



# **EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION: WOMEN BREAKING THE ENGLISH BARRIER**

WOMEN'S CONSULTATION REPORT 2016  
by THE WONDER FOUNDATION



Women's Network for Development  
and Educational Resources

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### **Action for ESOL**

#### **Afghan Association Paiwand**

3rd Floor Middlesex House, 130 College Road,  
Harrow, HA1 1BQ

#### **CARIS Haringey**

St Philip's Church, Philip Lane, Tottenham,  
London, N15 4HJ

#### **Voluntary Action Camden**

293-299 Kentish Town Road, London, NW5 2TJ

#### **Community Language Support Services**

St Mellitus Church, Tollington Park, London N4  
3AG

#### **Congolese Catholic Chaplaincy**

2 Lukin Street, London, E1 0AA

#### **Hackney CVS**

The Adiaha Antigha Centre, 24-30 Dalston  
Lane, London, E8 3AZ

#### **Iraqi Association**

Unit 1 Cavell House, 233 Wood Lane, London  
W12 0HL

#### **Learning and Work Institute**

Chetwynd House, 21 De Montfort Street,  
Leicester, LE1 7GE

#### **London Black Women's Project**

661 Barking Road, Plaistow, London, E13 9EX

#### **Migrant Resource Centre**

56 Eccleston Square, 2nd floor, London, SW1V  
1PH

#### **NATECLA (National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults)**

South and City College Birmingham, Hall Green  
Campus, Cole Bank Road, Birmingham B28 8ES

#### **Pembury Community Centre**

Block A Atkins Square, Dalston Lane, Hackney,  
London, E8 1HL

#### **The Baytree Centre**

300 Brixton Road, London, SW9 6AE

#### **The Selby Trust**

Selby Centre, Selby Road, Tottenham, London  
N17 8JL

#### **Women for Refugee Women**

Tindlemanor, 52-54, Featherstone St, London,  
EC1Y 8RT

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**Zarlasht Halamzai**

**Dr Anuli Igboaka**

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## **About Wonder Foundation**

WONDER's mission is to empower vulnerable communities worldwide through education. We work with partner projects in the UK and overseas that primarily support women and act as a stimulus for ending poverty in their families and communities. Wonder Foundation is a Registered Company No: 7921757 & Registered Charity No: 1148679

## **Report Authors**

Olivia Darby, Arnub Farooqi, Hsiang-Yun Lai

Questions or comments about this paper or our work should be addressed to:  
olivia@wonderfoundation.org.uk or 10 Wellesley Terrace, London, N1 7NA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

English proficiency is an essential tool for life in the UK, which has a large and growing population who were not born in the UK. Without good knowledge of English, daily life - from shopping to catching the right bus to speaking to your GP or children's teacher - is a battle. Many migrants - whether refugees, asylum seekers, former refugees, or others living in poverty - come from countries where there are defined gender roles and a lack of gender equity. With regard to learning English this means that women often face aggravated barriers compared to men from the same countries or socioeconomic groups.

When women's English is discussed, it is often done so within the context of improving the situation for their families and wider society, rather than as a good in and of itself. Women's own fulfilment is not sufficiently valued as an outcome by policy makers. The author Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie challenged this at the UN when she said, "In the public discourse today, we often speak of people as a single thing. Refugee. Immigrant... Let us remember that we are not just bones and flesh. We are emotional beings. We all share a desire to be valued, a desire to matter. Let us remember that dignity is as important as food".<sup>1</sup>

This report seeks to give a voice to vulnerable migrant women with low English proficiency, who are by definition 'hard to reach' and rarely heard and to better understand and address the challenges that they face in learning English. There is no agreed definition of 'vulnerable migrant' but we sought to hear from those with low English proficiency living on low incomes. Apart from two women in their 80s, all of the vulnerable migrant women who we had conversations with wanted to improve their English proficiency. This report sets out to explore, in their own words, the challenges they face when accessing English learning. The women also made suggestions for how access to learning could be improved.

Due to budget constraints we undertook our research in London, where the Wonder Foundation is based. Children's centres, which act as focal points for mothers from many different backgrounds, were contacted as well as community groups that:

- served specific migrant groups, including churches and mosques
- supported refugees and/ or migrants in general
- offered English classes

Thirty-two interviews with vulnerable migrant women were undertaken and 34 women participated in 4 focus groups (n=66). We spoke to 8 community workers and 5 community ESOL teachers. We also undertook a literature review to situate our study participants' experience in the wider context.

The literature review supports our findings and highlights that looking at ESOL in a vacuum is inadequate.

**Female refugees, asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants want to learn English but often face complex challenges.** These may include mental ill-health, care responsibilities, domestic violence, and multi-dimensional poverty. Women require support to overcome these if they are to acquire the capacity to learn and regularly attend classes. **When women struggle to meet their basic needs and those of their dependents, English learning is pushed down**

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<sup>1</sup> Speech at UN Humanitarian Day, 19 Aug 2016, <http://webtv.un.org/watch/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-writer-world-humanitarian-day-2016/5091392999001>

**their list of priorities**, even though they clearly recognise that learning or improving their English would make their lives easier and better.

*“As a woman, you have to do cooking, cleaning, looking after husband, looking after house, this is your priority, my husband was saying all the time.”*

For those who can overcome these initial challenges, the cost, location and timings of classes and the lack of free childcare have been recognised as barriers to women learning English for many years, and this was echoed by the women that we spoke to who also expressed that delays in starting to learn English upon arrival made it more difficult for women to start learning. **Women with families are time and energy poor and provision of child care is essential to make learning a possibility for many mothers.** Even the most motivated learners may struggle to attend every class and a flexible approach is therefore needed.

*“This week two women from an EC postcode and living in refuges applied to learn ESOL. They were both told that they need to pay £200. One was offered a place in Greenwich. That will take all her income just to travel there. They are desperate single women who want to learn English. They are getting panic attacks. They just want to learn English. What else can they do?”*

**Creating spaces where vulnerable women feel safe and welcome – empowering spaces – are important in developing their confidence to try new things.** Community centres that did this and provided additional support to overcome the other barriers that they face, for example, advice provision, counselling, child care were valued by the women who often found it hard to overcome the feeling of dislocation that they felt upon arriving in the UK.

*“If I have a problem I don’t have family here. But I have my God and I have more people, friends, integration. I’m meeting beautiful people at school...”*

**Women’s isolation was not only a consequence of not speaking English, but also a barrier to learning English**, as it meant that women did not know where to learn, how to get to classes and had no one to support them through the experience. Not having the opportunity to practice meant that a woman’s command of and confidence in using English could decrease and reverse the benefit that she gained from classes. **Women wanted the opportunity to meet native English speakers.**

*“I only speak with non-natives it’s really hard to meet natives. We only have contact with migrants.”*

**Personal relationships – between women and with community workers and teachers – were invaluable to the women and motivated them** to make the effort to attend classes and other activities at community centres. The dependency of these women could be overwhelming for already stretched staff. Trained volunteers could play an important role in supporting vulnerable women, for example helping them to apply for courses, accompanying them on their first day, motivating them and encouraging them. When these volunteers were other migrants they could help learners to negotiate the complexities that they were already overcoming and showed that advancement was possible. British volunteers played an important role in making migrants feel welcomed and provided an insight into the host culture. Being listened to by others made them feel valued and no longer invisible.

*“Outside of the classroom, if you have the funding for it, the volunteers are so good. We have young professionals or migrants who have been here longer. The migrants have gone through the same*

*process. The learners can see their future. If [women learning English] meet a volunteer who is a native speaker it's really great. It shows English people care and have an interest in them. It's often their first contact with an English person. It's like an introduction to integrate."*

**For women starting English from scratch, including those with very little education, the lack of beginners' classes prevented learning.** Understanding needs so that effective local, tailored solutions with adapted teaching styles and formats to make initial English-learning possible are essential. Women suggested that they would benefit from English taught through practical classes, including cookery and crafts, as would women-only classes and, for some, learning with others from a similar cultural background. More work needs to be done to understand what teaching methods work for women with different needs and from different cultural and education backgrounds so that women can learn as quickly as possible and classes have high retention levels. Learning English has value to migrant women, their families and benefits to wider society even when it does not lead quickly to employment.

*"Anybody who stays in this country they need to speak English for everyday life."*

**Further, it needs to be recognised that some women – those who are most vulnerable - face personal barriers that make learning at the pace required by immigration regulations, or in some cases at all, impossible.** There are women in the UK who are even more isolated than those who we spoke to and who face even *greater* challenges than them.

*"Because my husband hit my head, and sometimes I'm blank, and can't really understand or see anything, it's really affecting my understanding of the language, otherwise I am so happy to learn because I love learning."*

Learning English is an essential part of vulnerable female migrants' journeys to feel empowered and able to make fulfilling choices, raise their aspirations and those of their friends and families, and to integrate and feel at home in the UK, which they want. If one goal of women's English-learning is that they are empowered to engage with British society, they also must be listened to as to how best that can come about.

**Having listened to these women and those who support them in the community, we are making the following recommendations:**

Our recommendations echo those which have been made by many migrant, refugee and education organisations before us, but have not yet been acted upon:

- **A whole-person approach to the needs of vulnerable female migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers needs to be embedded in service delivery.** National and local Government, the NHS, learning providers, community groups and charities need to work together if prevention and early intervention are to be achieved. Co-locating advice provision, counselling and child care alongside English provision and vice versa will help the most vulnerable women to address their challenges as well as resolving some of the most immediate barriers to English learning.
- The Government should develop a **national UK English-learning strategy with specific consideration given to the additional challenges that women learners may face.** This should include:
  - **Recognition of the value of women learning English for their own wellbeing and fulfilment** in addition to the wider benefit that it has to their families, employability and social integration.
  - **Commitment to equal access to English language learning for all women, regardless of**



their country of origin, religion or ethnicity.

- **Guaranteed funding for accredited ESOL classes**, which are valued by women learning English.
  - **A commitment to full cost recovery<sup>2</sup>** to ensure that ESOL teachers are not overburdened by administration and meeting learners' additional needs and providers can effectively address the barriers that learners face, engaging harder-to-reach learners and improving retention.
  - **Recognition of ESOL teachers' experience and training**, to be reflected in their pay and with adequate time allocated to class preparation, administration and students support to reflect what they already do.
  - **A commitment to making accredited ESOL accessible for learners**, with delivery taking place in the community as well as within colleges.
  - **Recognition that local, community-based and non-accredited English-learning initiatives in local and familiar places are essential for women with low confidence.**
- **Research needs to be undertaken into which methods and formats of English language teaching are most effective in engaging different types of vulnerable female migrants and enhancing their learning.** Our findings suggest that these could include offering single-sex provision, English taught to speakers of one language only or English taught through the development of other skills or relevant knowledge.
- **Empowering community spaces where women feel safe and welcome are essential if migrant women are to build relationships and integrate.** Local service commissioning must recognise the value of well-used community spaces that serve women and children living in cramped accommodation and on low incomes, who cannot afford access to other safe meeting places. Empowering spaces reduce isolation, help women to form friendships, practice English informally and build their confidence and familiarity with the UK so that they are aware of their rights and responsibilities as well as opportunities.
- **It should be made easier for all migrants to volunteer** should they wish to, to use their skills for the good of others and create new social networks. Complex English-language application processes should not bar them from roles that do not require high English language levels.
- **The integration of migrants is a two-way process. Mentoring and befriending of migrant English learners by nationals and better established migrants should also be encouraged and funded at the local and national level.** The responsibility for integrating migrants cannot fall upon them alone if they do not have opportunities to meet UK citizens. Women of all backgrounds are seeking to meet British people and opportunities to make them feel welcome and included in British society. Addressing isolation in practice is more sustainable and effective than theoretical discussions of British values in promoting inclusion.

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<sup>2</sup> Full Cost Recovery means securing funding for, or 'recovering', all your costs, including the direct costs of projects and all your overheads. Every organisation, whether voluntary, public or private, needs to recover all its costs, and ideally generate a surplus, or it cannot pay its employees, rent office space, offer its products and services, or plan for the future and the continued development and delivery of its services. New Philanthropy Capital, <http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/full-cost-recovery-2/full-cost-recovery-2/?post-parent=6107>

## I. INTRODUCTION

English proficiency is an essential tool for life in the UK, which has a large and growing population who were not born in the UK. Without good knowledge of English, daily life - from shopping to catching the right bus to speaking to your GP or children's teacher – is a battle. Many migrants – whether refugees, asylum seekers, former refugees, or others living in poverty – come from countries where there are defined gender roles and a lack of gender equity. With regard to learning English this means that women often face aggravated barriers compared to men from the same countries or socioeconomic groups.

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<sup>3</sup> Speech at UN Humanitarian Day, 19 Aug 2016, <http://webtv.un.org/watch/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-writer-world-humanitarian-day-2016/5091392999001>

Following the refugee crisis of summer 2015, the Wonder Foundation and our partners in Europe<sup>4</sup>, all of whom are focussed on women and education, discussed what we could do and refocused our work on education support for refugee women as well as the vulnerable women who the projects were already serving, many of them migrants. As this work continued, we focussed on language learning as the key to opening up other opportunities as well as improving wellbeing. Listening to experts, including community leaders and teachers from NATECLA, Action for ESOL and the Learning and Work Institute reminded us that limited access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and other methods of English learning was not only an issue for refugees and asylum seekers, but for other vulnerable migrants also.



