

Multicultural Women's Day Address

Alice Pung

Thank you for inviting me here today to celebrate Multicultural Women's Day. Traditionally, International Women's Day celebrations celebrate the public achievements of women around the world. As a lawyer, I have attended celebrations of women who have become judges, barristers and solicitors – women who own a lot of words, and know how to use them, women who appear to have a lot of power.

But this Multicultural Women's Day celebration is special – it celebrates the private achievements of migrant women, women who usually don't have many English words.

I realise the significance of words, because I am also a writer. I realise that if you can speak the language of the society, the world opens up for you.

I wrote a book about three generations of women in my family – my mother, my grandmother and myself. My book is about what it is like to be a child of Chinese-Cambodian migrant parents growing up in Australia. This book is now studied by high school and university students around the country.

But my mother will never be able to read it, because she doesn't read or speak English.

People often ask me, 'why doesn't your mother speak English? She's been in the country for twenty-six years.' They can't understand how you can live in one country and not speak the language. They think it is very un-Australian. That migrants come here and form ghettos, and don't mix with the rest of society.

People who ask that question have probably never lived or worked overseas. They probably have some education – they can read and write. They have probably never felt unsafe enough to leave their home country. And they have probably never considered the question in reverse.

This is a question that is never asked, because we never ask it. It's not a question, it is the inevitable fact of colonisation – there have always been Western people living in Cambodia who don't speak Khmer, and the British living in China who don't speak Chinese! They don't need to – they have Cambodian or Chinese servants and housekeepers and child minders to do things for them!

Migrant women who settle in Australia don't have Australian servants doing things for us!

And why not? Because the story of migrant women in Australia is a story about work.

My mother worked at home. She made jewellery in the garage to sell to jewellery stores in Footscray. It was hard, lonely work and she was paid very little. As an employment lawyer, I know that is below the minimum wage. But she was grateful to have work and to be useful.

My mother started working in a plastic bag factory when she was thirteen. She didn't go to school because the Cambodian government closed down all the Chinese schools when she was 12. One day, she was operating the plastic bag cutter and it cut a huge bit off her leg. She went home, and stayed away from work for a week. My mother worried that whole week she was away from work, that she would be replaced at the factory.

In Australia, we have laws against child labour, and occupational health and safety laws. But in Cambodia, if your school was closed down and you were lucky to get a job, you were grateful. This has been my mother's attitude about work ever since. She has brought this attitude to this country – as a lot of migrant women in this room have.

Growing up in Australia, my generation is taught about our rights. As a lawyer, I help people with their rights. I know all about what kind of rights people should have in their jobs. As a society, we are preoccupied on *our rights, our entitlements, our demands*. We grow up being taught about feminism in school, and how much we should demand of the world. We are taught to demand a lot, and to strive to be publicly successful.

But women in my mother's generation are different. They think of responsibility. They live lives of quiet service. The men are the ones who can go out into Australian society to make a living, the women raise children at home – and they work at home, if they are lucky enough to get such work, even if it is bad work, secretive work, work that is not covered by any employment contract.

It has always been lonely for my mother. Later, her eyesight became bad, and her hands became stiff. When she was forty, she took up English classes with AMES. But having only a primary education in Cambodia, and being stuck at home all these years, she was too shy to speak to anyone. She felt alienated from us because we could understand things like Australian Politics, and she couldn't even read street signs or have a conversation in English.

There are hundreds and thousands of migrant women like my mother in this country, who are invisible to outside society because they don't know English. They are only visible in their own communities, or even just their own homes.

People say that migrant women like myself are successful because we have made it to the outside world.

But I am only here because someone invested in my education. Someone spent all their pay on a good school for me. Someone cooked meals for me so I would not have to take time from study, someone drove me to school without being able to read street-signs, someone gave me space to write a book even though they would never be able to understand how important it was because they have never read a book in their lives.

I think it's the women like my mother who are truly deserving of recognition. Ordinary women who do extraordinary things for their families. So that people like me can become lawyers and writers and teachers and doctors. So we won't ever have to do manual labour work that destroys our eyesight and gives us arthritis.

Migrant women have always invisibly, silently worked hard so that the next generation – women like myself – will not be invisible, so that we can have some degree of recognition in the world. No child of migrants makes it to where I am through their own efforts. Today we are here to recognise this effort, work and love that our mothers and grandmothers have put into our lives. And I am very proud to be part of this celebration, in honour of the women here today who have done far more for the betterment of society privately – with great dignity, resilience and strength - than my generation ever has publicly. We are created by such women and we must never forget that.