a crisis (Uekusa and Matthewman 2022). In this article, we argue that communities' self-resourcing patterns, including flocking (Ebersöhn et al. 2018) and placemaking (Courage et al. 2020) can offer insights into the complex and pre-existing dynamics between pluralistic communities and LGAs in contexts where resources are scarce, misaligned, or inaccessible. As educational researchers, we draw from a long history of research that positions plurality as a complex asset (Alim and Paris 2017; Ladson-Billings 1998; Yosso 2005). We use this work to interrogate the ways 'whitestream' (Urrieta 2010) thinking both informs and rewards particular types of transactional engagement between LGAs and communities, aligning with monolingual and monocultural norms. Communities become caught in a resilience trap: The more invisible work they do to place-make and sustain their communities in crisis, the more resilient and less in need of support they appear, pushing them to continually draw from reservoirs of social, emotional, linguistic, cultural, and navigational capital to sustain themselves (Bowles 2022; Uekusa and Matthewman 2022; Yosso 2005).

Through three case studies, we profile the ways migrant women utilised LGA resources (community hubs, libraries, and meeting places) to activate culturally sustaining placemaking prior to, and during, COVID-19 recovery. Borrowing from Alim and Paris's (2017) discussions of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP), originally articulated for classrooms, we locate these case studies within a revised definition of community-driven placemaking that 'positions dynamic cultural dexterity as a necessary good ... as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits' (Alim and Paris 2017, 1). Culturally sustaining placemaking requires complex care work (Tronto 2013), which manifests in each woman's leadership and signals profound levels of resilience during crisis. Their work also highlights the significant and often invisible labour that is required in contexts where access to appropriate resources from LGAs or social service agencies may be limited or absent (Uekusa and Matthewman 2022). This paradox underscores an important need for LGAs and organisations to turn back to communities, to learn about and resource what *is already there*, and share the labour required to enact sustainable care.

## Context

This study took place in The City of X, an LGA in Perth, Western Australia (population 95,860); approximately fifty-four percent of its residents are born overseas and 44.5%

speak a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Over the past seven years, the number of non-English speaking households in the City of X has grown by approximately 36% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Already the most isolated state in Australia, Western Australia was in a state of emergency for 922 days during 2020-2022, which included a hard border closure for interstate and international travel that lasted for 697 days, causing significant hardship for individuals with interstate or overseas family members, added financial stress, and, at times, interrupted access to medical and food supplies (Cortis and Blaxland 2022; Towie 2022). While Perth had restrictions on movement and social gatherings between March-June 2020 and subsequent snap lockdowns totalling only 12 days, strict social distancing, mask mandates, online education, work from home advice, and the hard border closure continued throughout 2020 and 2021, making it difficult for already isolated communities to access the vital social networks required to navigate hardship and resulting in further isolation, especially for migrant women (Cortis and Blaxland 2022). At the initial onset of the pandemic, the City of X reported significant challenges communicating vital information to its multilingual communities; they believed entire populations had been cut off from critical housing support information, food and amenities, social services, employment support, and communications from local schools (City of X Community Development Officer, personal communication, 04/2020). An initial survey conducted by the research team in June 2020 indicated City of X multilingual communities were struggling with employment, housing, and reliable access to food; these issues were of 'great concern' for local community leaders. The initial stages of our research, however, revealed that these communities were hyper-engaged in addressing these issues, but they did not rely on LGA support to enable this engagement.

## *Theoretical underpinnings*

### *Flocking and resilience*

In difficult circumstances, some communities work together to form effective social support by flocking, using their network to nurture, comfort, and protect others within the community and foster collective gains (Ebersöhn et al. 2018). When additional support is required, the flock expands to include more people and resources, buffering the community against extreme hardship (Ebersöhn et al. 2018). While it is a testament to community resilience, evidence of flocking can signal ongoing resource scarcity, especially in the form of social services, local government outreach and support, and material resources required for survival (food, clothing, and shelter) (Ebersöhn et al. 2018).

Bowles (2022) indicates that resilience-informed governance often overlooks the complexities communities face in their efforts to bounce-back from a crisis. Resilience, he writes, 'is a way of thinking about provision that reduces the expectations citizens may have of the state, and increasingly places the burden of care onto the citizens themselves' (274). Uekusa and Matthewman (2022) warn that communities may have a 'tipping point' (117) where, without appropriate and accessible resources and support, they exhibit heightened stress patterns (mental health issues, domestic violence, disengagement from social activities, community distrust), which can inhibit their capacities when responding to crisis. More research is needed to address the complex limits of individual and community resilience (Allen et al. 2018; Uekusa and Matthewman 2022),

especially given the dynamic nature of communities and the ways large-scale disaster can critically heighten pre-existing challenges including socio-economic insecurity, racism, marginalisation, and inadequate access to vital information and resources.

