



# **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

## 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 Ngozi 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>



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