

# Applying Women Centred Principles

Special Edition: Women Centred  
Working with Women Migrants

Kate Smith and Veronika Susedkova

womenCentre

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## What is Connecting Opportunities?

We work with new migrants to develop their skills and opportunities to find work and be part of the local community, in West Yorkshire and parts of North Yorkshire. Connecting Opportunities [CO] helps with developing the skills needed to gain employment in the UK; improving English; feeling part of the community; and increasing confidence and well-being. Connecting Opportunities is funded by the European Social Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund. It is part of the Building Better Opportunities programme.

Working across the Leeds City Region, Connecting Opportunities has supported women migrants, along with young people and men, to integrate, increase their employability and become more economically active members of the wider community.

Ten organisations make up Connecting Opportunities: Migration Yorkshire (lead organisation); Halifax Opportunities Trust; Horton Housing; Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network; Nova/Dominion Training; PATH Yorkshire; Solace Surviving Exile and Persecution; The Children's Society; Touchstone; and WomenCentre.

## What is Women Centred Working?

This report is a Special Edition of Women Centred Working, written as part of our work with Connecting Opportunities and women migrants.

Women Centred Working is an initiative to encourage the design and delivery of more effective services for women who are facing multiple disadvantages. Women centred ways of working can get to the root causes of complex problems by integrating and tailoring services around women's specific needs. There is powerful evidence of the effectiveness of this approach from

existing projects in local communities. Women centred working has been set up to share good practice, change thinking and promote effective, women centred approaches on a wider national basis.

Women Centred Working was initially a WomenCentre project funded by the Lankelly Chase Foundation's Promoting Change Programme.

There have been three previous booklets in our Women Centred Working series:

First: *Defining An Approach*  
Second: *Showcasing Women Centred Solutions*  
Third: *Taking Forward Women Centred Solutions*

[www.womencentredworking.com](http://www.womencentredworking.com)

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank:

Connecting Opportunities participants, peers and mentors, befrienders and volunteers, champions, staff and project partners who were involved in this project.

The funders – the European Social Fund and the National Lottery Community Fund, as well as Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership.

Special thanks to the women migrants of Connecting Opportunities who have taught us a great deal about women centred working.

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## Foreword



WomenCentre has been working with women of all ages across Kirklees and Calderdale for over 30 years. During this time we have developed and refined our approaches as a result of listening to the

voices of the women we support. What better way is there to ensure that we are getting it right than by doing this? It has always been our starting point, so when we were asked to work alongside the Connecting Opportunities partners to share our women centred working approach we were delighted.

Our two experienced workers Kate and Veronika have taken forward the previous learning from our women centred working initiative and have helped our partners to consider their approaches and to share our good practice ideas and suggestions with them. This has helped to ensure that the women engaging with the different project partners received approaches that have enabled them to move forwards with confidence in their lives. For many this will have been after many years of extreme

challenges that have arisen through no fault of their own. For WomenCentre it has been a small role to play but a significant one for the women engaged with the Connecting Opportunities project.

To conclude, we are proud to have been able to work alongside partners to share our knowledge, because this has always been core to our approach.

We are looking forward to continuing to develop these approaches further over the next two years.

*Angela Everson, CEO – WomenCentre*

## Women centred working and Connecting Opportunities



WomenCentre is a key partner on Connecting Opportunities (CO) and is invaluable in embedding women-centred working at the heart of the project and in supporting with gender equality issues.

Just over half of CO participants are female, ranging from 15 years upwards, and among them are refugees, victims of trafficking and isolated family joiners. Many have undergone life-changing experiences and face further challenges as newcomers to the UK. Women migrants can suffer most acutely from the difficulties associated with their situation, such as isolation, access to employment and education / training opportunities and mental health.

With WomenCentre's help, we put women's needs at the forefront of Connecting Opportunities service delivery. For example, the project funds childcare, enabling mothers to attend ESOL and employment support sessions. Volunteer befriending helps women practice their English and feel part of their local communities. Where required, we also offer women-only activities and provide female key workers.