### *Placemaking*

Placemaking among migrant communities enhances cities through community gardens, small businesses, activation of community centres, cultural spaces, parks, and neighbourhoods (Riordan and Claudio 2022; Sampson and Gifford 2010; Turner, Abramovic, and Hope 2021). We agree with Courage et al. (2020), who define placemaking as a form of connectedness among people and the places they live; it is inclusive of both the material (forming attachments to physical places) and immaterial (social attachments that form with others through activities or practices within a place). Placemaking is also an important aspect of sustainable health and wellbeing among migrant communities and can positively impact belonging (Bartlett, Mendenhall, and Ghaffar-Kucher 2017; Bell et al. 2018; Yashadhana et al. 2023). It is not the place itself that creates a sense of belonging; it is the capacity of the network that could be established there (Barglowski and Bonfert 2023; Yashadhana et al. 2023). When migrant communities can engage in placemaking that enhances language rights and recognition, employment prospects, financial wellbeing, and connections to transnational contexts, it has a profound impact on psycho-social wellbeing (Alim and Paris 2017; Barglowski and Bonfert 2023; Yashadhana et al. 2023).

We also argue that placemaking can privilege pluralistic identities and belonging while problematising inequalities. We draw from Alim and Paris (2017) to examine how communities facilitate culturally sustaining placemaking in contexts where they have faced systemic inequities exacerbated by resilience-informed governance (Bowles 2022). Alim and Paris (2017) reject the longstanding frameworks that serve to perpetuate 'White middle-class linguistic, literate, and cultural skills and ways of being' as the sole 'gatekeepers' to opportunity and progress (6). Instead, they attend to a 'pluralistic present and future' that refuses to 'separate culture from the bodies enacting culture and the ways those bodies are subjected to systemic discrimination' (7–9). When communities drive placemaking, they can begin to shape places through their own 'complete stories', where their cultures 'are sustained, extended, and complicated outside of a dichotomy of reproduction and resistance' (Wong and Peña 2017, 131). While flocking (Ebersöhn et al. 2018) is associated with response to chronic stress, placemaking is part of the sustained work communities do to generate belonging over time through organising, advocacy, and care networks; in this, they make room for the whole story by inviting collaboration and dialogue across cultures (Tuck 2009; Wong and Peña 2017). The whole story can also expose the intense challenge of doing this work from marginalised places. By examining these complexities, LGAs and organisations can learn to better generate and allocate resources that align with communities' complete stories (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013; Uekusa and Matthewman 2022).

### *Resilience-informed governance and care leadership*

Interrupting the resilience trap that places communities in a constant cycle of attempting to bounce-back without the appropriate resources (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013; Uekusa and Matthewman 2022) is only possible through a reciprocal relationship between government and communities. Croweller and Tschakert (2021) advocate for

shared and humanitarian leadership models that oppose ‘top-down, state and expert-driven framings of resilience’ (7). We argue this relational and justice-oriented leadership is already visible in many pluralistic communities. Their leadership extends placemaking into what Gutiérrez and Johnson (2017) define as a ‘third space ... predicated on an understanding that cultural practices are both enabling and constraining, with inherent tensions within’ (253). In this, these community leaders attend to the ways culture can be sustained while simultaneously activating appropriate resources and social networks required to survive and thrive (Alim and Paris 2017). LGAs and organisations can learn from this leadership, including recognising the ways it is time-intrusive, complex and carries its own emotional, material, and social burdens (Tronto 2013; Tsarenko et al. 2022).

Women who hold caring roles in their communities and are adept at responding to crisis often emerge as leaders, organising food, childcare, clothing, and housing when social service agencies and local governments are inaccessible, overcommitted, or absent (Martin 2014; Tsarenko et al. 2022). These efforts are daily contributions to placemaking for many migrant communities and signify the meeting of basic human needs through a relational network (Barglowski and Bonfert 2023). Tronto (2013) draws from intersectionality to argue that the inequalities of care position the more affluent as better equipped to care, having better access to food, exercise, and mental health resources. They are also more likely to have resources that make up the ‘infrastructure of care’ including access to better transportation and housing (Tronto 2013, 99). They are less likely, however, to feel pressure to care for others in society (Tronto 2013). People who undertake care work are among the lowest paid; they are frequently migrant working-class women and people of colour (Duffy 2011).

Migrant women volunteers often find themselves helping their communities navigate inaccessible care resources while also confronting their own challenges to access care in these contexts (Tsarenko et al. 2022). In this article, we argue this work also underscores the intersectionality of placemaking in communities, signalling exhaustive invisible and unpaid labour enacted by women in contexts where flocking is common and resources are inappropriate, inaccessible, or scarce (Scuzzarello and Moroşanu 2023; Tsarenko et al. 2022). This labour often goes unrecognised by the organisations for which these women are filling critical gaps. We agree with Tronto’s (2013) argument that while care work has historically been strategically positioned as women’s work and, therefore, continues to be absorbed by the most vulnerable women in our societies; there is an incredible need right now for societies ‘at every level’ to ‘engage in caring with one another’ (10). By examining and naming this labour, LGAs and organisations associated with resource provision may be better positioned to learn the responsibility of caring in a just society (Crosweller and Tschakert 2021; Tronto 2013).