In 2010, as Home Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities, Theresa May said, "We know that speaking English is key to integration",<sup>5</sup> whilst David Cameron, in his comments on the importance of immigrant Muslim women

<sup>4</sup> Latvia: Kapienas Battistas Centrs; Poland: Fundacja Widnokrag; Slovenia: Fundacija Sursum; Spain: Fundacion Canfranc, Fundacion Senara; Sweden: C.A.R.E.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/immigration-home-secretarys-speech-of-5-november-2010>



learning English<sup>6</sup>, recognised that many women face challenges in learning English which differ from those of men in their communities. Whilst we welcome this recognition and the funding following a series of cuts to ESOL, we are conscious that this funding only recognises the needs of a particular community and through the lens of the prevention of Islamic extremism, rather than the empowerment of these women as individuals. This report should be considered as a preliminary study, and in the recommendations we identify areas for further research. As a London-based charity, and with a limited budget, we have focussed our research on London. However, we would expect these conclusions to reflect the situation for many vulnerable female migrants in other urban areas of the UK. Too often decisions are made without speaking to the people affected by them. This report aims to give a voice to vulnerable migrant women to better understand their barriers to learning the English language.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

We undertook this study to better understand the barriers to English language learning that vulnerable migrant women in the UK face and how they could be overcome. Our approach was informed through informal conversations with over 50 ESOL teachers from all over the UK and community workers. To this end, there were two key components to this work. This study aimed to give vulnerable migrant women the opportunity to have a voice. This research aimed to hear the views of women struggling to access ESOL. This meant that we would need to reach them at the community level. Whilst it was understood that the most isolated female migrants would not be involved with any community groups, it was also understood that women in this category would be unlikely to agree to take part in our research. Due to budget constraints we undertook our research in London, where Wonder Foundation is based. Children's Centres, which act as focal points for mothers from many different backgrounds, were contacted as well as community groups

<sup>6</sup> The Government's Approach To Integration And Opportunity (2016) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/89/8905.htm>

that; served specific migrant groups, including churches and mosques, supported refugees and/ or migrants in general and offered English classes. Where requested posters were made in community languages and we reached out to community groups through the Selby Centre (Haringey), Hackney CVS and Voluntary Action Camden. Additionally, we requested case studies from the Baytree Centre, to show the situations of women seeking to learn English and what it allowed them to achieve. Due to the vulnerability of their users and the time/ resource pressures that many organisations are already facing in delivering their core work, many of these organisations felt unable to take part in the research. However, this research will be circulated to them and should they wish to comment upon it, an updated version will be produced. As a consequence we also interviewed community workers as they have a breadth of knowledge from working directly with vulnerable migrant women. In total we spoke to 8 female community workers from 8 different organisations and 5 ESOL teachers from 4 organisations, inviting them to share their experience on barriers to English learning and how it could be overcome through unstructured interviews. Interviews with community workers and ESOL teachers took place in person and by telephone, as preferred by the interviewee.

A combination of focus groups and face-to-face semi-structured interviews were used. Due to the vulnerability of those who we were talking to we adapted our method according to what our contact in the community group thought would be the least overwhelming for the participants. Interviews lasted up to 30 minutes, depending upon how much the women had to say. Some women felt more comfortable being interviewed in pairs. Focus groups were guided by a schedule and lasted for around one hour. Due to the low levels of English we also used community translation where necessary. Interviews and focus groups with vulnerable female migrants took place in Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Islington, Lambeth, Newham and Westminster. All interviewers, focus group leaders and community translators were female.

**Table 1: Participating Community Centres and Groups**

Organisation (see appendix)	Interviews	Focus Groups (number of participants)	Community worker interviews	ESOL teacher interview
Afghan Association Paiwand	-	-	1	-
CARIS Haringey	2	-	-	-
Community Language Support Services	-	-	1	-
Congolese Catholic Chaplaincy	-	-	1	-
IMECE	4	-	1	-
Iraqi Community Association	11	-	-	1
London Black Women's Project	-	1	1	-
Migrant Resource Centre	4	1	-	1
Pembury Community Centre	2	-	1	-
The Baytree Centre	8	2	1	2
Women for Refugee Women	-	-	1	1
Other women	2	-	-	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>4 (34)</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>

Women took part voluntarily. All of those who took part signed consent forms, where key information on the nature and purpose of the study was translated into key community languages (including Portuguese, Spanish, French, Farsi, Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, Tigrinya, Somali, Bengal, Sylheti and Urdu) before taking part. Due to the vulnerability of those involved in the study, anonymity was provided. The consent forms also allowed us to collect key demographic information from the women – their age, migration status, whether they were caring for children, their marital status and their country of origin.

The ages of the participants ranged from teenagers aged 16 to women in their 80s. All of the participants were first generation migrants; their reasons for coming to the UK ranged from asylum, marriage, family reunification and improving their economic status. All of the participants had come to the UK at the age of 14 or above, the majority as adults. Only 3 felt confident in their English abilities before coming to the UK.

The majority of participants were either Muslim (n=30) or Christian (n=19). Twenty-one women were single (including widows), 9 were divorced or separated, 15 were married, and eighteen women were living with children.

Women could not always explain their immigration status, of those who explained their status: 13 were British Nationals, of whom 9 had arrived in the UK as refugees, 6 were in the UK on a spousal visa, 11 were refugees and 1 was an asylum seeker.



Participants came from 28 different countries as detailed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Country of Origin of Migrant Interviewees and Focus Group Participants (Case Studies in Brackets)**

Country of Origin	No. of participants
Afghanistan	2
Albania	2
Angola	1 (1)
Bangladesh	6
Brazil	5 (1)
China	1 (1)
Colombia	4
DR Congo	1
Eritrea	3
Ethiopia	1
France	1
Ghana	1
Greece	1
Iraq	11
Kosovo	(1)
Kuwait	1
Mauritius	1
Morocco	(1)
Nigeria	1
Pakistan	1
Palestine	1
Poland	1
Portugal	1
Sierra Leone	1
Somalia	2
Spain	1
Syria	1
Turkey (of whom two identified at Kurdish)	5

Data analysis of the interviews and focus groups was undertaken by the lead researcher and was coded manually.

Further to this, a literature review identified the key challenges that migrant women in the UK face to situate the experiences of the women that we spoke to within the wider national context.

### 3. THE NEED FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE UK

The UK has a large foreign-born population and the number of migrants, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the UK population is growing. The number of foreign-born people in the UK has increased from around 3.8 million in 1993 to 8.3 million in 2014<sup>7</sup>. Whilst some of these migrants come from countries where English is spoken, many others do not.

The number of people seeking asylum in the UK is also growing. There has been a 63% increase in asylum applications between 2011 and 2015. In 2015 the UK received 32,414 applications for asylum, excluding dependents<sup>8</sup>. Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh have been amongst the top asylum applicant producing countries over the past five years and the number of Syrians and Eritreans seeking asylum has been steadily rising. None of these countries has English as an official language<sup>9</sup>.

London, where our research is based, is a focal point for immigration in the UK. Between 2001 and 2011, the proportion of non-UK born residents in London rose from 27.1% to 36.7%, showing the range and size of London's migrant communities – approximately 3 million people<sup>10</sup>. With over a third of residents born outside of the UK, London contrasts with England and Wales as a whole, where, when London is excluded, fewer than one in ten people were born outside of the UK. In 2014, about half of the UK's foreign-born population was in London (36.9%) and the South East (13.6%)<sup>11</sup>. Table 3 shows the top birthplaces of non-UK born Londoners. It can be seen that immigration from all of the countries listed, apart from Ireland, Kenya and Bangladesh, has grown. In 2004 there were insignificant numbers

7 Migration Observatory (Jan 2016) Migrants in the UK: An Overview [http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Migrants%20in%20the%20UK-Overview\\_0.pdf](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Migrants%20in%20the%20UK-Overview_0.pdf)

8 Refugee Council (Feb 2016) Asylum Statistics: Annual Trends [http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/6984/Asylum\\_Statistics\\_Annual\\_Trends\\_Feb\\_2016.pdf](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/6984/Asylum_Statistics_Annual_Trends_Feb_2016.pdf)

9 Refugee Council (Feb 2016) Asylum Statistics: Annual Trends

10 Greater London Authority (June 2013), "Diversity in London" <https://londondatastore-upload.s3.amazonaws.com/lyE%3D2011-census-diversity-in-london.pdf>.

11 Migration Observatory (Jan 2016) Migrants in the UK: An Overview

of Afghanistan and Romania-born residents and in 2014 there were over 50,000 people from each country living in London - together the same number of people as those in an average-sized borough.

**Table 3: Countries of birth of London residents from key immigrant populations, 2004 and 2014<sup>12</sup>**

Country	2004	2014
India	190,00	290,00
Poland	48,000	178,000
Pakistan	57,000	134,000
Bangladesh	127,000	109,000
Ireland	124,000	100,000
Nigeria	68,000	96,000
Romania*	-	84,000
Sri Lanka	50,000	83,000
Italy	47,000	79,000
Somalia	48,000	76,000
France	41,000	72,000
Jamaica	73,000	70,000
Ghana	56,000	66,000
Kenya	73,000	64,000
United States	46,000	62,000
Australia	49,000	56,000
Germany	47,000	52,000
Afghanistan*	-	51,000
Turkey	41,000	49,000
Philippines	21,000	48,000

\*Population of less than 10,000 in 2004.

### 3.1. Gendered Migration

Although the numbers of both female and male migrants have increased over time, women have constituted a majority of the UK's migrant population since at least 1993<sup>13</sup>. In 2014, 54% of the UK's foreign-born population were women<sup>14</sup>.

Of the total number of asylum seekers (excluding

12 Trust for London (2015) London's Poverty Profile 2015 [http://www.londonpovertyprofile.org.uk/2015\\_LPP\\_Document\\_01.7-web%255b2%255d.pdf](http://www.londonpovertyprofile.org.uk/2015_LPP_Document_01.7-web%255b2%255d.pdf)

13 Migration Observatory (Jan 2016) Migrants in the UK: An Overview

14 Migration Observatory (Jan 2016) Migrants in the UK: An Overview

dependents), women are a minority, 27% of 2014 applications coming from women, down from 30% in 2010<sup>15</sup>. However, the percentage of women applying for asylum varies according to their country of origin.

Of the top ten asylum applicant producing countries in 2014 (see Table 4), only Nigeria showed a higher proportion of female applicants (52%); whereas only 7% of Sudanese asylum seekers were female. However dependents (totalling 6,464 people in 2015<sup>16</sup>) were more likely to be female, especially those between the ages of 21 and 49.

Since 2011 female asylum seekers have been slightly more likely than males to be granted asylum or to be granted humanitarian protection or discretionary leave. The refusal rate has fallen since 2010, when three quarters of applicants were refused, to 59% for both men and women in 2014<sup>17</sup>.

**Table 4: Women asylum applicants from the top ten applicant producing countries to the UK, 2014<sup>18</sup>**

	Total Applications	Applications by women	% women
Eritrea	3,233	668	21%
Pakistan	2,726	680	25%
Syria	2,025	309	15%
Iran	2,000	587	29%
Albania	1,576	534	34%
Sudan	1,449	101	7%
Sri Lanka	1,292	248	19%
Afghanistan	1,139	171	15%
Nigeria	889	465	52%
Bangladesh	748	122	16%

15 Refugee Council (Feb 2016) Asylum Statistics: Annual Trends

16 Migration Observatory (Jul 2016) Migration in the UK <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Briefing-Asylum.pdf>

17 Refugee Council (Feb 2016) Asylum Statistics: Annual Trends

18 Refugee Council (Feb 2016) [http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/6984/Asylum\\_Statistics\\_Annual\\_Trends\\_Feb\\_2016.pdf](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/6984/Asylum_Statistics_Annual_Trends_Feb_2016.pdf)





### 3.2. Migrants and Language

The 2011 Census<sup>19</sup> showed that 1.3% of people living in England and Wales, a total of 726,000 people, reported that they could not speak English well and 138,000 people (0.3 per cent) reported that they could not speak English at all, 91,840 being women. In London 4.1% fell into these categories, and 2% of people in the West Midlands. Across local authorities, the four areas where the highest proportion of residents didn't speak English were Newham (8.7%), Brent (8%), Tower Hamlets (8%), and Leicester (7.5%), notably three of these areas are London boroughs.

It should be noted that whilst 8% (4.2 million) of the UK population do not have English as a mother tongue, the majority speak English well or very well (3.3 million)<sup>20</sup>.

The communities with the lowest proportions of proficient speakers of English are listed in Table 5.

