

Becoming willful subjects in higher education: Conversations with four female postgraduate refugee-background students

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Widening the participation of students from diverse background in higher education is a heated discourse in many countries including Australia. For decades, Australia has been accepting a significant number of refugees from different countries. As a marginalised community in various ways, the importance of refugee participation in higher education is recognised as central to resettlement, empowerment and social integration. While a considerable number of refugee arrivals are young people who are eligible for enrolment in higher education. Higher education institutions are historically elite spaces and unpaved terrain for marginalized students. Coming with disrupted education and traumatised experience, students with a refugee background have their own unique struggles to navigate the complex space of higher education.

Following intensive conversations (interviews) with four female postgraduate refugee background students as part of my doctoral research in education, this paper explores their experiences of journeying to higher education. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2014) concept of "willful subjects", I take a critical and creative approach to explore how this group of four refugee women encountered different barriers while navigating to postgraduate studies. According to Ahmed (2012) dominant wills such as institutions are unseen walls, and for "those who do not come against it, the wall does not appear: the institution seems open, committed, and diverse" (p. 12). However, people who do not belong to dominant groups, experience such walls and find themselves in positions of vulnerability where merely existing can be a willful act. The four women, I have worked with, have all encountered multiple wills as walls, including institutional, community, culture/state, and family will. Through performativities of resilience, persistence and resistance, they not only come against the walls, they also have to push the walls to turn them into paths in order to navigate to the higher education.

References

Ahmed, S. (2012). Whiteness and the general will: Diversity work as willful work. *philoSOPHIA*, 2(1), 1-20.

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