## Methodology

### Research design

In this study, Critical Community-Engaged Scholarship (CCES) (Gordon da Cruz 2017) shaped a continuous cycle of engagement and reflection among community leaders, LGA staff, and non-profit stakeholders involved in ongoing community-based projects within

the LGA. While all but one of the researchers is a first generation migrant to Australia, migration and resettlement are deeply subjective experiences, influenced not only by the individual, but also by socioeconomics, language, gender identity, and culture. CCES played a significant role in enabling researchers to capture the approaches, experiences, and reach of all stakeholders, while also documenting the challenges and successes of cross-cultural collaborations throughout the project. Gordon da Cruz (2017) argues that CCES focuses community-engaged work through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings 1998), which enables opportunities to disrupt the 'racial status quo' (Rosa and Flores 2017, 187) through methods that offer multiple entry points for participant stories and dialogues with other stakeholders. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model was of equal importance here; it draws from CRT to map the contacts, skills, abilities, and knowledge individuals use to 'survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression' (77). Her framework was essential in designing a study that could recognise and unpack the vital forms of capital within participant communities and simultaneously disrupt normative views of engagement and placemaking that stem from White middle-class monolingual values (Alim and Paris 2017).

### **Participants and recruitment**

Hard border closures meant COVID-19 restrictions in Western Australia were minimally invasive in the everyday; community-engaged research was possible because researchers had face-to-face contact with participants. The LGA had a robust list of approximately 60 community members who led community organisations and events. Twenty-six individuals (18 females and 8 males) chose to participate in the research portion of the study in 2020 and 2021, indicating strong desires to communicate and document the challenges they had faced. While some of these individuals were part of the initial list the LGA provided, most participants learned of the study through word of mouth and researcher engagement with community-driven events. Participants completed a strengths-analysis survey and were involved in focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and shadowing sessions, with the option to withdraw at any time. This paper reports on three female participants who were part of the overall study; their work was selected for this article as it exemplifies common patterns and challenges participants faced in resourcing communities during the crisis. Table 1 shows initial overall participants, language groups, education levels, and experience working in communities:

### **Data collection and analysis**

For the study to be of public good, it had to be grounded in the communities' work and experiences (Gordon da Cruz 2017). The project began with a *strengths-analysis survey* (10 items) that collected information about how communities supported each other during the initial lockdowns, their challenges and concerns, and modes or preferences for communication with each other and the LGA. This helped the research team to develop an initial assets-based understanding of communities (Gordon da Cruz 2017). The design of the survey offered an opportunity to detect community strengths (Yosso 2005) while simultaneously collecting information about structural barriers that limited migrants' access to broader support systems across Perth. There were four



**Table 1.** Demographic information of the participants.

Code	Gender	Language Group	Education	Experience (Years)
1	Female	Arabic; Somali	High School	3
2	Female	Indonesian; Javanese	NA	15
3	Female	Mandarin	University	6
4	Female	Malay	University	5
5	Male	Bengali; Arabic	University	7
6	Male	Malay	University	5
7	Male	Mandarin	University	2
8	Female	Punjabi	University	2
9	Female	Malay; Mandarin	University	8
10	Female	Punjabi	University	4
11	Female	Arabic; Turkish	University	8
12	Male	Hindi	University	5
13	Male	Punjabi	University	3
14	Female	English; Arabic	University	20
15	Female	Indonesian	University	5
16	Female	English	University	10
17	Male	English	University	8
18	Female	Hindi	University	15
19	Male	English; Indonesian	NA	15
20	Female	English	University	14
21	Female	English	University	10
22	Female	Kinyarwanda	NA	10
23	Female	Punjabi	University	3
24	Female	Arabic	NA	2
25	Female	Arabic	NA	2
26	Male	Punjabi	University	10

*focus groups* offered and each used a variation of Photovoice (Wang and Burris 1997); participants viewed a range of photographs from past community-based events in the City of X. They selected photos that represented community to them and discussed their choices in the focus groups. Figure 1 shows an example of the photos used for the focus groups.

The second phase of the study involved *shadowing participants*. Building from funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992), researchers attended community events, classes, and visited participants' homes to better understand their community work. Researchers created multimodal profiles through photographs, video, an audio-recorded semi-structured interview, and written field notes. Once again, the design of the shadowing sessions centred participants by documenting the ways they facilitated community, even during lockdowns (Gordon da Cruz 2017). In each interview, participants discussed their journeys as community leaders, their successes and challenges, and how they saw their work change during the pandemic. All the data was analysed for themes related to challenges, strengths, and patterns of sustainable engagement across communities (Braun and Clarke 2012). It was also de-identified and used as excerpts and vignettes to facilitate critical dialogue between communities and LGA staff, enabling difficult conversations and opening new pathways for community-driven leadership.

