



Lost without translation

[\(cross-posted with permission from Language: A Feminist Guide\)](#)

In Melbourne in 2007, [Marzieh Rahimi, a 33-year Dari-speaking woman who had come to Australia as a refugee from Afghanistan, was killed by her husband Soltan Azizi](#). He had a history of violence towards her, and before her death she had made two calls to the emergency services. But her English was very limited, and the operator could not understand her. In the end she hung up. No attempt was made to call her back, and no assistance was dispatched.

Being unable to get help in an emergency was not the only problem Marzieh Rahimi had faced because of her lack of proficiency in English. Although she had talked to social services through an interpreter, her sister, who had spoken to her by phone from the USA, later testified that Marzieh had felt unsupported. The couple lived in an area where there were few other Dari speakers, so being unable to speak English left her isolated, with no friends or neighbours she could turn to.

At Soltan Azizi's trial, the judge criticized the emergency services, calling the failure to prevent Marzieh Rahimi's death 'an indictment of our society'. But many people disagreed: if she expected help, they said, she should have made the effort to learn English.

As [the linguist and human rights advocate Ingrid Piller commented](#), language is 'the last bastion of "legitimate" victim blaming'. People who would never suggest that the victim of a hate crime should have changed their religion or lightened their skin find it perfectly reasonable to say that they should have learnt the language. And in this case the victim-blaming was doubly unjust. Like the domestic violence that killed her, Marzieh Rahimi's linguistic problems were a product of structural sexual inequality.

One aspect of this inequality is to do with access to second language learning. It is not a coincidence that Soltan Azizi had attended English classes, whereas Marzieh Rahimi had not. Women who enter a country as dependents do not always get the same opportunities as men who are expected to join the workforce. Even if classes are in theory available, women may in practice be unable to attend them because they do not have childcare, or transport, or money.

Learning a new language as an adult is not as easy as many English monolinguals think. It's been calculated that the average adult needs over 400 hours of instruction to achieve a reasonable level of proficiency, and more than that if the language is 'difficult', e.g. written in a different script from the one the learner already knows. These figures assume a learner who is educated and literate: it's harder for adults with low levels of literacy. This disadvantages refugees whose education has been limited by extreme poverty and/or disrupted by conflict. And it particularly affects women, because where education is a scarce resource, girls are likely to get even less than boys.

Marzieh Rahimi was economically dependent, socially isolated and burdened with domestic responsibilities. She also had a controlling and violent husband who would hardly have



encouraged her to seek out language-learning opportunities. Saying that she 'should have made the effort' to master English glosses over all the structural factors that prevented her from doing so.

This punitive attitude is increasingly common, and not only in Australia. In the UK, where I live, it is both entrenched in public opinion and increasingly enshrined in government policy.

The crackdown on non-English speakers began under Labour in 2005 with the introduction of a test for UK citizenship that had to be taken in 'a recognized British language' (in practice English, though Welsh and Gaelic are also permitted). This has advantaged applicants from affluent majority English-speaking countries like the US, Canada and Australia, while disadvantaging those from poor, non-English speaking countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. Successive governments have also imposed English language requirements for non-EU migrants who don't want to become citizens, but simply want to work or study in Britain, or to join a spouse here. In 2014 the government announced [new restrictions on benefit claimants](#) with limited skills in English.

During the same period, translation and interpreting services have been cut repeatedly, not only to save money but also for ideological reasons. Since 2006 both the main political parties have openly declared their opposition to multilingual service provision. They claim that it removes the incentive to learn English, and that this leads to a lack of integration and 'social cohesion'.

This rhetoric, which implies that Britain is awash with people who cannot speak the majority language, is at odds with the evidence compiled by the government's own statisticians. [The 2011 census](#) showed that in fact there are very few people living in the UK who don't speak English: they make up around 0.3% of the population, which is a very low figure for a country with high rates of immigration.