Women tell us that the project has transformed how they see their future. They say they feel less isolated, more empowered and their aspirations have expanded; some have found work in the UK for the very first time.

Now in the second year of the project, WomenCentre's expertise helps us to continually refine and improve our service. The women's focus groups they conduct with participants give invaluable insights into many of the issues and barriers women face, while the training and advice they offer to delivery partners helps staff to navigate the many challenges and raises aspirations. Their women-centred approach is invaluable in continuing to enrich our practice for the benefit of CO staff and participants.

*Vanessa Lenzionowski, Project Manager – Connecting Opportunities, Migration Yorkshire*



‘The time is absolutely right for a dynamic approach which fully supports, integrates and learns from women centred working. Now, more than ever, there's a strong call to make progress around gender. The women centred approach should appeal to all of us who are working to address gender disparity and counter the hostile environment in the UK.’

Kate Smith and Veronika Susedkova

## Introduction

**Welcome to this special edition of Women Centred Working. Written as part of our wider work with Connecting Opportunities and women migrants, this report is the fourth in our series.**

Over the past two years, WomenCentre had the opportunity to work as part of Connecting Opportunities to support the design and delivery of services that better respond to the distinct experiences and needs of women migrants. Through training, reflection and learning, we have supported our project partners to consider, put into practice and review the women centred ways of working approach within their services. This report is an opportunity to showcase the success of the women centred approach and offer examples that have proven to work with women migrants.

Women centred working requires time and works best with partners who are committed to learning from, reflecting about and experimenting with such processes. This can be both an opportunity and a challenge; it requires organisations being open to the organic unfolding and development of these processes rather than following a prescriptive baseline and rigid guidelines.

Women centred approaches do not necessarily require additional resources, because practical considerations and learning processes resulting from them become an intrinsic part of the work, and matter as much as the outcomes for individual women and communities.

We do not take for granted that all projects will fully use women centred working and we recognise that the framework can be easier to implement in some areas, whilst being more challenging in others. However, we believe women centred ways of working can make a positive difference to all services, communities and women. We hope this Special Edition encourages innovative thinking that means women centred working becomes an integral element in the planning, delivery and evaluation of projects and services.

*Kate Smith and Veronika Susedkova*

## Women migrants Women centred working

Connecting Opportunities was set up to acknowledge that the skills, strengths and potential of new migrants would remain untapped if we did not take action to address some of the many barriers they can face. Central to this approach was the recognition that women migrants may face additional barriers and challenges.

Every year, women migrants work, study, volunteer and make progress in their education and careers, contributing extensively to workplaces, services and communities. Women may gain greater economic independence, create opportunities and have broader freedoms through migration. Yet migration may equally entrench traditional gender roles, creating new and enduring vulnerabilities for women migrants.

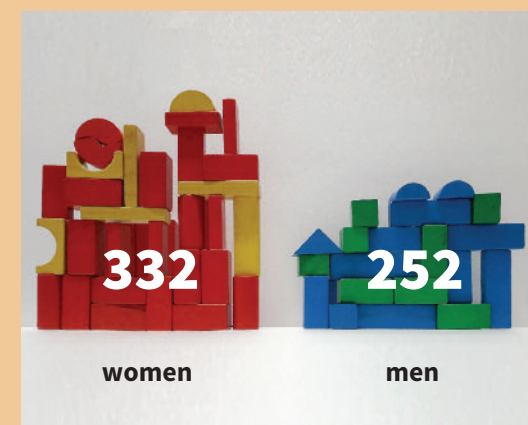
Some women are relegated to the role of homemakers and carers, confining them to the domestic and reproductive spheres of society. Norms about reproductive and domestic work are frequently seen as women's work, where women continue to do an unequal share of unpaid domestic and care work.