The case studies that follow examine the borders between resilience-informed governance and resilient communities; they unpack the intense labour required to support communities through culturally sustaining practices (Alim and Paris 2017; Tronto 2013) when resources are limited or misaligned with community needs. We present these case studies through the common actions three women used in different ways to connect with their communities: *Visiting communities, acknowledging challenges,*





**Figure 1.** Photo example of a community-based event (sewing group).

*identifying opportunities.* This study has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE2020-72827). All participant names are pseudonyms.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Action 1: visiting communities: the case of Amina***

Community visits and consultation shape Amina’s work as the founder of a local non-profit organisation that brings diverse cultures together in the interest of social enterprise. Amina migrated from India seventeen years ago. When asked about the purpose of her non-profit, she indicated her focus involves identifying and activating community resources:

There's also a big push on support for skill sets that each one has, and providing opportunities for benefiting the community, contributing to the community using those skills that they have, so that not only do you feel a sense of belonging to the other person through contribution, but also it can create avenues for cultural connections, employment, work experience. (Personal Interview, 14 August 2020)

Here, Amina describes how her organisation positions aspirational capital to support stronger navigational, social, and cultural capital (Yosso 2005). This precipitates the expansion of networks that can help newcomers navigate their lives in a new place (Yashadhana et al. 2023). As a cultural insider, she uses community visits and consultation to identify individual strengths and challenges; by facilitating events and projects, she builds external networks, using placemaking to disrupt 'whitestream' (Urrieta 2010) expectations and assumptions about her community. While some of this is akin to facilitating flocking (Ebersöhn et al. 2018), Amina's work is proactive rather than reactive response to crisis. To an outsider, her community is resilient, but the resilience has been organised and facilitated through her leadership and activation of community assets and external networks.

Currently, Amina's organisation facilitates three ongoing large-scale projects, with other localised projects under production or seasonally active. These projects include training emerging cooks to provide catering for events across Perth, sewing groups at local libraries, and an international music initiative that connects local multilingual musicians to community organisations for paid appearances at events. Community members lead these initiatives with support from Amina. Her work focuses on consultative placemaking (Courage et al. 2020), helping community members to build from their strengths and navigate challenges, while also engaging them with external networks to sustain their projects. She discusses Hanaa, who runs the sewing initiative, in order to illustrate her approach:

I look at Hanaa, Hanaa existed before [name of Amina's organisation] existed. But the amount of things that Hanaa has been able to do through [name of Amina's organisation], she hasn't been able to do at another organisation, simply because I get her. I understand the multi-skilled person that she is, it's precisely what Hanaa needs- she's doing all the work now, but she needs me to write the emails. She needs me to do the phone calls. She needs me to get the things. (Personal Interview, 14 August 2020)

Her consultation methods also help her identify and activate linguistic capital (Yosso 2005) through what Rymes (2014) defines as *discursive practices*, where participants use their full repertoires, or collection of ways of using language and communicating to function optimally in multiple multilingual communities. These repertoires are inter-discursive, with participants moving through their daily lives accumulating many experiences and images to draw upon when communicating with each other. These are a few ways Amina's organisation engages in the large-scale and complex efforts required to enact care practices through placemaking in under resourced and monolingual contexts.

### *Limits of placemaking: access to appropriate space*

The labour involved in visiting and consulting communities to organise them in such a strategic way is unimaginable; it is a type of responsible care that requires significant material, emotional, linguistic, and cultural resources. Amina stores all the material

resources for her projects in her living room or the boot of her car. They are visible reminders of the ways the work is inseparable from her day-to-day life and career as a lecturer at a local community college. When we asked Amina about the challenges she faced as a community leader during the pandemic, she was drawn to a discussion of what appeared to be her tipping point (Uekusa and Matthewman 2022), which related to the emotional care she provided to stressed communities during that time: 'I mean, the nervousness in the community had an impact on everybody. But it has had more impact on people who are already marginalised, and a lot of our members are marginalised' (Personal Interview, 21 August 2020). Amina discussed the impact social isolation had on her community, where visitation and consultation are paramount to their supportive network: 'We didn't let everything stop, so there is a sense of triumph in getting the things that we could do done. Although there were a lot of things that resulted in isolation, mainly isolation. But also emotional stress' (Personal Interview, 21 August 2020). Her discussion highlights the ways such volunteer work operates at the intersection of 'lean governments ... and unmet needs of vulnerable communities and families' (Tsarenko et al. 2022, 694), further complicated by a global crisis. Amina noted that not having a place for the community to come together was a significant roadblock: 'We don't have an office. And our members felt that they had got completely disconnected from the whole world because they couldn't come face to face' (Personal Interview, 21 August 2020). Tsarenko et al. (2022) note that this is a 'precarious' (695) place for migrant women volunteers, who work to fill resource gaps, but without the institutional protection of an LGA or social service organisation, revealing the limits of their resilience without additional support (Uekusa and Matthewman 2022).