It is also untrue that this small minority of non-English speakers are people who simply refuse to make the effort. The women's charity [Eaves has just released a report](#) on the experiences of women who came to the UK on spousal visas: their research found that women who needed to improve their English were keen to do so (not least because they were also keen to find work). The problem they faced was inadequate provision. The classes that were free or affordable were also full, with waiting times that in some cases were measured in years. Many did not offer childcare, without which they were useless to a lot of the women who needed them.

The UK's increasingly draconian policies are presented as being about 'integration', but research like Eaves's suggests that little is being done to help newcomers integrate, linguistically or otherwise. The real agenda has more to do with trying to control migrant numbers by being as unwelcoming as possible. It's not hard to see that this is racist and xenophobic, but we also need to recognize that it is sexist: the way it works in practice reinforces gender inequality, keeping women dependent on men and making them more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

It is shocking to discover, for instance, that the immigration service itself does not routinely provide interpreters when dealing with non-English speaking women in situations of crisis, such



as [those who have left violent men while their immigration status is still precarious](#) and need urgent assistance to avoid destitution. Asylum seekers held in detention centres may be forced to rely on other detainees to interpret for them, or [to relay their stories of persecution and torture through their own children](#).

Women's organizations are well aware of the importance of multilingual services, but they are struggling to provide them because of insufficient funding. Some of the most experienced and effective providers are specialist services set up to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of Black and minority ethnic women; but they have often had to fight to survive. In 2008 Ealing Council threatened Southall Black Sisters with closure, claiming that their specialist provision for BME women was detrimental to social cohesion (an argument SBS successfully challenged in court). Last year, Latin American Women's Aid almost had to close its London refuge after Islington Council withdrew its annual grant, apparently on the grounds that since Islington residents mostly aren't from Latin America, the service did not merit council support.

Meanwhile, non-specialist local services are also dealing with linguistically diverse populations, but they are expected to manage with a level of funding that does not cover the cost of interpreters or bilingual workers. Refuges are being forced to turn women away because they cannot meet their linguistic needs. As Kimberle Crenshaw pointed out in her 1991 article '[Mapping the Margins](#)', this is an unacceptable position for refuges to be in, since it means they are unable to meet their primary goal of providing a place of safety.

This is part of the general problem of women's services being starved of funds, but it is also connected to the point made by Ingrid Piller, that language discrimination is often seen as legitimate where other kinds are not. Feminists need to be vocal in opposing this. Denying women services because of the languages they do or don't speak is treating them unequally, and in some cases denying them basic rights. Politicians should not be able to get away with arguing that multilingual service-provision 'ghettoizes' non-English speakers: anyone who pays attention to the experiences of women will know that the opposite is true.

As well as defending multilingual services, we should support campaigns for women, regardless of visa and employment status, to have meaningful access to English language teaching. That requires not only more provision overall, so that people who cannot pay don't have to wait years to take a class, but also more provision that addresses the specific needs of women—especially their need for childcare.

Last but not least, we should challenge prejudice against non-English speakers, or those who speak the language imperfectly, wherever we encounter it. Some of the women interviewed for the Eaves report mentioned negative attitudes to other languages as an obstacle to integration: they were wary of interacting with British people in case their imperfect English provoked a hostile response. Low-level linguistic intolerance contributes to the isolation of non-English speakers, and helps to create a climate in which more serious abuses can be condoned.

Marzieh Rahimi's story shows where this can lead. Her treatment wasn't just a failure of communication, it was a failure of empathy and basic humanity. Not speaking English made her Other: she 'hadn't made the effort', so it was somehow acceptable to make none for her. It's



not enough that her killer was brought to justice. The system which failed her, and which continues to fail women like her, must also be held to account.

In this post I have drawn on information from several UK women's organizations, including [Eaves](#), [Imkaan](#), [LAWA](#), [nia](#), [Southall Black Sisters](#) and [Women's Aid](#). (You can use the links if you want to donate to support their work.) For pointing me to some of these sources and for answering my questions I am grateful to Liz Kelly, Janet McDermott, Yasmin Rehman, Sumanta Roy and Karen Ingala Smith. The views expressed are my own.