19 Office for National Statistics (2013) Language in England and Wales: 2011 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/language/articles/languageinenglandandwales/2013-03-04>

20 Office for National Statistics (2013) Language in England and Wales: 2011

**Table 5: Main languages other than English(I) with 10 lowest proportions of people who could speak English 'well' or 'very well' (Proficient(II))(III), England and Wales, 2011<sup>21</sup>**

Main Language	Total population aged 3 and over	Per cent 'Proficient' (2)
Gypsy/Traveller languages	461	37.5
Pakistan Pahari (with Mirpuri and Potwari)	21,854	55.2
Vietnamese	15,168	58.3
Cantonese Chinese	44,404	61
Yiddish	3,987	62.2
Panjabi	273,231	67.6
Romani language (any)	629	68.7
Bengali (with Sylheti and Chatgaya)	221,403	69.6
Turkish	99,423	69.9
Latvian	31,523	70.8

Notes:

I) English or Welsh in Wales; II) This includes people who selected 'very well' or 'well' for question 19 on the 2011 Census form. This is grouped as 'Main language is not English: Can speak English very well or well' within published tables; III) Sign languages and main languages with populations of under 300 people have been excluded.

### 4. CASE STUDIES

These case studies, from the Baytree Centre, show the reality of life for vulnerable female migrants who don't speak English. Names have been changed to respect the privacy of the women:

#### Clara

Clara grew up in a favela outside of Rio de Janeiro and hadn't finished primary school. In Brazil she met a British man, they married and she moved to London with him. London terrified her. She was surprised at how alien she felt in this new city and that she felt so unhappy despite London being so much more

21 Office for National Statistics (2013) Language in England and Wales: 2011



advanced than where she had grown up – she felt that the city was cold and hostile and she lost her confidence. As she didn't understand the language she learnt to read people's faces and stay away from "trouble", she felt invisible and depressed. She tried to attend English classes in a college but found the whole process overwhelming. After some time she found the courage to try again and came to the centre. As soon as she got in she burst into tears as although the people were kind and friendly she felt ashamed that she could not explain herself. Soon one of the ESOL teachers came and helped her to enrol.

Once she started classes Clara learnt quickly and her confidence grew rapidly. She was now able to look at people in the eyes, to smile, to stand tall. One year after the course finished she popped by to say thank you. She had found employment as a housekeeper with a wealthy family in a wealthy area. She spoke English confidently, she was beaming and expecting her first child.

### **Genti**

Genti came to London as a refugee from Kosovo. Educated to secondary school level in her own country she felt frustrated that she could not prepare her children for school as she didn't speak English. She found the centre and enrolled. She learnt English very quickly and as she was eager to support her children and husband (who had no chance of learning as his working timetable didn't allow him) she also attended literacy classes in the centre. She started volunteering at the centre to gain skills and practice English. She grew in confidence and was encouraged to apply for other things.

Five years after starting ESOL classes Genti is now a part-qualified accountant working in the city. She taught her children to read and write English so that when they started school they came top of their English class, much to the school's surprise! Genti's job has meant that, with her encouragement, her husband has been able to reduce his hours and take ESOL classes too. She is now a great ambassador for the centre, encouraging newcomers to learn.

### **Mouna**

Mouna, originally from Morocco, came to London after marrying a British man and was working as a cleaner when she started to attend classes. Her dream was to become a nurse but as she was a bit older, her level of English was poor and her work schedule made learning difficult. During her English classes Mouna made friends with women from all over the world and she learnt about the possibility of becoming a health care assistant. With a bit of help from her mentor and her English teacher she was able to complete the application and also secured some basic volunteer experience to strengthen her CV. Now Mouna is working at a local GP surgery, and enjoying her role, especially as her background is now a strength as does outreach work with her community on health promotion campaigns and maternal health.

### **Maria**

When Maria first came to the centre she had a daughter attending a secondary school which had recommended that she accessed support from a learning mentor at Baytree to address her falling grades. Originally from Angola, Maria came to the UK from Portugal and spoke no English as well as having had little education. Maria was experiencing many problems at home. She had low self-esteem and did not speak up for herself. Her husband, who worked during the night and slept during the day, did not engage with the children. Her three teenage children laughed at her English, showed her no respect and were failing at school. They would spend most of their time in front of the television and refused to do their homework. The family as a whole never sat down and have dinner together.

As part her engagement with the centre Maria attended family enrichment sessions, having one-to-one support from a Portuguese speaking parent support worker. Maria started to openly address the issues she was facing at home she saw that both her submissive behaviour and her husband's controlling behaviour were bad examples for her children. She sought help, started ESOL classes and received advice on

how to gain her family's respect. Over time Maria made changes at home and now her children communicate with each other, the family regularly share meals and they sit down and discuss different topics and issues. She looked for additional support for her children and has also introduced homework sessions in the kitchen that have been taken on by her children. Her relationship with her children has also improved.

The parent coordinator who worked with her said, *'Maria is a different woman now. She is more confident, stands up for herself, and radiates dignity and self-respect. She even dresses differently.'* She is learning organisational and time management skills. Maria has also been learning about the importance of doing things for herself and has started looking ahead and thinking about the future. Her dream is to open a cake decorating business. As a result Maria has been attending one-to-one literacy lessons for ESOL learners to improve her writing skills.

## Si

Si came to the UK from China to join her permanently-settled husband. He was the only person who she knew in London and she could not read, write or speak any English. She found it very isolating but was overjoyed when they had their first child a year later. However, in the months that followed Si discovered that her husband was a gambling addict. Money for food and basic necessities became scarce. In her isolation, she did not know how to get help. Her husband became violent and she started to fear for her child who was now a toddler. She managed to call the police even though she only spoke Mandarin and was offered support – eventually moving to a flat.

When her daughter was five Si met another Chinese woman who had a child attending activities at Baytree. Si was introduced to the mother-daughter programme at Baytree and she and her daughter were given one-to-one support. This included mentoring and tutorials in ESOL, literacy and numeracy for 1 year. Si appreciated this support and now speaks basic English. Her ex-husband still had access to their

daughter and became violent again, but due to her higher levels of confidence and English Si was able to contact the police. This time Si had more confidence and phoned the police straight away to keep herself and her daughter safe.

## 5. LISTENING TO THE WOMEN

*"Anybody who stays in this country they need to speak English for everyday life."*

With only the exception of two women in their eighties, every woman who we spoke to said that learning English was essential to their wellbeing in the UK and wanted to learn.

The barriers that women identified have been divided into personal – barriers created by the women's situations - and practical – barriers created by the type of provision that was offered. The women also suggested what would make it easier for them to learn English.

### 5.1. Personal Barriers that were Identified

*"People drop out as their shifts change. Issues for accommodation, family, worry to find a job, long hours."*

The majority of the women that we spoke to faced multiple barriers to learning or improving their English to a level that would allow them to function independently in the UK.

*"I can't talk to my neighbour, in seven years I have been in this block of flats but I can't really talk to my neighbours, can just say hello. When I go to doctor I cannot really explain myself, I went to school but I can't really understand. Maybe someone is bullying me but I can't really understand to talk to them or say something back."*

#### 5.1.1. Low Self Confidence and Poor Mental Health

Before a woman can learn English she has to have the confidence and capacity to do a series of new things – learn how to travel independently in a new city, have the self-belief that she can

learn English, find out where she can learn, apply for a course, arrange her schedule so that she can start and walk through the classroom door on the first day. Many of the women we spoke to experienced a culture shock when they arrived as “everything was different”.

Several of them had travelled on their own, and for those seeking asylum it was a time of uncertainty and isolation. The multi-faceted impact of low confidence and isolation for vulnerable migrants is shown in Clara’s case study. One community worker explained:

*“Confidence is such an important thing. I think many people don’t realise how hard it is for people who don’t speak English. They only realise the role of language when they are transplanted to other places. How long it takes to learn. The other pressures like caring for the family.”*

Women explained their arrival in the UK as being a time of struggle, isolation and feeling voiceless:

*“It was so hard to make friends. Even though I came alone I had friends here already, but we lived so far apart. I suffered from depression, but I managed to attend ESOL once a week. Some people have been here 25 years and don’t speak English.”*

*“Everything was big obstacle-you can’t explain yourself.”*

*“Everything was a problem. I can’t explain what I need, what I want, my feelings...”*

*“I didn’t want to be looked down upon because of the problems in my country, my neighbours were racist.”*

Some older women weren’t sure that they had the capacity to learn English. They had taken classes previously but not made much progress, and despite recognising that not speaking English was making their lives difficult, they weren’t sure whether it was worth trying to learn again:

*“I forget to go [to classes]. When I am there I learn, and when I leave I forget.”*

*“I feel old to start again; I don’t have confidence.”*

Women’s low confidence and lack of self-belief meant that they were scared to practice speaking English and were afraid that others might laugh at them. Many had experience of being belittled for not speaking good English:

*“[Because I can’t speak English, in my job] I am not treated as a human, but I am a strong woman because I have been loved by my father and my mother.”*

*“I feel so happy at that time because I’m going to learn language, no one’s going to say oh you don’t know anything, no-one’s going to look at me down any more.”*

*“When you’re a child you don’t mind making mistakes. When you’re an adult you’re scared to make mistakes. When you’re an adult and someone laughs at you, you avoid speaking.”*

*“Arab people feel shy and don’t have enough courage in themselves. If you want them to learn, you have to teach them to have confidence in themselves. The ones who speak perfect English don’t mock us, but other Arabs do.”*

Women also spoke about how the shame of not speaking English and an accompanying reduction in self-belief grew the longer they have been in the country, as people expected them to have learnt already.

*“People, when they look at me, think that I can read and write. And once someone said to me, how can’t you read and write. You are a big woman and you can’t really read and write. And I felt so bad.”*

Whilst many of the women we spoke to had travelled with family or joined friends, others had travelled alone and had no one to fall back on. The extent of their isolation meant that



they relied on community centre workers for everything, beyond the capacity and responsibility of those workers.

*“It is difficult when they have put me as their next of kin because they have no one else, but this isn’t my role.”*

For others, low confidence was closely linked to mental ill-health which meant that they didn’t have the energy and mental capacity to focus on learning English as daily living was already a struggle. Whilst many of the women did not discuss their mental health, those leading community groups saw how it affected their ability to start classes and also whether they completed courses if they did start:

*“Many of them suffer. I have now been trained as a community counsellor. Many of the women come to me. They aren’t coping – how can they learn?”*

*“A lot of the women have depression. They say that they can’t learn because they are tired, that they don’t have energy, but it’s their*

*mental health”*

*“From some communities, like Bangladesh, it’s hard to reach them. They have depression. You need to be able to offer flexible classes to accommodate their needs.”*

*“They aren’t able to talk about their mental health problems. They don’t have the language”* ESOL teachers we spoke to were aware of the sufferings of their students and their additional needs and it made teaching them more difficult:

*“There are two schools of thought about how they cope with mental health problems. We aren’t psychologists. On the one hand we would see if we can put them in touch with a counsellor. Others say let’s avoid talking about traumatic subjects as we can’t fix these problems for them. Some say we should be writing journals and stories with them to help them process.”*

*“I steer clear of the subject of kids as some women have had to leave kids behind. It’s*



*hard. And you don't know what trauma you're dealing with."*

They also saw how English boosted women's wellbeing:

*"Learning English makes a visible difference to confidence. People seem happier. They have more of a sense of purpose. They have a project. They like being students and the studying process is valuable. The acquisition of English is important and leads them to be less isolated."*

### **5.1.2. Finding the Time and Juggling Responsibilities**

Many of the women that we spoke to were not only cash poor, but time poor, with jobs, caring responsibilities and households to run. Several of the women that we spoke to were working as cleaners, a job that they were able to do without speaking English. They were tired after they finished work and many of them worked several cleaning jobs each day to make ends meet. Due to the hours that cleaners work – often late at night or early in the morning – finding an English class that fit with her work schedule was difficult, as a Colombian former refugee who has been working for around 20 years as a cleaner said, *"because of my work it is hard to find a class"*. Equally, she knew that she couldn't get a job that paid the same or more and would allow her to work less antisocial hours without speaking better English. Another woman, a Brazilian, also working as a cleaner said, *"After my job I am tired. I cannot learn. I have to look after my children"* and another said, *"Between childcare and a job it isn't possible"*. One community worker said: *"English My Way pre-entry was brilliant. It was intensive. But it was 6-9 in the evening, and not everyone could come, so people would drop it"*.

The majority of the women that we spoke to all wanted to work, but due either to care responsibilities or their immigration status were not able to get jobs. One asylum seeker expressed this as:

*"I want a job. I don't like taking from this*

*country. I want to work. I can't work. I don't have papers."*

Even for women who were not juggling childcare with a job, finding time for learning English was a great challenge. Women with small children could not learn without access to childcare, which they could not afford to pay for. Often these women did not have family around who could help them and had not developed social networks that they could use to help with childcare:

*"[Going to classes is] not possible with 2 small children". An older learner spoke about her successful experience and said, "It was easy to access class as it was only 2 hours a week and I got childcare."*

A community worker said:

*"They want to go to school and integrate but they have to pay for childcare, lessons. Who will stay with the children? The free childcare for 3 year olds is good but what about their other children?"*

The withdrawal of funding for childcare at colleges had stopped some learners in their tracks. An Eritrean woman spoke of her aunts' experience of learning English:

*"The problem was that after these classes where they was childcare it was hard for them to continue to improve their English. Both were single mothers, because their husbands were still in the army in Eritrea and it was harder for them to get out of the country, so they came at a later time. As single mothers they had to stay home and take care of the children most of the time. Because of this they did not continue their education or start work"*

Equally, responsibilities for caring for other family members were likely to fall on their shoulders:

*"I did a 2 year course in Birmingham. Entry I passed. I have a family problem so when I have my daughter back I will see."*



However, single mothers could also be those keenest to learn English. One community worker, talking about her experience working with Afghan refugee women said:

*“The ones who have husbands who are more dependent on them. Single mums are more motivated to learn. Childcare, it’s really important. It encourages them.”*

Mothers saw that English was important for them to properly undertake their caring responsibilities properly. *“It causes a problem when kids start school because you cannot help them with homework”*. It also meant that they would not have to rely on their children for translation, which many were uncomfortable with.