Because the community had previously come together through face-to-face events and projects, activated at parks and libraries across the LGA, the issues they encountered with technology and language access were at the forefront of their struggles to connect during the initial lockdowns:

A lot of our members don't have the basic IT skills ... all our events got cancelled. Because our community needed such technological support, we weren't able to stay in touch with them, and so we had to resort to things such as WhatsApp video calls, that only allows like three or four people at a time. (Personal Interview, 14 August 2020)

Amina felt the lack of physical space and need for digital upskilling also created further challenges for group connection:

The third major thing for our group was Ramadan ... For us, it was huge, because I mean, I'm not a Muslim, so it doesn't impact me directly, but I felt the agony that our members were going through. Because it's a time for coming together, and they couldn't, and so it was very soulless, in a sense. (Personal Interview, 14 August 2020)

Finally, she noted that the issues with technology and language access created barriers for individuals to get direct support in a time of extreme need: 'We also had loss of income due to loss of jobs, we also had huge problems of accessing Centrelink support, because of again, technology' (Personal Interview, 14 August 2020). She frames this discussion by referencing the ways support organisations (Centrelink, the LGA, and social service agencies) use digital tools to publish information (mostly in English), assuming individuals would find and access it with little intervention. Amina's organisation then engaged

community members in the negotiated work of linguistically and digitally navigating that information so that it could be usefully applied to alleviate their current stress, signalling the ways care work expands and intensifies during crisis and particularly in contexts where resources are misaligned with community needs (Tronto 2013; Tsarenko et al. 2022; Uekusa and Matthewman 2022). She recalls the complexities of this work without a physical space to meet but also highlights how social network digital applications can be optimal vehicles for leaders to break through physical and system constraints, enabling them to continue building capacity through remote networks that sustain cultural connections in a time of great stress (Alim and Paris 2017).

### *Limits of placemaking: institutional labour*

The hurdles Amina's organisation navigated to combat social isolation and disconnection through a stronger online presence became a form of digital placemaking:

There were huge opportunities for having fun. So I'll give you an example. We have an ongoing project, in collaboration with [local nonprofit] and it consists of live events. So we had to cancel that. But, in that particular case, it was possible for us to shift it online. Because the [name of nonprofit], social enterprise officer has huge experience in these kind of things, he has a social media background and things like that. And the skill set is broader, in that project. So we were able to shift it online and we've created an online show. (Personal Interview, 14 August 2020)

A more prominent online presence supported the organisation's already existing connections with each other and increased wider communication and networking. Amina also saw this as an opportunity for learning and co-learning among the group: 'One of the first things that we support each other with is technology and language. A lot of our members don't have basic IT skills, so we've sort of supported them by doing the WhatsApp group' (Personal Interview, 14 August 2020). Amina was able to capitalise on WhatsApp as a social networking platform, maximising access to communal resources and building capacities, despite the mandates of isolation and social distancing. Digital placemaking was evidenced in the community-organised live streamed concert amid the lockdowns; another was a mask sewing project, which was facilitated entirely through WhatsApp.

The work Amina's organisation did before and during the crisis was largely invisible to the LGA, due to its lack of perceived value in ensuring individuals were complying with lockdown and social distancing orders (Covarrubias, Laiduc, and Valle 2022). The LGA missed a critical opportunity for not only strengthening resources that already exist but also activating a two-way dialogue with communities, which could serve to disrupt top-down monolingual practices that further marginalise plurilingual communities (Alim and Paris 2017). It is easy to see how an interlocked approach with communities prior to the crisis would have benefitted both the LGA's agenda of critical information sharing and provided some connections and resources for online support during the pandemic. Visiting communities was the first action that many community leaders used in our study; it was a simple way to connect with their populations through accessible and appropriate social and cultural events and it offered significant benefits, including recognition, to community members at a low cost. For LGAs interested in appropriate resource development and activation, this would be the first step in understanding the needs and capacities in communities.

## **Action 2: acknowledging the challenges: the case of Sagal**

Sagal was raised in New Zealand and moved to Australia during adolescence. She became a committed Somali community leader after the mosque shooting in Christchurch. During that tragedy, she witnessed government's failed attempts to communicate information in the wake of the crisis, highlighting a need for better understanding around visitation and consultation in communities:

They weren't equipped or trained in that field. They were all down in a community hall, as you can imagine, trying to get information out, trying to help the community, and the community leaders are just fighting one another, because they don't know. There was no connection ... there is no network ... there was not much information. (Personal Interview, 19 March 2021)

Observing her community's disconnection during crisis informed her leadership practices. Home visits enabled her to unite a fractured community during the initial COVID-19 lockdowns; she facilitated a digital network for her community to share resources through WhatsApp:

I visited one family and I remember I almost cried because the daughter was like 'Mom what are we gonna eat? It's Ramadan tomorrow, what are we gonna eat?' So we created a WhatsApp group. I made sure that I tagged a few families, said 'so if you know, any family, please send it to me'. I made sure like every suburb had one person that contacted somebody in the area. (Personal Interview, 19 March 2021)

Through this visitation, Sagal strategically resourced her community by supporting flocking (Ebersöhn et al. 2018); she went from house to house to deliver resources her community had identified through the WhatsApp group, using these opportunities to further consult with communities. She did not indicate that she shared this responsibility with other community members, who often struggle to access the infrastructure of care (Tronto 2013), including transportation, adequate housing, employment, and social service agencies.

