



AUSTRALIAN STORY

While refugees may often be afforded better opportunities in Australia, our country is all the richer for their immense contribution. Women from three refugee families share their experiences with Dilvin Yasa

Those lucky enough to be born here know there are many advantages to being able to call Australia home, but ask the UNHCR's Naomi Steer about how our nation benefits from refugees and she immediately begins a lengthy roll call of recognisable names.

"There's Anh Do, Judy Cassab, Les Murray, Tan Le, Dr Karl ... If we have a conversation about why diversity in Australia is vital when it comes to connecting us to a global community, we could look at the importance of having different cultural perspectives, new employment skills and life experiences," explains Steer, the national director of Australia for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "There are plenty of studies that show migration and refugee intake stimulate the economy significantly; the act of welcoming refugees and asylum-seekers enriching us in all manner of ways, many of them unexpected."

There's also the chance our newest citizens will one day become our nation's ultimate success stories, the memory of their formative years pushing them to give back to the country they escaped to. Five such women share their stories.

AMINATA CONTEH-BIGER, 41
Aminata Conteh-Biger fled Sierra Leone after being kidnapped by soldiers and held hostage. The mum of two is the founder and CEO of the Aminata Maternal Foundation.

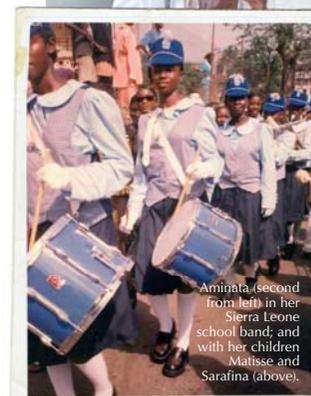
If there's one thing Aminata Conteh-Biger's children know at such a tender age, it's how fortunate they are. For a start, like many Australian kids, Sarafina, 9, and Matisse, 8, can lay claim to not one but several cultures, says Aminata. "My husband Antoine is French and we always say our kids have three cultures: African, Australian and French. How lucky are we that our children get to enjoy such a variety of music, food and culture, all the things that make life great?"

Her positivity is remarkable given her traumatic past. Born in Sierra Leone, where a vicious civil war raged between 1991 and 2002, Aminata was 18 when she was kidnapped by rebels and held captive for months, a terrifying experience that brought with it frequent rape and beatings. After her release,



"My daughter is alive today because I was able to give birth in Australia"

— Aminata Conteh-Biger



Aminata (second from left) in her Sierra Leone school band; and with her children Matisse and Sarafina (above).

change from all I'd ever known."

The word "luck" comes up quite a lot in conversations with Aminata. While it's often overused, there's no better word one could imagine for her story. There's the luck that enabled her to make a new life for herself, and the luck – particularly in the case of Sarafina, who was born with shoulder dystocia – that her children were born in Sydney rather than in her home town of Freetown, Sierra Leone.

"It was a complicated birth and I was fortunate enough to have a whole team of doctors to help her arrive safely," Aminata explains. "I knew that if I had given birth in Sierra Leone, it is highly likely that one or both of us would not have survived. That was the catalyst for me to start the Aminata Maternal Foundation."

Established in 2014, the foundation is a not-for-profit that empowers women in Sierra Leone, focusing on maternal health and the creation of sustainable communities.

Despite her immense contribution, it's her kids who make Aminata feel most proud. "My hope for my children is that they keep the values Antoine and I have instilled in them, to be kind, caring and always true to themselves."

Rising Heart, \$34.99, is published by Pan Macmillan.

Aminata was afforded the opportunity to seek asylum thanks to a resettlement program run by the UNHCR. The remote location of Australia appealed.

"I didn't know where it was or anything about the country except that there were hardly any people from Sierra Leone there, since the resettlement program was so new," she writes in her book, *Rising Heart*. Having been granted refugee status, she fled to Australia in 2000, aged 20.

"Australia was confusing at first," Aminata admits. "Feeling safe was the best part of my early days here, but it also felt overwhelmingly uncertain and scary a lot of the time. I also had to deal with the reality of leaving behind my family and friends – it was a huge