The burden of care responsibilities fell on women not only when they were single mothers, but also due to cultural norms:

*“As a woman, you have to do cooking, cleaning, looking after husband, looking after house, this is your priority, my husband was saying all the time.”*

### **5.1.3. Family Opposition**

The women we spoke to were all in situations where currently they were able to attend activities run by community organisations, however, for some this had not always been the case. Some women, notably those from Turkish, Kurdish, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, who had now separated from their husbands, had not been able to learn English because their husbands would not allow them.

The main reasons given were that their husbands didn’t want them to be independent, or that their husbands had not had the opportunity to learn themselves and did not want their wives to be better educated than they were:

*“I wanted to learn. But my husband wouldn’t let me. He wouldn’t let me speak to people.”*

*“She wanted to go but husband would delay. He didn’t like that people would see her.”*

*“Her husband only has secondary education. He didn’t want her to be better educated than him. He speaks English but doesn’t write.”*

*“My husband he stopped me, say “Why do you need to read” he would just tell me where to sign.”*

Or, as a community worker said, *“English is empowerment and some husbands don’t want women to have that freedom.”*

For some of these women, including Si, mentioned in the case study, domestic violence made learning difficult, whilst their low levels of English knowledge at the time of the abuse had increased their inability to overcome their situation:

*“Because my husband hit my head, and sometimes I’m blank, and can’t really understand or see anything, it’s really effecting my understanding of the language, otherwise I am so happy to learn because I love learning.”*

*“My husband attacked me, and now he is out of jail. I feel nervous all the time. I can’t concentrate.”*

*“I could not explain my situation [domestic violence]. I did not know where to get help. My husband would not let me learn English. He just wanted me to work for money in the factory.”*

Women we spoke to, in addition to Maria in the case study, found that their lack of English meant that their children didn’t respect them, especially if children had been required to provide translation for parents. The cases of Genti and Maria both show the benefit to children’s academic achievement of mothers learning English.

## **5.2. Practical Barriers Women Identified**

For most of the women we spoke to, the primary method of learning English that they were considering was ESOL classes. However, they faced a range of problems in accessing

these and, as one community worker said, “some people don’t even know about ESOL at all”. Whilst the women we spoke to were all now in touch with community workers who could advise them on where they could access accredited ESOL classes, many had not known where to access them in the past. Even for those who were aware of classes, the enrolment process was a challenge:

A community worker said, “They can’t go to colleges to enroll because they need help.”

“Now I have started making plans to go to the school, but I heard that I need to go there and apply and it takes a lot of time with a long queue.”

“Last Monday I was lost in the street to come to school. And I tried to talk with person but my English isn’t very good. So I couldn’t find it.”

Even when they had managed to enrol, long waiting lists meant that women could not start classes at colleges.

### **5.2.1. “Every time money...”**

All of the women we spoke to found the cost of classes to be a barrier, with many seeking out free courses. However, the free provision in community centres was often unaccredited.

The changes to ESOL funding meant that many of the women that we spoke to who had previously had ESOL classes were no longer eligible for free courses or thought they weren’t as their friends were not. This meant that women had stopped attending classes. The complexity of the benefits system also meant that “they find it difficult to approach colleges. They don’t know they are eligible for courses when they’re on benefits.”

For everyone on a low income, costs of travelling within London on public transport are prohibitive. Community workers explained the impact of Azure Cards<sup>22</sup> on women’s ability

<sup>22</sup> British Red Cross (2014) The Azure Payment Card: The Humanitarian Cost Of A Cashless System

to travel, as this allowance for essentials doesn’t allow them to pay for travel costs, even if they had been able to budget for them. For this reason, one refugee support organisation that we spoke to reimbursed travel costs for those attending activities. Others wished that they could provide travel expenses, but noted that they didn’t have the funds to do so.

The impact of the combination of cost and inaccessible location on vulnerable women’s learning was described by one community worker:

“This week two women from an EC postcode and living in refuges applied to learn ESOL. They were both told that they need to pay £200. One was offered a place in Greenwich. That will take all her income just to travel there. They are desperate single women who want to learn English. They are getting panic attacks. They just want to learn English. What else can they do?”

However, we found that some women (notably those without caring responsibilities) were willing to spend the time to travel to a community English class that they enjoyed as they felt that they gained more from it than provisions closer to where they lived:

“It takes me two hours on the bus to come. I don’t know other schools [closer to me] but I like here.”

For women with children the ability to travel was further constrained by when they needed to drop and pick up children from school or nursery, and care responsibilities for younger children.

### **5.2.2. Low Levels of Literacy**

Low levels of literacy was a significant problem. The Baytree Centre noted that this could occur in several ways, making teaching a challenge:

“We see women who are illiterate in their own language which has a different script, for example Eritreans and Arabic speakers. We see women who are illiterate in their

*own language which has the same script as English, often Madeirans, Latin Americans or West Africans. Women come to us who are educated and literate in their own language, for example Chinese or Arabic, but do not know the Roman script. Some of these women have other learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, aside from literacy problems.”*

A proportion of the women who we spoke with, notably older women from Turkey, both Kurdish and Turkish, and women from Afghanistan, had received little or no education in their childhood and arrived in the UK illiterate.

This group had less confidence to start learning English, even compared to those who had only had a little education before their arrival in the UK – as one community worker said:

*“The ones who have had a little education at home push themselves to expand their languages and skills.”*



They found this to be a barrier both in terms of their ability to learn English and their ability to access English courses. Not reading in their mother tongue meant that they could only gain information from personal interactions: both printed on online information in their native languages was still inaccessible.

Those who had attended classes in college found it distressing, as everything was new. They could not even write their own names, had no understanding of grammar from their own language to build upon and few study skills.

Simple things that we don't usually consider as language issues were also difficult for this group. Women couldn't catch a bus easily, as they couldn't read the bus numbers. One woman explained how she had *“tried to catch the bus one day. I got lost and I couldn't find out where I was. After that, I just used to walk every day.”*

Some illiterate women did manage to learn to speak English in the community, but they still faced problems:

*“I remember a woman who could speak English. I thought she must be OK. But she wasn't literate. She didn't have confidence as she still couldn't do basic things.”*

Consequently, illiteracy is a significant barrier to learning, preventing women from knowing that classes exist, having the confidence to sign up to them, travelling to them and learning whilst in them.

Whether illiterate or not, it was clear that there were not enough pre-entry level accredited ESOL classes of community-based classes available for absolute beginners to start learning English.

*“I went to a community centre in Hammersmith but there were no beginner classes, the class [pace] was too quick for me so I stop going.”*

As women progressed, they continued to be placed into the wrong level of class, due to the shortage of places, which prevented them

from progressing, *“the classes are mixed level, so I cannot improve”*.

In one area, *“only in the Mosque are there pre-entry level classes”*. This made the courses very accessible for some Muslim women, but meant that women from other backgrounds were put off from attending, even though the classes were open to all.

Women found large colleges to be daunting. As one community worker said, *“If I put myself in that situation and I’ve just come to the country and have to go on my own and these people know better English than me, I wouldn’t go”*.

One woman, suffering from a long-term illness and learning at community centre said, *“I am shy to go to college. Intimidated”*.

Several of the women who we spoke to had accessed ESOL classes through colleges in the past, dropping out both due to practical problems but also because they have found the experience overwhelming:

*“Shy people struggle. I have taken women to their first classes and stayed with them, but I don’t actually have time to take people.”*

*“They get social anxiety from a large group. For some going somewhere with lots of people is overwhelming. My clients need counselling. They need community level classes.”*

A student explained how she had started at college after overcoming the stress of the application process but, *“I stop going. Too many people. It scare me”*. Women were surprised by the size of colleges, often having only been to small schools if they had attended at all. The size of colleges and the number of people was stressful.

Whilst they couldn’t always explain why, participants were clear in their preference for the environment of the community centres throughout the study.

### **5.3. What the Women Suggested**

Whilst acknowledging the barriers above, all of which need to be addressed, the women we spoke to shared their ideas about the type of classes and other provisions that would make it easier for them to learn English.

#### **5.3.1. Empowering Spaces and Forming Friendships**

Many of the women who we spoke to had little opportunity to socialise outside of their community centre. As one community worker said, *“There’s nowhere for people to go outside. People just stay in their homes”*. They had no money to meet friends for a coffee or to take up a hobby, and they had little time with their other responsibilities. Community ESOL classes or other community activities were where they were meeting new people and forming friendships:

*“If I have a problem I don’t have family here. But I have my God and I have more people, friends, integration. I’m meeting beautiful people at school...”*

The majority of women we spoke to stated that they would be happy to attend either all-female or mixed English classes, with Muslim women from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh being the exception.

However, it was often clear that they were more confident in a women-only space and were attending women-only activities in the community centres. Reasons given were that women would find it easier to speak up and participate, that they would be able to discuss things that were important and that they would find it easier to make friends. Community workers told us:

*“A lot of the women feel more comfortable in a supportive environment targeted at women” and “it’s empowering to have a women’s only space. Many of them come from cultures where men have their spaces and women have their spaces”*.



Women said:

*“Women are shy so it would be better to have a woman leader.”*

*“Having classes for people all female Bangladeshis would be helpful. We could translate for each other. It would be easier to make friends.”*

*“The ladies are more comfortable around ladies. Most of them mainly being taught by a man might not put them off, but having men in the class might be off putting.”*

*“No stress here [when compared to college-based English classes].”*

Students also valued how their female teachers provided support in non-academic ways, acting as a mentor and advising on employment and where students could get advice.

However, teachers rarely had much time to do this and did not feel able to take on this role. As one explained:

*“It’s probably a mistake to get too involved in individuals lives outside the classroom. You can make suggestions or put them in touch with a counsellor. I have a tendency to get too involved so I have to guard against that. In another context I might befriend them but I’m a teacher and I want to keep a professional distance.”*

As in the comment above from the learner wanting to learn from other Bangladeshis, there were learners who thought that it would be easier to learn English with others from their language group.

Some thought that it would be beneficial as women could help each other to understand and classes could be tailored to a specific group’s needs:

*“English classes just for Afghan women would motivate them. They can ask someone. Having someone who can translate in*

*community languages in the groups builds confidence. It means everyone can be heard.”*

*“Speaking with [other] Turkish people, having the chance to translate was helpful.”*

Additionally, for less confident beginners, two community workers were clear that the women felt more at ease with people from their own background and more encouraged to learn:

*“They can’t relate to each other. [Afghan women] can’t relate to Albanian, Eritrean women. They need someone who speaks their language to encourage them.”*

*“... Someone who speaks their language, it increases their chances of attending.”*

*“They want to stay with Congolese people. Even if they go to English classes they are closed to meeting people. It’s most safety. [With other Congolese people] They feel secure. They feel they won’t be judged. They are scared of being laughed at when they speak English. They fear that they don’t speak properly. No-one is perfect. For someone who has just arrived she will be ashamed of speaking in public. The fear is of being laughed at.”*

However, other women appreciated multicultural classes:

*“It’s better for me if they don’t speak Arabic because then I would just speak Arabic.”*

*“They complain because they place them together, and they chat, but they don’t learn much.” But here, they were giving them homework, asking them questions. Here they really wanted them to learn.”*

*“I came in 1992. When I came I knew little English from school. It was hard, I could understand but couldn’t speak. Then I went to college. They taught you to communicate. It was mixed nationality so you had to speak English. They are now my friends so I speak English with them.”*



### 5.3.2. The Importance of Good Teachers

The importance of good teaching was raised by both learners and community workers. Women found good teachers to be encouraging and motivated them to attend and improve their English:

*“I enjoy the classes. The teacher is very, very good. She would move her hands, she was passionate.”*

*“I like the teacher. It’s very important to me with a high level. He speaks clearly.”*

*“The teacher is passionate, he’s friendly and helpful.”*

*“[I like it here because] my teacher is friendly.”*

*“I found it easier here because I like the teacher, lessons are done slowly, well-paced, and the teacher can translate.”*

*“Having a friendly teacher makes it easier to come.”*

When teachers were not encouraging learners felt discouraged, but sometimes class sizes meant that teachers did not have time to speak to individual students:

*“I had one woman who loved ESOL and then dropped out when she started a different class where the teacher knocked her confidence.”*

*“The encouragement here is good compared to where I went to class [before]. There the teachers look like they do their job and then they finish.”*

*“I used to be a teacher in my country. Sometimes there are too many people [in the class]. Students don’t get enough time with teachers.”*

Community leaders were also clear that teachers’ cultural literacy is important to the learners:

*“[Teachers need to] speak their language, know their experience, know their culture.”*

*“The teachers have to be aware of their culture, being taught by teachers who know their culture would be easier.”*

*“Not understanding the culture makes a gap, a barrier between [the teacher and student].”*

And, with reference to the specific needs of illiterate people to have good teachers, one experienced community ESOL teacher said:

*“It’s possible to teach illiterate people to speak English if you don’t speak their language, but anyone who isn’t trained and experienced would struggle. There need to be more ESOL teachers from minority groups, bilingual teachers.”*

One of the women who we spoke to was in her 40s and had recently learnt to write, attending a literacy class for her mother tongue, Turkish, which she found helpful. However, whilst community organisations recognised the importance of having good, well-trained teachers, they often relied on volunteers due to a lack of funding, some of whom were qualified, but some others were not, affecting the quality of the classes provided as well as the number of hours provided and hence the women’s English learning. Some women were attending free classes in different locations each week so that they could improve as quickly as possible.