### **Limits of placemaking: infrastructures of care**

Sagal's ongoing struggle has been to gain the community's respect and recognition as a capable leader while also experiencing her own challenges accessing the infrastructure of care (Tronto 2013). 'It was challenging - first of all, "who are you"? For 15 years, I've just been looking after kids and family ... I didn't have enough resources, I didn't have where to start or what to do' (Personal Interview, 19 March 2021). Part of her unique leadership is her willingness to share her own mental health journey as a way of dismantling taboos and refusing to flatten her community's cultural dynamics (Gutiérrez and Johnson 2017). Sagal's community has faced socioeconomic, religious, and cultural hardships as refugees in Australia and the isolation during COVID-19 triggered complex emotional distress, especially among adolescents:

I realised that so many of the young ones are coming, like girls who are teenage actually, she's about to be suicide. I don't want this. I don't want to take it, how do I train a mother that doesn't know what suicide is? (Personal Interview, 19 March 1. 2021)

Sagal's discussions of trauma, isolation, and dislocation were a large focus of her response to the trials she faces as a leader; such trauma presents complexities that are often



misrecognised by support organisations or the LGA itself (Uekusa and Matthewman 2022). Sagal's story exemplifies the ways culturally sustaining leadership can also create a 'third space' (Gutiérrez and Johnson 2017, 249) for communities to define and address complexities on their own terms. These challenges highlight an intersectional need in many communities for more appropriate trauma-informed adolescent mental health and substance abuse resources:

They went through childhood trauma, or family that comes from civil war, so they carry that trauma for generation after generation. And now the younger ones are going through it ... . The other thing is, maybe drugs and alcohol, because there's not a lot that, but now they're starting, drugs and alcohol has increased, especially the youth ... . Is it to do with the mental health? Or is it to do with the environment? (Personal Interview, 19 March 2021)

Sagal's story centres on her transparent and open leadership that uses community visits to identify and acknowledge the challenges. In this, she disrupts definitions of resilience that ignore cultural and historical trauma, persistent resource scarcity, and inaccessible infrastructures of care (Allen et al. 2018; Tronto 2013). Instead, her work composes a counter-narrative that highlights the complexities of care in these conditions, exemplifying the ways migrant women leaders leverage forms of capital and enable community access to a larger body of resources. This is exhaustive work, especially when basic material and mental health needs have not been met by larger and more resourced organisations (Tsarenko et al. 2022), but are essential components of placemaking as a form of wellbeing (Yashadhana et al. 2023).

### *Limits of placemaking: access to support networks*

Sagal quickly knew her community needed trauma-informed leaders with insider knowledge and capacities to advocate for appropriate resources within the LGA. The pressure for her to upskill to meet her community's needs required her to identify, access, and navigate higher-level outsider networks:

You still need to find out how to help the mother, how to help the father. Those are the challenges as well. Yeah, and you can't be a saint. You can't, and you've got a life as well. And you don't even have the skills as well. The skills that you needed as a leader. And for me, I had to, you know, do my own skill training ... . I volunteer with so many different organisations to understand. (Personal Interview, 19 March 2021)

She was not afraid to be vulnerable and indicated that she needed to learn; the benefits to her community have been significant since she began as a community leader:

Within the two years, we've done mental health and doctor (Somali), doctor always is amazing, and now they go to him. So any mother, or father or whatever, they don't – they're too embarrassed to go to doctors, they'll see him and they can talk to him. (Personal Interview, 19 March 2021)

These community improvements gave Sagal momentum in her work. While Amina did indicate her community was marginalised, the two women's perspectives articulate how marginalisation happens in different forms across communities, requiring dynamic resources. Amina's work related to helping the community develop ways to come together without physical space; in Sagal's community, the need for readily accessible and culturally appropriate services upon arrival after forced migration was a central

priority. Both types of leadership required the women to engage outsider networks that may have previously misinterpreted their communities' capacities and needs. Sagal explains that in her desperation, she reached out to any network available and found the LGA could support: 'They are there to mentor. And that's what, I need more of that. A small organisation like us that don't even know where to start. It's fantastic' (Personal Interview, 19 March 2021). Sagal's story offers insights into the ways resources often sit adjacent to a community, underscoring misconceptions that all communities have access to infrastructures of care that enable easy connection (internet and phone access, language resources, time, and transportation to engage with these resources) (Tronto 2013). Her work shows how culturally sustaining leadership can build from a clear understanding of what the community has, including its complexities, and dismantle practices that further marginalise community capacities.

