

MR WAKERMAN: Welcome back from afternoon tea. We're very pleased to have two special speakers now, two guests from Wagga Wagga. You can see the title of their talk here. It gives me great pleasure to introduce Constance Okot and Susan Moi, now living in Wagga Wagga, originally from Sudan. They're going to share their story with us. So please give a warm welcome to Constance and Susan.

(Applause)

Refugees in rural Australia: from Africa to the Riverina

Constance Okot and Susan Moi

MS OKOT: Thank you very much. I'm Constance and Susan. I'm going to talk about myself. I'm born in Sudan. I'm a Sudanese. I take refugee in Kenya. From Kenya I came to Australia. In Australia I landed to Wagga. Actually what I heard from the beginning some of the things actually touch me and I say I'm very lucky myself to be in Australia and even to find very special people. When I came from Sudan, in Sudan I was in a city. When the war broke out I fear. I thought that it was very bad. It was scared. It was like jumping from a hot pan into the fire. In the village it was very bad so we think of running up and down till we got a way out to get into a refugee camp. In the refugee camp from the country you thought that, "Oh, I'm running away. I'm going to get to be safe." So, again the camp was not safe. All this, like, the support from the United Nations, I find my way to Wagga.

As one of the counsellor was talking actually settling again bring everything back. When I was coming from Kenya I feel like I was okay, and then when I reach in Wagga, actually I become very sick and even coming from the lawyer actually asked me, "Are you in need of being in a big city or a small city?" With all going around I prefer being in a small place and I was told I'm going to Wagga. The next day when I went to this lawyer he gave me an appointment and I told him "I'm going to Wagga." He say, "Where?" I say, "It is somewhere around Canberra." He say, "I've never seen. Let's check." He brought a map and we were looking at this Wagga Wagga, we can't see, and he goes, "Oh, I don't know Wagga. I'm from Australia actually, but -" "I thought you were from Australia. Why don't you know Wagga?" "I don't know. I'm from Adelaide."

So actually when I landed in Wagga I was a bit confused. I was "Oh, dear, where am I again? Who am I going to know here?" With a lot of my parent, my brothers and sister, I don't know where everybody is. I thought that I was lost in Kenya. Now I am really lost when I see the culture, the food. I have to cook in the what - the cooker. I have to open the water. We live on the road. You feel like, "Am I safe if you feel the police you just feel like there is something. My children, again, another problem. When the planes go up we actually take three days in the plane. The children didn't eat in the plane because plane we feel like - they saw planes like for fighting and now we are in the plane. They didn't eat for days. When we reach here the security at Melbourne were very nice. We bought some biscuits and the lady attendant on the plane say, "Let these children go because all these days they didn't eat." food.

I was totally confused. With help from the Multicultural and I actually went to - we found our lovely doctor, Dr Duncan, she's working day and night. You feel like you don't have anybody anywhere but feel if you really have that faith you'll find someone else who

will be like your father, your mother or your parent. Actually, in Wagga we have a lot of support. In other places people say they don't have anything. In Wagga all these kids like the doctor. For me, actually, they are more than my family. Even my family can't do what they actually did to me and to this end I'm standing in front of you. I'm very happy to talk about it because we have say other things. Thank you.

(Applause)

MS MOI: My name is Susan Moi and I'm from Sudan also. We are not very close from where we come, but we met in Wagga. My family and I have been in Wagga for one year and six months tomorrow. Being a refugee is like another tribe created by war. I have been a refugee from the time I was five and I have been a refugee for all these years, the whole of my life, so to say. I've been brought up between Sudan and Uganda and I do not know where home is. At this point I'll say that I don't care where home is. For me, home is where my friends, my family, and those who care about me are. I don't really care very much of my country anymore. I know it will sound bad, but this is reality.

I'm so touched by the last speaker. I didn't know that there is someone out there that would have the same speaking as myself. I am tired of being called a refugee. I would just wish that one day I sleep and I wake up and I'm not a refugee, but I guess it's not going to be. I would really advocate if there is someone, with my friend now I know you, we can advocate that people have settled here for two or more years shouldn't be called refugees anymore. It is a torture to me. It's another trauma for me. I really don't like it, because it takes me back to all the process again. I keep asking myself, why did I come here? I should have stayed there in the camp where I'm legally a refugee. If I become an Australian tomorrow and I'm still being called a refugee, what's the point of becoming an Australian? I don't know. I don't understand it.

But I thought I would talk to you about women's health. I know probably men will say, "What about the men?" Well, some of the things that we women go through, men don't; mental, emotional, and psychological problems, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder. Men do have, yes, but women have more. Because the men care for himself alone, but the woman has to care for everybody and nobody cares about her. There are some women who came to this country when they were sexually abused, and for them - I am not one.

I don't know how they live with that, but I think that they are going through even more problems that counselling might not even help them in the near future. They might even be living with that for a long time. I'm so happy to be in Wagga, because our doctor is a lady. If I go to her I know some of the things I really wouldn't want to talk about it with someone, but if I see her, somehow I feel good. She's a lady like me. Maybe she can understand me. And she knows what I'm going through. I'll be able to express it to her without any fear.

Things like pap smear, men do not know, but ladies, come on. I wouldn't want to go to any man with that. I had it done to me twice before coming here. One was with a male doctor who was awful. I just couldn't get it away from my mind. It keeps coming and coming and coming. When I'm at the Wagga Dr Duncan told me to come for it and I started thinking "Oh, boy, here we go again." It's just not one of those things that you really look

forward to it, but for health reasons we have to do it, and for me I think I'm really lucky Dr Duncan is there to help me.

We have dental problems and being a refugee where do you get that money to go and see a dentist? Some of us might not have even seen a dentist in their whole life. For us Africans, the two, three Africans that are here, who will agree with me, we don't go to see dentist when our teeth are not paining. What for? So you can imagine those kinds of problems, prolonged issues that are there to be careful.

The productive health needs for those who are fairly young and producing. Some of these things in some African cultures, people don't talk about them. I see white people are, you know, they are so excited when a woman is pregnant. They run around telling people. We don't. We don't talk about those things until it is protruding and people see it, it's there. So some of these things really are not things women will go easily out to talk about. There are culturally troubles. For maybe a minority group of women who went through female genital mutilation, they have all these things in mind. They don't know what on earth is happening to them and they are here, they need help. They need someone to talk to. They need someone to listen to them. They need someone to understand them. It's not easy.

We ran here because of war, killings and all that, but we still have domestic violence. It's something that we have to also deal with. It's a very difficult thing, but in Africa probably you will go to your uncles, you will go your in-laws or you go to somebody to talk to, but here it's all different. You go to someone, they'll go the police, then soon the family will be separated. We do not understand some of these things. So we have come here with packages of problems, some of them may not be able to answer them or even solve them, but I guess it will help if there is someone there to listen to all these problems.

Of course the language issue. Many women have not gone to school. They cannot read, they cannot write, and because they are not able to express themselves in English they'll decide just to sit at home until probably things go really bad. That's when they'll think of going to see a doctor.

So we have many problems. I guess with the care and the love from other people, we'll be able to solve some of these problems. I just want to say that I'm very thankful to all of you and I'm so thankful for this country and the government. I don't know much about it, but the fact that we are here tells me that the people are good and we have to be thankful for that. Thank you.

(Applause)