*“Three days I come to Baytree. I go to Croydon College on Thursday. On Friday I go to a local church.”*

### 5.3.3. Relevant Content

Many women who we spoke to wanted a greater focus on oral and aural English. If they found that the English that they needed day-to-day wasn’t improving it was discouraging:

*“I did one year of classes. I stopped as I wasn’t practicing speaking.”*

*“The focus is writing. People need to learn to communicate.”*

*“Many start and leave. They might feel they aren’t learning.”*

They found that the English they needed on a day-to-day basis wasn’t what they were learning in classes. In London, where there are English speakers from all over the UK, speaking it both as a first and second language, they found accents difficult.

*“We struggle with accents. Scottish or Indian. Such as the GP, housing, the hospital, phone calls...”*

*“Other people have different accents from my children.”*

*“I can’t understand slang. We need to learn slang vocabulary. I can’t practice it as I don’t have a job.”*

They also found that the focus on English for employment meant that they weren’t learning the vocabulary that they needed to meet their own challenges, which was discouraging:

*“I came in 2000, I spoke English better then. I learned in school in Iraq and took courses in London at first. They just kept teaching us to work, so I’ve not practiced since.”*

*“We were taught a specific language at work, not to talk to others...once they thought we could work they finished teaching us.”*

There was also a feeling that the English language requirements for citizenship were not helping women to learn the type of English that they needed:

*“They just go to learn specific English to pass the test, not to learn.”*

#### **5.4. Accessible Format**

Due to the low confidence and low English levels of many of the women that they worked with, community workers suggested that

tailored informal learning, either using topics that women enjoyed or addressing specific needs that they had, would engage learners:

*“We had practical classes, beauty, hairdressing, computers in English. They went really well. We learnt from that. They are more practical learners: sewing, crochet, arts, jewellery making...”*

*“It needs to be more than ESOL – sharing food and music.”*

*“The women need drama or music. That’s how I learned. They need to learn to communicate, conversation clubs. Tell stories. Subjects they love-family problems, doctors, schools for children. Make classes creative, they like dancing, put music.”*

This echoes the findings for teaching adult women literacy in developing countries: *“Literacy learning is particularly effective when it is linked to, integrated with or embedded in other learning. Such approaches produce stronger outcomes in both literacy and vocational education and training”<sup>23</sup>.*

ESOL classes also proved to be an opportunity for women to relax and make friends, becoming a focal point in their weeks and something to look forward to:

*“They love meeting each other to speak, to bring their food. They share common things- they can communicate-they can relax for a while!”*

*“We are now friends and we can help each other.”*

*“I felt alone – it’s nice to have friends here.”*

Women studying in the community valued the informal setting. They appreciated the opportunity to sit with other women before

<sup>23</sup> NIACE\* (2012) Women’s Rights to Literacy: Advocating Women’s Right To Access Learning Literacy Through International Development [http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/sites/niace\\_en/files/document-downloads/womensrighttoliteracy\\_web.pdf](http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/sites/niace_en/files/document-downloads/womensrighttoliteracy_web.pdf) \*Now Learning and Work Institute

or after classes, or in other activities, and the genuine friendships that this had allowed them to form, both with each other and also with volunteers and staff. The women appreciated these friendships, *“where I come from I have lots of family and here my friends are my family”*. At Baytree the women had taken the initiative to start a ‘club’ after their beginners ESOL class and the women were encouraged to attend class to see each other because *“It feels like a family”*.

Learners in other places also wished that they had more opportunities to meet people and make friends:

*“It would be nice to spend time with people, to have more social activities to know what’s going on in London.”*

#### **5.4.1. The Importance of a Whole-Person Approach**

Community workers spoke about the importance of a ‘whole-person’ approach to English learning, saying that offering ESOL classes on their own without considering women’s other support needs and the effect of their low confidence meant that learners did not complete their courses:

*“I don’t believe anyone’s conquered ESOL yet. Don’t get me wrong. There may be people who get to the end of it but it depends on so many factors.”*

*“You don’t see much change in a person over 3 months. It’s just enough time to get settled and gain confidence and settle the child into the crèche.”*

*“Alongside ESOL there need to be other things to encourage them to stay on their ESOL classes. How to develop themselves and their confidence.”*

This was echoed by the women, both in the central focus that they put on friendship as part of their English-learning experience, but on the other services that they accessed through the community centres that they attended to

address their day-to-day problems, such as advice provision and counselling:

*“Sometimes we are having a very hard time, and when we come here they can sort it out for us.”*

*“I like coming here because everyone understands each other, the counsellor...”*

*“Because some people have domestic violence, and here its only women, and so it’s easy to talk to them. Other places have men, and it’s not so easy to talk to them. They help us, IMECE is helping us for domestic violence issues. We are learning lots of things in IMECE, and we are trying to help each other through counselors or just with other women. Because of the domestic violence, IMECE is contacting with police, with refugee center, or council, doctors, everything.”*

ESOL accreditation alone was not enough to empower a woman to make the most of her new English language skills:

*“I completed all the ESOL levels but I still have very little confidence to speak.”*

Many community centres found that volunteers, both migrants and native English speakers, could successfully offer individual support and encouragement to learners:

*“Outside of the classroom, if you have the funding for it, the volunteers are so good. We have young professionals or migrants who have been here longer. The migrants have gone through the same process. The learners can see their future. If [women learning English] meet a volunteers who is a native speaker it’s really great. It shows English people care and have an interest in them. It’s often their first contact with an English person. It’s like an introduction to integrate. Someone is showing interest in them. A volunteer has no self-interest and the women appreciate that. It’s so nice for them to know someone who isn’t a teacher but who comes to see them and walk side by side with them. Two cultures can meet and understand*

*each other. It's a dialogue."*

*"The thing that was absolutely fundamental to me was my mentor."*

An earlier study at Baytree found that the system of an ESOL teacher or trained volunteer calling and encouraging women each time they didn't turn up to their class was effective in motivating them to attend the next class and accelerating their English learning compared to other approaches for illiterate learners<sup>24</sup>.

The older women in particular noted the importance of encouragement in helping them to learn:

*"It's more difficult for the women old. I [didn't] believe I had this capacity to learn, but others encouraged me."*

*"Older ladies need encouragement. Courses in community centres are very important."*

For the women we spoke to, English wasn't just a skill they wanted to learn, but something that would be transformative:

*"I'm trying to do my best. This is my life because I have to do my best to show my life and this is me. I'm trying my best to live my life."*

*"They gain confidence, achievement, self-esteem, structure in their lives. They can make their own choices. It's so liberating for women. They can rebuild their lives."*

#### **5.4.2. Supporting Learning Outside the Classroom**

Women noted that they struggled to practice their English which made it hard for them to progress. One reason was that they could not access enough teaching hours each week. Another was that they rarely if ever met native English speakers, despite wanting to, hampering their ability to improve their English as well as to integrate:

<sup>24</sup> Brooks, G. & M. Burton (2010) The Spalding Method: An Evaluation For The Baytree Centre, Brixton <http://www.wonderfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/BaytreeSpaldingReport.pdf>

*"I have no-one to practice English with."*

*"We speak only broken English together."*

*"I only speak with non-natives it's really hard to meet natives. We only have contact with migrants."*

However, it was often voiced that women were happy to have met other people from all over the world and learn about other cultures. None of the women we spoke to stated that she didn't want to mix with people outside of her own ethnic group. This sentiment was shared by many:

*"It's important that the people are multicultural. It's good for integration and community. It's a good mix of people old and young."*

*"I'm living with a Portuguese lady and have to speak English. It's amazing-it's my dream."*

Many didn't know how they could meet English people whilst others pointed out that they didn't have the income to take up activities where they could meet native speakers and naturally form friendships, if their English was good enough, as:

*"I can't take up a hobby to meet people because it's too expensive."*

Several women that we spoke to mentioned that they had investigated volunteering, although more as a way of gaining skills for employment rather than as a way of making new friends or practicing English. In the case studies, volunteering had helped Genti and Mouna to gain the skills and experience that led to their employment. One ESOL teacher told us:

*"I encourage people to volunteer. Asylum seekers can formally volunteer. I've been pushing it. Ideally it can provide a stepping stone to work if they are granted refugee status. Volunteering while they wait is a great way to acclimatise. There is a wide variety of ability and accomplishment. Some people*

*are bored – they had good jobs in their own country but can't work and are cut off from their lives. Volunteering is great and enhances your life and is practical. You gain. You can put it on your CV. They are really bored if they can't work."*

Some women we spoke to expressed frustration that they couldn't use skills that they already had in voluntary roles, as their English wasn't good enough, but that they couldn't improve their English as they couldn't get a voluntary role, as *"It's hard to find volunteering opportunities that allow me to use my skills"*.

Many women we spoke to were determined to learn English and had made it a priority. It had influenced their leisure and work choices. Some of the strategies that they used include:

*"I watch TV without subtitles. It makes me practice even if I only understand five words in a conversation."*

*"We are exposed only to Arabic. For most people TV is always satellite. Our friends are Arabs. After one week when we'd just got satellite TV I noticed I lost my English so I cancelled it."*

Some women, notably those without small children, said that when they couldn't attend courses, or between lessons they would try to teach themselves:

*"I use a phone app and library stories and videos. I teach myself from a book."*

*"I would still like to learn English. I try to learn by reading English newspapers."*

*"If I cannot come to the class I read the newspaper and books."*

However these strategies are of course out of reach for those who have very low levels of literacy, little time and nowhere to study. For others, work provided opportunities to improve English, for example:

*"I help an old English woman so I practice with her."*

*"I care for an elderly lady. I read out loud and she corrects my English. She likes doing this because she was a teacher."*

## **6. SITUATING THE PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE IN THE WIDER CONTEXT**

To understand the experiences that our study participants identified more deeply, we examined the literature to provide a broader context. This allowed us to look at women's English-language learning as a national rather than London issue and to see to what extent the issues that they identified had been observed by others.

### **6.1. How the UK Helps Women to Learn English**

There is currently no national strategy for English learning in England, although there are in Scotland<sup>25</sup> and Wales<sup>26</sup>. Notably neither strategy addresses the impact of gender inequalities on ESOL access. The main approach that the British government has taken towards supporting migrants to learn English has been the funding of accredited ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes, taught by qualified teachers and comprised of five levels of courses intended to meet increasing skill levels. However, funding for ESOL has been reduced by 40% over the last five years<sup>27</sup>. Current demand for ESOL is greater than supply and there is no guarantee that a place in a class at the right level will be available, and if available will be local or at a time when learners can attend. Despite the growing number of immigrants from countries with low rates of English proficiency the number of people taking English lessons fell from 163,000 in 2010/2011

25 The Scottish Government (2015) Welcoming Our Learners: Scotland's ESOL Strategy 2015 – 2020 [http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/ESOLStrategy2015to2020\\_tcm4-855848.pdf](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/ESOLStrategy2015to2020_tcm4-855848.pdf)

26 Welsh Government (2014) English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Policy for Wales <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/20373/1/140619-esol-policy-en.pdf>

27 DEMOS (2014) On Speaking Terms [http://www.demos.co.uk/files/On\\_speaking\\_termsweb.pdf?1408395571](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/On_speaking_termsweb.pdf?1408395571)



to 131,100 in 2014/2015<sup>28</sup>. Meanwhile, the number achieving their ESOL qualification fell from 122,100 to 109,600 over the same period.

Accredited courses vary from part time, as little as 2 hours of learning per week, to full time (12-24 hours per week) and can last from 12 weeks to a full academic year. These are delivered in Further Education Colleges, Adult Community Colleges and by private providers, including charities. Additionally there may be courses funded by other means and often volunteered in the community, typically ranging from 1-4 hours per week.

The current aims of ESOL are for learners to progress into mainstream adult learning through increased proficiency in speaking and listening, reading and writing and courses use a specific ESOL core curriculum, and promotion of integration, reduction of Islamic extremism and 'British Values'<sup>29</sup>. Funding has come via different government departments with different agenda. These include the Home Office, DCLG and BIS, which has considered ESOL from an employment perspective. BIS's responsibility for ESOL, as of July 2016, has now been moved to the Department for Education.