### *Action 3: identifying opportunities: the case of Happiness*

After many familial challenges, Happiness finally felt settled in her work and life in Turkey. Then, she met her husband, who convinced her to move to Australia in 2002. They were married for three years before he was diagnosed with cancer and died shortly after. Happiness undertook the primary care for his teenage son, who had previously lost his mother in a traffic accident. In the aftermath of his death, she experienced exclusion from the larger community, making way for a painful and complicated post-migration story. She approached our interview from a place of disconnection and isolation:

Every week I was going to the gravestone ... . But then I got really depressed, very sad. Then being a widow woman, you are treated differently by the community, by the society. And I don't know how it is much in Australian culture, but in certain cultures, when you're a widow, the other woman don't feel safe around you. Even the people that you meet, like, meet regularly when my husband was alive. And they are all educated people ... . the only thing that I had was the friends, and it was melting away too. (Personal Interview, 29 March 2021)

The disintegration of her network led Happiness to consider how women navigate death and loss in her community; this tension informs the ways she resists static definitions of culture that decentre the human (Gutiérrez and Johnson 2017). Her leadership, instead, centres the human and complicates care work through an intersectional lens (Tronto 2013), denoting instances when communities do not engage in flocking (Ebersöhn et al. 2018) and, instead, begin 'melting away' in response to particular types of tragedy and the associated stigma. In this instance, Happiness' efforts at placemaking during a crisis showed the ways a familiar community can create barriers instead of support. She had lost everything, including her home after her husband's death:

When I left that home ... . I didn't have furniture, I didn't have anything to survive. It was coming to know to people's real face ... . many women are going through this process. A woman becomes widow, their husband die, with children, without children. Many women, even in their own countries, they are not safe. And if they don't have the support network, who can tell them? Who told me that I could go to Centrelink? Not the Turkish people, it was an Australian woman. And I appreciate her. And I started working. (Personal Interview, 29 March 2021)



This pivotal moment turned Happiness back to her community. Her organisation connects women from all over the community to stage dance, drama, and singing performances in multiple languages and enable dialogue; she positions the aesthetic (Noë 2023) at the centre of consultation and placemaking in her community, using it to facilitate greater understandings of the complex landscapes we all navigate. She successfully establishes ways for communities to tell their full stories through arts-based practices and events (Wong and Peña 2017). Her work exemplifies how arts-based and community-led programming can be an act of placemaking that fosters healing, while simultaneously rejecting static or positivistic portrayals of culture (Alim and Paris 2017; Lillie 2020).

### *Limits of placemaking: access to knowledge and societal norms*

Similar to leaders across this study, as her organisation grew, the physical space Happiness' needed for events changed significantly. Her organisation's success brought new capacity challenges for venues:

It grown and more people come ... . So then we used that venue a few times, then we used somewhere in (name omitted) a few times. But even that, like, place where we had 120 people, wasn't enough anymore. (Personal Interview, 29 March 2021)

Because of the size of the organisation and the need for a large event space at low or no cost, her community began using spaces provided by churches and schools. They quickly realised there were problems connected with this arrangement:

But then we realised one day, a group, artist group call us ... . And they said, okay, they are interested in this art activity ... . They are very willing to come. But sorry, we can't come because we are not spiritual or religious people. I said okay, why did you think that this is a spiritual operation? Because on your flyer it says Baha'i Community Centre, it says, Saint, um ... . (Personal Interview, 29 March 2021)

While seemingly insignificant, understanding how outsider communities navigate religious borders in Australia was a critical area for Happiness to overcome. Over time, Happiness learned that becoming a registered organisation might offer some relief from fees and alleviate the need to use religious spaces for her functions. Navigating the challenges to become a registered organisation was deeply frustrating for Happiness, who has more than one post-secondary degree, but lacked the specific skills and understanding to complete the forms related to registration. Frustrations, anxieties and self-blaming often arise for migrants who, despite their skills in moving between languages, have internalised the 'English-only' ideology faced in educational and work settings (Dobinson et al. 2023). Happiness recounts her experience with the limits of her language and networks in Australia:

So then we become a registered organisation, but it really brought its own challenges. Because we don't know how to write grants. We are mingling with our own. So we don't know the language of the government, we don't know what they want to hear. Like we are not using the same language. So then, getting familiar with these things, starting, making the relationships, networks. Trying to learn how to write grant, which is very difficult. Especially having the English not the first language. And is not sometimes only English. (Personal Interview, 29 March 2021)

This was a common issue across participants: An organisation's success in bringing people together was often overshadowed by the complications related to successful grant

applications. Participants noted ongoing issues with acquiring the necessary language and skills to navigate bureaucratic forms and systems that would secure funding and/or appropriate venues for events at a reasonable cost. This challenge meant that most participants competed for a small group of venues that were safe and could adequately promote placemaking and inclusion. This added complexity furthered the invisible labour required to resource gaps without greater institutional support or disruption to practices that perpetuated exclusion (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013; Martin 2014).