Without a national commitment to English language learning for migrants who is eligible to attend state-funded classes, either free or subsidised, has changed over time.

Reduced spending has led to local providers reducing the number of classes and consolidating teaching into fewer locations. In the past, when the budget was greater, colleges often worked with community groups to deliver targeted accredited ESOL to hard to reach groups, but this is now very limited. With the devolution of further education funding those who are least likely to raise their voices are also the ones who are most likely to lose out. Cuts have also been made by closing childcare provisions

28 Skills Funding Agency (July 2016) Statistical First Release: Further Education and Skills Learner Participation, Outcomes and Level of Highest Qualification Held [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/486852/SFR\\_commentary\\_November\\_2015\\_ofqual\\_update.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/486852/SFR_commentary_November_2015_ofqual_update.pdf)

29 DEMOS (2014) On Speaking Terms

and making fewer people eligible for free or subsidised classes.

### **6.1.1. Who can Access English Classes?**

Eligibility for free or subsidised ESOL is complex and consequently people seeking to learn English are often unsure about whether or how much they would have to pay.

At present, to be eligible for Government ESOL funding a person must be 19 or over and

(A) have been ordinarily resident in the UK or another country in the European Economic Area (EEA) for the last 3 years or

(B) have been granted indefinite leave to remain, exceptional leave to remain, right of abode or British Citizenship in the last 3 years. Or

(C) be the spouse or civil partner of a person covered by one of the statements above and have been both married and resident in the UK for 1 year.

At present there are no course fees for those who are unemployed and (1) in receipt of a Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG) benefit or (2) receiving or whose partners is receiving certain other income-based benefits and can sign a declaration that they need skills training to enter employment or (3) who is the unwaged dependent of someone meeting the conditions of (A) or (B) or (4) an asylum seeker receiving income-based benefit/assistance, or their dependant or (5) someone whose asylum claim has been denied but whose appeal has not received a decision within 6 months of being lodged; who is granted support under section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; or who is in the care of a local authority and are receiving local authority support for themselves under section 23C or section 23CA of the Children Act 1989.

Free ESOL is only available to those who are actively seeking work, others will have to part-fund their studies. By definition this means that when asylum seekers become eligible for ESOL funding they cannot access free ESOL, as they are not allowed to work. Consequently some people, including asylum seekers, have to wait

long periods before they are eligible for free or subsidised ESOL and that those who are not actively seeking paid work, for example those who are unwell or have care responsibilities, are not eligible for free ESOL classes. Even when ESOL is free, there may be enrolment or registration fees. Eligibility does not guarantee that a place at the correct level will be available to a learner.

### **6.1.2. Other ways that Migrants Learn English**

Self-study English courses exist, both as books and audio, and thanks to technology, online. Self-study relies on the learner knowing that these resources both exist and having the capacity to study independently, which would include somewhere where they could study, undisturbed. Online learning is often praised as a solution for those who cannot attend classes, allowing people to learn in their own time and at their own pace. However, it is not suitable for everyone, depending upon access to and proficiency in using a computer, tablet or smartphone and internet access – low access is linked to poverty<sup>30</sup>. Further, e-learning only works effectively for those who already have self-regulated learning skills and who have the ability to plan and reflect upon their learning, consequently excluding those with the lowest levels of prior education and best serving those from cultures where independent learning is valued. It has been found to be most effective in ‘blended learning’ delivery, where there is still intensive teacher support<sup>31</sup>. Learning spoken English in the community is a two-way process as it requires interaction with English speakers. Those who have the opportunity to practice through conversations with a native speaker progress at a faster pace than those who do not<sup>32</sup>.

The existing literature shows that, regardless

30 Ofcom (2015) Adults’ Media Use And Attitudes [http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/media-lit-10years/2015\\_Adults\\_media\\_use\\_and\\_attitudes\\_report.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/media-lit-10years/2015_Adults_media_use_and_attitudes_report.pdf)

31 Danaher, K. (2014) Meeting The Learning Needs Of Refugees And Migrants In Tertiary Blended ESOL Courses, Unitec ePress Occasional and Discussion Paper Series, Auckland, New Zealand: Unitec ePress. (Vol. 2014/2.)

32 DEMOS (2014) On Speaking Terms

of their immigration status, vulnerable women living in the UK who cannot speak English are at a disadvantage, unable to live independent lives, and often living in poverty and ill-health, whilst putting pressure on the systems that they require by requiring interpreters, unable to get well-paid work, and struggling to bring up their children, whose superior command of English allows them to take advantage of their mothers. The barriers that they face to learning English are described below.

### **Definitions**

#### **Asylum seeker**

A person who has applied for asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees on the ground that if he is returned to his country of origin he has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political belief or membership of a particular social group. He remains an asylum seeker for so long as his application or an appeal against refusal of his application is pending<sup>33</sup>.

#### **Refugee**

In this context, refugee means an asylum seeker whose application has been successful. Refugees are defined and protected under international law. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines who is a refugee and outlines the basic rights which states should afford to refugees. One of the most fundamental principles laid down in international law is that “refugees should not be expelled or returned to situations where their life and freedom would be under threat.”<sup>34</sup>

#### **Migrant**

According to the UNHCR, migrants “choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, migrants face no such impediment to return. If

33 UNHCR (Jul 2016) UNHCR viewpoint: ‘Refugee’ Or ‘Migrant’ – Which Is Right? <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html>

34 UNHCR (Jul 2016) UNHCR viewpoint: ‘Refugee’ Or ‘Migrant’ – Which Is Right?

they choose to return home, they will continue to receive the protection of their government”<sup>35</sup>. However, according to the conditions of their visas, migrants may not be able to stay in the UK despite the fact that returning home may be unsafe<sup>36</sup>.

### **No Recourse to Public Funds**

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) is an immigration condition restricting access to public funds, including many mainstream benefits such as welfare and housing.

Families and individuals may have a right to financial support (accommodation and subsistence) from social services to avoid destitution or because of complex health needs. In these cases, the local authority has a duty to support the accommodation and subsistence costs of residents with NRPF<sup>37</sup>.

## **6.2. Struggling to Meet Basic Needs**

Before women can think about learning English, they must ensure that their basic needs, and those of their dependents, are met. Those who don't speak English and who are supporting themselves are often caught in a trap. They cannot afford to pay for English classes and often, between the split shifts or multiple jobs needed to secure a liveable income, cannot physically attend classes at the time they are scheduled<sup>38</sup>. However, without English they cannot obtain better paid work with a better timetable and may also be vulnerable to exploitation from employers.

### **6.2.1. Food and Essentials**

Asylum seekers and refugees face specific challenges in meeting their basic needs. Destitute asylum seekers are given £36.95 for

35 UNHCR (Jul 2016) UNHCR viewpoint: 'Refugee' Or 'Migrant' –Which Is Right?

36 IPPR (2013) Returning Irregular Immigrants How Effective Is The EU's Response? [http://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2013/02/returning-migrants-EU-130220\\_10371.pdf?noredirect=1](http://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2013/02/returning-migrants-EU-130220_10371.pdf?noredirect=1)

37 No Recourse to Public Funds Network (2016) Practice Guidance for Local Authorities (England) Assessing and Supporting Adults who have No Recourse to Public Funds <http://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/Documents/Practice-Guidance-Adults-England.pdf>

38 Granada, A.L. (2013) Latin Americans in London, language, integration and ethnic identity [http://eprints.aston.ac.uk/24402/1/Granada\\_Ana\\_Lucila\\_2014.pdf](http://eprints.aston.ac.uk/24402/1/Granada_Ana_Lucila_2014.pdf)

each person in their household each week, to be collected from a local post office, to buy essentials such as food, clothing and toiletries.<sup>39</sup> However, the rules for accessing this money are strict. Those refused asylum, if they meet the conditions, are given the same amount, but on an 'Azure' payment card. This restricts what they can buy and shops may decide whether or not what they need is essential. Living on a tight budget means that travel costs are a luxury and for those using an Azure card, travel is not recognised as an essential cost. There are also migrants living in the UK who have no recourse to public funds and if their income decreases they can find themselves in poverty<sup>40</sup>. Refugee and asylum-seeking pregnant mothers and those with young children are given supplements. Maternity grants of £300 are available to expectant or recent mothers. These, however need to be applied for, meaning that mothers need to be aware of and able to apply.

All of those on very low incomes struggle to meet their basic needs but food poverty affects men and women differently and women will often go hungry in order to feed their children<sup>41</sup>. Women are often responsible for feeding their families and need to be able to budget in order to do so. If they cannot read English, or ask questions in shops, they cannot know how much something costs or buy what they want. When people are struggling to feed themselves and their families, and cannot travel, accessing English classes becomes a luxury that they cannot afford.

### **6.2.2. Shelter**

Regardless of immigration status, most vulnerable migrants are living in precarious conditions. These range from rough-sleeping to living with family and friends, often in

39 [www.gov.uk/asylum-support](http://www.gov.uk/asylum-support)

40 COMPAS (2015) Safeguarding Children From Destitution: Local Authority Responses To Families With 'No Recourse To Public Funds' [https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/media/PR-2015-No\\_Recourse\\_Public\\_Funds\\_LAs.pdf](https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/media/PR-2015-No_Recourse_Public_Funds_LAs.pdf)

41 Church Action on Poverty, The Trussell Trust and Oxfam (2014) Below The Breadline: The Relentless Rise Of Food Poverty In Britain <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/01/Below-the-Breadline-The-Trussell-Trust.pdf>

overcrowded conditions<sup>42</sup>. Asylum seekers and refugees may have little choice in where they are housed<sup>43</sup>. Three quarters of migrants who have arrived in the last five years live in private rented accommodation where they can be taken advantage of by unscrupulous landlords and where the wider housing crisis means that rent costs are high and there is pressure on the cheapest accommodation, which is the poorest quality<sup>44</sup>. New migrants tend to rely on personal connections to access accommodation, for example friends, family or may be accommodated by employers<sup>45</sup>, which means that they have few legal rights. If they fall out with friends or family or lose their job they could become homeless.

Neighbourhoods may be unwelcoming or hostile to immigrants, especially when resident families are on housing waiting lists or transfer lists as they themselves are living in overcrowded, temporary or otherwise inadequate accommodation, and believe immigrants are getting preferential treatment<sup>46</sup>.

People living in precarious housing situations struggle to access services, including education, as they are likely to move due to housing pressures<sup>47</sup>. Even if women in precarious housing situations can find a class nearby, it is not unlikely that they will end up moving at some point during their course, lowering the chance that they will finish it, or that they will continue onto a higher level, when travel costs may increase. Equally, the stress of these living conditions may well mean that they attend classes tired and distracted and struggle to learn and get ill frequently, affecting their attendance and it

42 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Aug 2011) UK Migration: the leadership role of housing providers <https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/41563/download?token=nNUcSWa7&filetype=viewpoint>

43 Chartered Institute of Housing [http://www.housing-rights.info/02\\_2\\_Refugees.php](http://www.housing-rights.info/02_2_Refugees.php)

44 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Feb 2012) UK migrants and the private rented sector <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-migrants-and-private-rented-sector>

45 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Feb 2012) UK migrants and the private rented sector

46 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Aug 2011) UK Migration: the leadership role of housing providers

47 LSE (2007) Population mobility and service provision: A report for London Councils <http://www.lse.ac.uk/geographyAndEnvironment/research/London/pdf/populationmobilityandserviceprovision.pdf>

is unlikely that they would have somewhere quiet to study independently. Poor housing, for example homes which are damp, overcrowded or infested, affects people's health and may cost the country a similar amount as smoking and alcohol<sup>48</sup>.

### 6.3. Poor Wellbeing

Asylum seeking, refugee and vulnerable migrant women have higher levels of poor physical and mental health than the general population, related also to poorer health in BAME communities and those living in poverty<sup>49,50</sup>. Feeling dislocated and isolation from family and friends can lead to mental health problems.<sup>51</sup> Access to healthcare is one issue: a person doesn't need to be "ordinarily resident" in the UK to be eligible for NHS primary medical care and GPs and migrants will not be denied emergency medical care<sup>52</sup> but they may not be eligible for treatment for other conditions<sup>53</sup>. Treating patients who don't speak English is difficult. They may require interpreters, which costs the NHS and slows down treatment, or rely on family or friends<sup>54</sup>. This puts the patient in the power of someone who may or may not have their best interests at heart and can be upsetting, with patients feeling that they have no control over what happens to them and do not understand what is going on.

Mental health of migrants has been shown to decrease the longer they are in the UK, as their

48 Building Research Establishment (2015) The Cost Of Poor Housing To The NHS <https://www.bre.co.uk/filelibrary/pdf/87741-Cost-of-Poor-Housing-Briefing-Paper-v3.pdf>

49 The King's Fund (Nov 2014) Tackling Poverty: Making More Of The NHS In England [http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field\\_publication\\_file/tackling-poverty-research-paper-jrf-kingsfund-nov14.pdf](http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field_publication_file/tackling-poverty-research-paper-jrf-kingsfund-nov14.pdf)

50 National Institute of Economic and Social Research (Jul 2015) Intergenerational And Inter-Ethnic Well-Being: An Analysis For The UK <http://www.niesr.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publications/DP451.pdf>

51 National Institute of Economic and Social Research (Jul 2015) Intergenerational And Inter-Ethnic Well-Being: An Analysis For The UK

52 Citizens Advice NHS charges for people from abroad <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/healthcare/help-with-health-costs/nhs-charges-for-people-from-abroad/> (Accessed August 2016)

53 The King's Fund (Nov 2014) Tackling Poverty: Making More Of The NHS In England

54 NHS (2015) Interpreting and Translation in Primary Care Services <https://www.england.nhs.uk/commissioning/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2015/07/interpreting-events-presentation.pdf>



expectations meet reality<sup>55</sup>. Across Europe, both refugees and vulnerable migrants have been found to have worse mental health than the general population<sup>56</sup>. This can be affected by pre-migration factors i.e. the difficult situations that they have left behind, by migration factors i.e. the experiences that they have faced whilst migrating; both of these may well expose the migrant to traumatic events<sup>57</sup>. Post-migration stresses may also affect mental health. Mind, the mental health charity, suggests that causes of stress leading to mental ill health are first the uncertainty of the leave to remain process, isolation and dislocation, destitution and the relationship with home, which could include broken family networks, trauma and fear of return<sup>58</sup>. Stress affects brain function, memory and the ability to learn<sup>59</sup>.

Women are particularly at risk, as many come from highly gendered and segregated societies, where they are not accustomed to participating in public life and remain far more isolated than men<sup>60</sup>. The challenges of pregnancy, childbirth and caring for a new baby are aggravated for refugee, asylum seeking and vulnerable migrant women, even beyond those faced by other women living in poverty<sup>61</sup>.

Women's low English proficiency correlates to poor health much more strongly than for men (see Table 6) whilst access to adult learning

55 National Institute of Economic and Social Research (Jul 2015) Intergenerational And Inter-Ethnic Well-Being: An Analysis For The UK

56 Missinne, S. & Bracke, P. (2012) Depressive Symptoms Among Immigrants And Ethnic Minorities: A Population Based Study In 23 European Countries Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology 47 (1)

57 Kirmayer, L. J., L. Narasiah, M. Munoz, M. Rashid, A.G. Ryder, J. Guzder, G. Hassan, C. Rousseau, K. Pottie (2011) 'Common Mental Health Problems in Immigrants and Refugees: general approach in primary care' Canadian Medical Association Journal 183 (12)

58 MIND (2009) Improving Mental Health Support For Refugee Communities – An Advocacy Approach [https://www.mind.org.uk/media/192447/Refugee\\_Report\\_1.pdf](https://www.mind.org.uk/media/192447/Refugee_Report_1.pdf)

59 Mental Health America (2014) Impact of Toxic Stress on Individuals and Communities: A Review of the Literature <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/sites/default/files/Impact%20of%20Toxic%20Stress%20on%20Individuals%20and%20Communities-A%20Review%20of%20the%20Literature.pdf>

60 Kirmayer et al (2011) 'Common Mental Health Problems in Immigrants and Refugees: general approach in primary care'

61 Maternity Action & Refugee Council (2013) When Maternity Doesn't Matter: Dispersing Pregnant Women Seeking Asylum [http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0002/6402/When\\_Maternity\\_Doesn\\_t\\_Matter\\_-\\_Ref\\_Council\\_\\_Maternity\\_Action\\_report\\_Feb2013.pdf](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0002/6402/When_Maternity_Doesn_t_Matter_-_Ref_Council__Maternity_Action_report_Feb2013.pdf)

has clear, identifiable positive effects for both well-being and health<sup>62</sup>. Consequently, it can be seen that poor wellbeing makes it difficult for women to learn English, whilst having low levels of English proficiency affects their wellbeing.

**Table 6: Proportions of 'Good' Health for Males and Females within each Proficiency Category, England and Wales, 2011<sup>63</sup>**

'Good' health for each proficiency category	Males	Females	Percentage point difference
Main language is English (1)	81.4	79.2	2.2
'Proficient' (2)	88.6	88	0.6
'Non-proficient' (3)	72.4	60.2	12.2
Total population aged 3 or over	81.7	79.4	2.3

Notes:

1. English or Welsh in Wales.

2. This includes people who selected 'very well' or 'well' for question 19 on the 2011 Census form. This is grouped as 'Main language is not English: Can speak English very well or well' within published tables.

3. This includes people who selected 'not well' or 'not at all' for question 19 on the 2011 Census form. This is grouped as 'Main language is not English: Cannot speak English or cannot speak English well' within published tables.<sup>64</sup>

#### 6.4. Caring Responsibilities

*"Women are still expected to fulfil their traditional roles, but have lost the resources they used to depend upon. They cope by prioritizing the needs of their husbands and children, often to the detriment of their own health and well-being."* (Oxfam, 2013)<sup>65</sup>

Many female migrants come from backgrounds where a woman's primary role is as a caregiver and homemaker<sup>66</sup>. However, in all regions of the

62 Field, J (2011) Adult Learning, Health And Well-Being – Changing Lives [https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/15658/1/adult\\_learner\\_2011.pdf](https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/15658/1/adult_learner_2011.pdf)

63 Office for National Statistics (2013) Language in England and Wales: 2011

64 Office for National Statistics (2013) 2011 Census: Detailed analysis - English language proficiency in England and Wales, Main language and general health characteristics

65 Oxfam (2013) Shifting Sands: Changing gender roles among refugees in Lebanon

<https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/rr-shifting-sands-lebanon-syria-refugees-gender-030913-summ-en.pdf>

66 UN Women (2015) Progress Of The World's Women 2015-2016 [http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW\\_progressreport.pdf](http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW_progressreport.pdf)



world women work more than men: on average they do at least two and a half times more unpaid care and domestic work than men, with large gender disparities in time spent cooking, cleaning and caring for household members. If paid and unpaid work are combined, women work longer hours than men in nearly all countries<sup>67</sup>.

Women who are mothers are likely to care for small children themselves at home, not only because they cannot afford childcare but because they see motherhood as their role. Similarly, women may care for elderly, ill or disabled relatives<sup>68</sup>. Care responsibilities are further increased as children living in poverty are more likely to be absent from school due to illness, to be hospitalised or to report a long-standing illness<sup>69</sup>. Time saving strategies are often not available, such as online shopping, especially those who may not have room to store food, or a fridge, who may not have access to a washing machine at home and who cannot use the internet for any of the following reasons – no computer, no internet connection, no knowledge of using computers or no knowledge of English.

### 6.5. Safety and Agency

Many refugee communities in the UK initially consist mainly of men, as they generally move first, and their wives join them later<sup>70</sup>. Young refugee and asylum-seeking women are particularly open to exploitation by the men around them<sup>71</sup>.

Worldwide, almost one-third (30%) of all women who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence

67 UN Women (2015) Progress Of The World's Women 2015-2016

68 UN General Assembly (Aug 2013) Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F68%2F293&Submit=Search&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F68%2F293&Submit=Search&Lang=E)

69 The Marmot Review (Feb 2010) Fairer Society, Healthy Lives <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report>

70 Refugee Action (2002) Is It Safe Here? Refugee Women's Experiences In The UK [http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/assets/0000/5475/Is\\_It\\_Safe\\_Here\\_Report\\_2002\\_Refugee\\_Action.pdf](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/assets/0000/5475/Is_It_Safe_Here_Report_2002_Refugee_Action.pdf)

71 Refugee Action (2002) Is It Safe Here?

by their intimate partner and in some regions this is much higher. This affects their physical and mental health<sup>72</sup>. According to the Refugee Council, refugee women are affected by violence more than any other group of women in the world. Consequently, a significant number of refugee women living in the UK have experienced violence, including rape or sexual violence, prior to arrival and remain vulnerable even after arriving in the UK<sup>73</sup>.

Vulnerable migrant women face a range of additional barriers to reporting and accessing the help they need after experiencing abuse. This includes cultural attitudes within their communities towards these issues. Sometimes disclosure can mean rejection by their family or their community, and under some religious laws divorce can result in the loss of custody of their children. These barriers are especially pronounced for women who have insecure immigration status. Women who have lived in oppressive regimes prior to arriving in the UK are likely to fear seeking help from the police or local government, which therefore greatly reduces their ability to access safety<sup>74</sup>. Women with poor education<sup>75</sup> or a disability are also more likely to face domestic violence<sup>76</sup>.

Within some migrant communities, notably those with roots in South Asia, Afghanistan, Turkey and Kurdish, women may have very limited freedoms. They may not be allowed to choose whether or whom to marry. Not obeying a male family member may lead violence, expulsion from the family and consequent isolation, or even death<sup>77</sup>. Consequently, whether or not they can learn English depends upon whether permission is given. Trafficked

72 WHO (2016) Intimate Partner And Sexual Violence Against Women: Fact Sheet N°239 <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/>

73 Refugee Action (2002) Is It Safe Here?

74 [https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0001/6381/GLA\\_domestic\\_violence\\_Oct05.pdf](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0001/6381/GLA_domestic_violence_Oct05.pdf)

75 WHO (2016) Intimate Partner And Sexual Violence Against Women: Fact Sheet N°239

76 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) Violence against women: an EU-wide survey [http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14\\_en.pdf](http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf)

77 The Henry Jackson Society (2015) 'Honour' Killings In The UK <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Honour-Killings-in-the-UK.pdf>

migrant women are another vulnerable group who are hard to engage due to issues of fear, control and shame<sup>78</sup>.

Abused women can develop a range of symptoms that continue even if they escape the abusive situation. These include agitation and anxiety, depression, panic attacks, trouble sleeping or relaxing, numbness, sense of isolation, nightmares<sup>79</sup> and domestic violence can impact women's wellbeing, ranging from likelihood of attempting suicide, difficulty walking, dizziness and memory loss, throughout their lives<sup>80</sup>. All of these make daily life, let alone committing to English-language learning, difficult, and provision of community-based support where women feel safe and secure, which recognises that women's feeling of safety can take time to develop and that is flexible so that the wellbeing consequences of abuse are accommodated has been found to be effective<sup>81</sup>.

## 6.6. Poor Education

Levels of education among female refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants vary depending on their country of origin, the educational facilities available, and the degree to which their education has been interrupted by war and conflict. In some cases, women may arrive in the UK with no experience of formal education. The most recent United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data estimates that worldwide, 50% of primary school-age refugee children are out of school, and 75% of secondary education level

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78 Action Foundation (Mar 2015) A Report On The Challenges, Successes And Barriers For Particularly Isolated Communities Accessing ESOL Classes In Newcastle Upon Tyne <http://www.actionfoundation.org.uk/downloads/Hard%20to%20reach%20ESOL%20research%20report.pdf>

79 Refuge: Effects of domestic violence on women <http://www.refuge.org.uk/get-help-now/what-is-domestic-violence/effects-of-domestic-violence-on-women/>

80 Mary Ellsberg, M., H.A.F.M. Jansen, L. Heise, C.H. Watts, C. Garcia-Moreno on behalf of the WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women Study Team (2008) Intimate partner violence and women's physical and mental health in the WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence: an observational study, *The Lancet*, Volume 371, Issue 9619, 5–11 April 2008, Pages 1165–1172

81 Action Foundation (Mar 2015) A Report On The Challenges, Successes And Barriers For Particularly Isolated Communities Accessing ESOL Classes In Newcastle Upon Tyne

adolescent refugees are also out of school<sup>82</sup>. This means that the education levels of young adult refugees and asylum seekers, who have no right to complete school in the UK, will be low.

In migrants' countries of origin access to education may be poor in general, and women and girls are likely to have fewer years of education, both through favouring sons, domestic duties and other factors, such as child marriage, where girls tend to drop out of school in the preparatory time before marriage or shortly afterwards, which denied her right to an education and the ability to develop crucial skills and knowledge<sup>83</sup>.

The disparity between literacy rates for men and women, as a proxy for education level, is shown in Table 7, for selected countries for which there are significant vulnerable populations in the UK who do not speak English. With the exception of Iraq, all countries showed that younger people were more literate, suggesting that young migrants would be better educated than older ones. Equally, the gender gap for literacy was lower for younger people, although in all countries (excepting Colombia, Brazil and Poland where there was approximate parity) the literacy rate amongst 25-64 year olds was higher for men than for women. This suggests that women are less likely to speak English upon arrival than men, having received less education, that they are more likely than men to be illiterate in their own language, and consequently have greater barriers to learning English.