Happiness repeatedly discussed the complexities around this exclusion, where community non-profits are expected to do the care work in communities without overtaxing the government with requests:

So then, if you, if government. In my opinion, like, I don't know if it is, like, we are asking too much, but in my mind, let's be sincere and honest with something. And realistic. What you want to do from non-profit organisations, what do you want them to? Provide services? Build the community? Getting people together? Building cultural awareness? ... . We are doing only the woman's health? Are we doing only the domestic violence? And are doing only the homelessness? No. We are doing a lot, this, that, that, that. (Personal Interview 29 March 2021)

Here, Happiness indicates that the expectation for organisations like her own to perform a variety of functions that enable community resilience is significant, but their limited access to structural and place-based resources is a constant barrier put in place by the LGA itself. She continued the discussion by referencing one of the project's focus groups, where she was asked to choose one photo that best articulated her organisation's focus:

And the photo, some of them were art, some of them are cooking. Like which one represents us? None of them and all of them, and how do we say this? It represents so many stages and all the woman, regardless their background, Australian woman, other woman, and no matter what culture and country they are from, it is a place for the woman and their families. (Personal Interview, 29 March 2021)

Happiness underpins the *intersectionality* within her organisation by rejecting the need for a singular focus (Tronto 2013). This nuanced understanding of communities can be particularly critical when projects are meant to counteract structural disparities, where accessing services has been difficult due to an absence of culturally responsible or multifaceted support (Uekusa and Matthewman 2022). Understanding these complexities and histories within communities can help shape culturally sustaining definitions of community engagement (Alim and Paris 2017; Lillie 2020) and offer comprehensive snapshots of the relationships that are facilitated and sustained through community-driven projects.

## Conclusion

This article tracked community-driven placemaking among three migrant women leaders in Perth, Western Australia at the onset of a global pandemic. Disrupting traditional definitions of placemaking, where designers, LGAs, or organisations imagine and implement a place for individuals to come together, these women used already-existing material and digital places to shape ongoing connections, even during crisis. They reshaped these places through digital and face-to-face community visits, taking the pulse of their communities, bringing them together, and acknowledging challenges through difficult conversations. Their abilities to identify challenges through their

engagement within, and between, these populations meant they could address these issues, with broader inequalities not only being exposed but also constructively addressed (Alim and Paris 2017; Gilmartin and Dagg 2021). Their work within these communities promoted rethinking, and reconstruction, of systems to assist with the issues that COVID-19 aggravated in the community enabling pathways towards sustainable development, and combating systemic inequalities. Their work shows the vital role a community must play in sustainable placemaking and the limits of that placemaking when systems and structures have been designed without them in mind.

Included in their efforts to place make are instances of flocking, where they facilitated community networks to buffer and support during crisis (Ebersöhn et al. 2018; Seale et al. 2022). Their leadership, however, existed prior to and way beyond instances of flocking, exposing two core, interlinked themes related to placemaking in resilience-informed contexts (Barglowski and Bonfert 2023; Bowles 2022; Yashadhana et al. 2023). The first was the lack of access to physical space for each woman's work within the community which inhibited their communities' engagement and resource sharing. Existing difficulties in procuring these spaces in the first place (and the funds that are required to access them) also proved to be an ongoing challenge. When COVID-19 restrictions meant that no-one could use physical spaces, digital placemaking enabled flocking to continue, and in this digital form of connection a second common theme emerged. Digital literacy arose as a challenge in tandem with the success of digital connection during lockdowns, with many members of the community needing help to use these forms of technology, highlighting how digital illiteracy can worsen existing inequalities during times of crisis, and further stress already stretched communities (Cortis and Blaxland 2022; Seale et al. 2022; Uekusa and Matthewman 2022). Related to these two themes, LGAs rely on non-profit groups such as the ones run by these women for community connection, but they often do not provide appropriate support for these groups (Cortis and Blaxland 2022; Tsarenko et al. 2022). As a result, the invisible care work (Tronto 2013) that must be done by the communities themselves compounds the inequalities.

Local governments can support culturally sustaining placemaking through three actions: Visiting communities, acknowledging the challenges, and identifying opportunities. Through this, LGAs and other organisations can begin the process of radically reshaping how they enact work *within our* pluralistic societies. Inequalities stemming from intersectional identities such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and linguistic background often worked as barriers towards access to physical and digital spaces for communities and funding to support initiatives (Cortis and Blaxland 2022). If our institutions were intersectional, they would not only be providing seats at the table, but they would try to understand how the table should be redesigned for everyone to contribute and engage in future building. This would involve moving past tokenistic consultation, towards investment in broader, more courageous reciprocal relationships with communities most affected by historical marginalisation. It would also involve the co-creation of programming that addresses, subverts, or dismantles institutions, structures or systems that discriminate, marginalise, or erase communities.

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## Data availability statement

Due to confidentiality and the ongoing nature of the study, data is not currently publicly available for this study.

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