Illiteracy and low literacy means that as well as learning a new language, learners may need to learn how to hold a pen, what an alphabet is, learn a new alphabet and the most basic fundamentals of grammar. Research has shown that literacy changes the way that the brain

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82 UNHCR & Global Education Monitoring Report (May 2016) No More Excuses: Provide Education To All Forcibly Displaced People <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002448/244847E.pdf>

83 Amsterdam Institute of Social Research (2016) Understanding And Addressing Child Marriage. A Scoping Study Of Available Academic And Programmatic Literature For The Her Choice Alliance <http://www.her-choice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Her-Choice-Scoping-Study-Final-July-16-1.pdf>

functions, and whilst adult brains can still be plastic, developing literacy from scratch takes time<sup>84</sup>. Different teaching methods have been found to appeal to different learners, and having the opportunity to try new methods, such as Spalding, can benefit pre-entry learners<sup>85</sup>.

challenges there are few effective and joined up resources and interventions in place to help mitigate the challenges that the women face to help them learn and speak English well.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

**Table 7: Literacy Rate for Selected Countries (%) in 2015**

Country	Literacy rate (%) (25-64 years)		Youth literacy rate (%) (15-24 years)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Afghanistan	41.80	10.81	69.42	46.11
Albania	98.67	98.65	98.98	99.08
Bangladesh	64.64*	58.31*	80.62	85.87
Brazil	92.49	94.17	98.52	99.36
Colombia	94.68	95.37	98.23	99.10
Democratic Republic of Congo	87.92	61.12	91.61	80.49
Eritrea	77.96	56.54	94.57	91.95
Ethiopia	51.52	27.28	71.13	67.82
India	79.00	58.22	91.84	87.26
Iran	92.78	84.18	98.27	97.77
Iraq	89.07	74.91	82.42	80.61
Nigeria	65.54	43.95	79.89	65.33
Pakistan	67.86	34.71	80.23	66.80
Poland	99.99	99.99	99.99	99.99
Somalia	49.7**	25.8*	N/A	N/A
Sudan	62.15	47.56	71.31	70.41
Syria	91.82**	80.72	94.14	95.63
Turkey	99.14	95.14	99.80	99.15

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (<http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?queryid=166>)

\*Adult literacy rate (15+ years)

\*\* Adult literacy rate (15+ years), 2000-2006<sup>86</sup>

In summary, the literature shows that they are a range of challenges that migrants from vulnerable backgrounds face when living in the UK. The challenges are interlinked with poor and unstable accommodation, for example. Whilst professionals and groups that work with vulnerable migrant women are aware of these

The literature review supports our findings and highlights that looking at ESOL in a vacuum is inadequate. leading us to the following conclusions:

Female refugees, asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants want to learn English but the challenges that they face are complex and looking at ESOL in a vacuum is inadequate if they are to learn English. Due to the complexity of the issues that these women face – for example mental ill-health, care responsibilities, domestic violence, and multi-dimensional poverty – providing the support to overcome these is important if women are going to have the capacity to learn and regularly attend classes. When women struggle to meet their basic needs and those of their dependents, English learning is pushed down their list of priorities, even though they clearly recognise that learning or improving their English would make their lives easier.

For those that can overcome these initial challenges, the cost, location and timings of classes and the lack of free childcare have been recognised as barriers to women learning English for many years, and this was echoed by the women that we spoke to. Women with families are time and energy poor and provision of child care is essential to make learning a possibility for many mothers. Even the most motivated learners may struggle to attend every class and a flexible approach is therefore needed.

Creating spaces where vulnerable women feel safe and welcome – empowering spaces – are important in developing their confidence to try new things. Community centres that did this and provided additional support to overcome the other barriers that they face, for example, advice provision, counselling, child care were

84 Dehaene, S. (2011) The Massive Impact of Literacy on the Brain and its Consequences for Education, Human Neuroplasticity and Education: Pontifical Academy of Sciences <http://www.unicog.org/publications/Dehaene%20Review%20Cognitive%20neuroscience%20of%20Reading%20and%20Education%202011.pdf>

85 Brooks, G. & M. Burton (2010) The Spalding Method: An Evaluation For The Baytree Centre, Brixton

86 UNESCO Somali Distance Education and Literacy <http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=4&programme=100>

valued by the women who often found it hard to overcome the feeling of dislocation that they felt upon arriving in the UK.

Women's isolation was not only a consequence of not speaking English, but also a barrier to learning English, as it meant that women did not know where to learn, how to get to classes and had no one to support them through the experience. Delays in starting to learn English upon arrival made it more difficult for women to start learning. Not having the opportunity to practice meant that a woman's command of and confidence in using English could decrease and reverse the benefit that she gained from classes. Women wanted the opportunity to meet native English speakers. The Muslim women who we spoke to, from many countries, wanted to learn English and integrate. Their aspirations and barriers were not different to those of the other women who we spoke to.

Personal relationships – between women and with community workers and teachers – were invaluable to the women and motivated them to make the effort to attend classes and other activities at community centres. The dependency of these women could be overwhelming for already stretched staff but trained volunteers could play an important role in supporting vulnerable women, for example helping them to apply for courses, accompanying them on their first day, motivating them and encouraging them.

When these volunteers were other migrants they could help learners to negotiate the complexities that they were already overcoming and showed that advancement was possible. British volunteers played an important role in making migrants feel welcomed and provided an insight into the dominant culture. Being listened to by others made them feel valued and no longer invisible. One ESOL teacher said:

*“It's nice to have tea and sofas and snacks... knowing their name is key. It's tricky with a lot of people and sometimes they only pop in briefly. It makes people feel welcome. It makes them feel recognised as*

*an individual and not just a person in a crowd. People light up if you know their name and are disappointed when you don't.”*

For women starting English from scratch, including those with very little education, the lack of beginners' classes was a huge barrier. Understanding needs so that effective local, tailored solutions with adapted teaching styles and formats to make initial English-learning possible are essential. Women suggested that they would benefit from English taught through practical classes, including cookery and crafts, as would women-only classes and, for some, learning with others from a similar cultural background. More work needs to be done to understand what teaching methods work for women with different needs and from different cultural and education backgrounds so that women can learn as quickly as possible and classes have high retention levels. Learning English has value to these women, their families and benefits to wider society even when it does not lead quickly to employment.

Further, it needs to be recognised that some women – those who are most vulnerable - face personal barriers that make learning at the pace required by immigration regulations, or in some cases at all, impossible. There are women in the UK who are even more isolated than those who we spoke to and who face even greater challenges than them.

Learning English is an essential part of vulnerable female migrants' journeys to feel empowered and able to make fulfilling choices, raise their aspirations and those of their friends and families, and to integrate and feel at home in the UK, which they want. If one goal of women's English-learning is that they are empowered to engage with British society, they also must be listened to as to how best that can come about.



## 8. HOW THE UK CAN EMPOWER WOMEN TO BREAK THE ENGLISH BARRIER



Having listened to vulnerable migrant women and those who support them in the community, we are making the following recommendations:

- **A whole-person approach to the needs of vulnerable female migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers needs to be embedded in service delivery.** National and local Government, the NHS, learning providers, community groups and charities need to work together if prevention and early intervention are to be achieved. Co-locating advice provision, counselling and child care alongside English provision and vice versa will help the most vulnerable women to address their challenges as well as resolving some of the most immediate barriers to English learning.

- **The Government should develop a national UK English-learning strategy with specific consideration given to the additional challenges that women learners may face.** This should include:

- **Recognition of the value of women learning English for their own wellbeing and fulfilment in addition to the wider benefit that it has to their families, employability and social integration.**

- **Commitment to equal access to English language learning for all women, regardless of their country of origin, religion or ethnicity.**

- **Guaranteed funding for accredited ESOL classes, which are valued by women learning English.**

- **A commitment to full cost recovery<sup>87</sup> to ensure that ESOL teachers are not overburdened by administration and meeting learners' additional needs and providers can effectively address the barriers that learners face, engaging harder-to-reach learners and improving retention.**

- **Recognition of ESOL teachers' experience and training, to be reflected in their pay and with adequate time allocated to class preparation, administration and students support to reflect what they already do.**

- **A commitment to making accredited ESOL accessible for learners, with delivery taking place in the community as well as within colleges.**

- **Recognition that local, community-based and non-accredited English-**

<sup>87</sup> New Philanthropy Capital, <http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/full-cost-recovery-2/full-cost-recovery-2/?post-parent=6107>



**learning initiatives in local and familiar places are essential for women with low confidence.**

more sustainable and effective than theoretical discussions of British values in promoting inclusion.

- **Research needs to be undertaken into which methods and formats of English language teaching are most effective in engaging different types of vulnerable female migrants and enhancing their learning.** Our findings suggest that these could include offering single-sex provision, English taught to speakers of one language only or English taught through the development of other skills or relevant knowledge.

- **Empowering community spaces where women feel safe and welcome are essential if migrant women are to build relationships and integrate.** Local service commissioning must recognise the value of well-used community spaces that serve women and children living in cramped accommodation and on low incomes, who cannot afford access to other safe meeting places. Empowering spaces reduce isolation, help women to form friendships, practice English informally and build their confidence and familiarity with the UK so that they are aware of their rights and responsibilities as well as opportunities.

- **It should be made easier for all migrants to volunteer** should they wish to, to use their skills for the good of others and create new social networks. Complex English-language application processes should not bar them from roles that do not require high English language levels.

- **The integration of migrants is a two-way process. Mentoring and befriending of migrant English learners by nationals and better established migrants should also be encouraged and funded at the local and national level.** The responsibility for integrating migrants cannot fall upon them alone if they do not have opportunities to meet UK citizens. Women of all backgrounds are seeking to meet British people and opportunities to make them feel welcome and included in British society. Addressing isolation in practice is

## APPENDIX: Background on the Participant Organisations

<p><b>Afghan Association Paiwand</b> was founded in 2002 to maintain Afghan cultural identity and pass on the community's rich heritage to the next generation in the UK. They provide supported accommodation for unaccompanied minors and refugee youths, for young Afghans they provide Saturday schools in Harrow and Barnet for young Afghans and mentoring, ESOL classes to adults, parenting classes and a mental health project.</p>
<p><b>CARIS Haringey</b> has been providing a holistic range of services for families in temporary accommodation since 1990. Their services are open to everyone in temporary accommodation in the London Borough of Haringey, and service-users include a high proportion of refugees, asylum-seekers, victims of domestic violence, and those with mental health issues.</p>
<p><b>Community Language Support Services</b> was founded by Eritrean women, it provides legal and housing assistance to immigrants in Amharic, Arabic, English, Somali, French, Tigre and Tigrinya as well as counselling and ESOL when funding is available. It is based in the presbytery of St Mellitus Church in Holloway.</p>
<p><b>Congolese Catholic Chaplaincy</b> was set up to serve Catholics from DRC across London and Essex. It is based at St Joan of Arc church, Highbury, a natural centre for Congolese since the family of Patrice Lumumba, the first Premier of the former Belgian Congo, fled there after his murder in 1961. As well as religious activities, the church has a programme for young people and offers support to Congolese migrants.</p>
<p><b>IMECE Women's Centre</b> was set up in 1982. Its aim is to empower Black, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BMER) women, particularly Turkish, Kurdish and Turkish Cypriot women and improve quality of their lives. It provides a women-only space, advice, counselling and support for victims of violence against women and girls, a subject on which they also provide training to statutory organisations.</p>
<p><b>Iraqi Community Association</b> enables Iraqis to settle and integrate in the UK. They provide a range of services to people from all backgrounds who are originally from Iraq, including volunteering opportunities, advice, public health support, counselling, training, employment guidance, information services, and organising cultural events. They also raise awareness about relevant events in Iraq and the integration process in the UK.</p>
<p><b>London Black Women's Project</b> is a black feminist organisation that works towards elimination of gender-based violence. They provide refuge accommodation, counselling, advocacy and advice services and community advocacy and training to professionals and members of community on a range of issues relating to elimination of violence against women and girls.</p>
<p><b>Migrant Resource Centre</b> offers a range of free services to support migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to integrate, through supporting them to develop their skills and understand their rights and responsibilities so that they can fully participate in and contribute to that society. The MRC aims to improve the image and perception of migrants and refugees in the UK, promote social justice and enable and encourage two-way integration through dialogue, mutual acceptance and respect. To achieve this they offer specialist immigration and asylum advice, general information and advice, employment, education and training advice and support and information on accessing health services.</p>
<p><b>Pembury Community Centre</b> is a Peabody Community Centre in Hackney Wick. It offers a range of services to people living in the local area including activities for children and young people, parenting and family support, employment, education and volunteering activities for adults, including ESOL, advice, health services and a befriending project for the elderly.</p>
<p><b>The Baytree Centre</b> opened in 1996, Baytree offers services and support to women and girls facing multiple barriers to inclusion. The services developed for clients focus on education (including ESOL, delivered both at the centre and, for parents of children under five, in a number of Lambeth Children's Centres), training, employment, health and social support measures in order to enhance confidence and self-esteem and to promote aspirations, community cohesion and cultural harmony. All projects for both women and girls rely on 1-1 mentoring, offering support to them in overcoming personal difficulties.</p>
<p><b>Women for Refugee Women</b> is a support and advocacy organisation. They work directly with women who seek asylum. And support two grassroots groups in London, Women Asylum Seekers Together London and the London Refugee Women's Forum. More than 70 women come to these groups every week for English classes, advice, lunch and other projects such as craft and drama.</p>



**Women's Network for Development  
and Educational Resources**

10 Wellesley Terrace  
London N1 7NA  
07411 951297  
[contact@wonderfoundation.org.uk](mailto:contact@wonderfoundation.org.uk)  
[www.wonderfoundation.org.uk](http://www.wonderfoundation.org.uk)

Registered Company No. 7921757  
Registered Charity No. 1148679



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