Labour divisions often consist of ideas and practices that define what roles and activities are deemed appropriate for women (and men). This in turn leads to a gender-segregated labour market where women are recruited into certain types of jobs. Indeed, many women migrants are confined to 'feminine' sectors related to care, such as health, teaching, cleaning, cooking and service industries, which is often paid or valued less than other work.

Faced with multiple and complex gendered challenges, some women migrants are prevented from making full use of the services and opportunities that should be available to them. Women migrants who are qualified may experience deskilling and downward social mobility by engaging in jobs that do not make good use of their educational qualifications. Similarly, women migrants who do not have qualifications and are viewed as unskilled, often work in sectors that are less regulated and become 'less visible' than other workers. This can expose women to new or increased risks of exploitation, abuse and harm.

Changing the additional barriers and challenges faced by some women migrants requires a dynamic shift in gender expectations.

**The number of women and men participating in the first 18 months.**



**The ages of the women participants in the first 18 months.**



## Six recommended principles of women centred working with women migrants

In this report, we outline six recommended principles of women centred working with women migrants that emerged through the work with Connecting Opportunities. These principles are intended to bring about change that can transform the quality of life and opportunities of women migrants, who so often face severe and multiple disadvantages.

Whilst WomenCentre has developed women centred working over many years of service experience, these principles were developed and applied by the ten organisations that make up Connecting Opportunities. Each of these different project partners worked with WomenCentre to develop approaches that address gender equality issues and to respond to the experiences and needs of women migrants, building gender capacity and accountability across Connecting Opportunities.



Left: The suitcase toolkit used in workshops with staff and volunteers about gender and mental health.

### Six principles of women centred working with women migrants

#### 1. Provide services informed by women's voices

Consider and develop ways of engaging women in the design, delivery, feedback and evaluation of services.

#### 2. Know your local specialist support for women

Consider and develop how you ensure women know about available specialist support and how your service can effectively refer on to specialist services. This can ensure that women receive the right level of support in critical situations and the right advice in terms of prevention and protection.

#### 3. Provide learning opportunities about gender

Consider and develop different opportunities within your service, where you discuss issues connected to gender and gender stereotypes. Creative tools and safe spaces are essential to help to open up discussion in a safe environment.

#### 4. Support staff learning around gender specific issues

The workers and team may not have in-depth knowledge about gender specific issues, but they should have enough knowledge to provide initial support. Workers also need to be able to effectively refer to relevant specialist services.

#### 5. Creatively resolve childcare support

It can be challenging to access suitable childcare. Consider timings of services, associated costs and the location of services.

#### 6. Offer creative solutions to enable access to wider services

Some women might be limited and constrained about accessing services. Consider offering additional and wider services for women to access alongside or as part of provision that they already access.

## Principle 1 Provide services informed by women's voices



*Above and opposite: These photos were taken with two different women-only focus groups which were facilitated as pottery sessions. Most of the women had not done pottery painting before and they enjoyed creating their own pieces and taking them home.*

We believe service provision for women migrants should be informed by working directly with women migrants and placing them at the heart of service delivery. This can be achieved by focussing on women migrants who access your organisation in many different roles including being service users, peers, volunteers, workers and managers. It is vital to consider some of the challenges that might exist in the lives of women migrants in order to understand women's lives. These challenges can be complex and intersect with each other - such as issues of precarious immigration status, poverty, isolation/loneliness, language barriers, childcare and other caring responsibilities. We recognise the vital importance of women migrants inputting into and participating in services at all levels.

### Practical ideas for including the perspectives of women migrants:

- Involve women in the design of tenders and evaluation of service delivery
- Support women to engage in forums (including women-only forums) about services
- Ensure women input into the delivery and development of services
- Enable women (including volunteers and service users) to support and facilitate service delivery and a variety of different sessions
- Develop and share case studies as a way of working directly with a woman with lived experience and listening to what has really made a difference in her life
- Identify a champion to lead on women centred working within your organisation

### Good practice example – Focus groups

Focus groups are a way of working directly with a group, to enable women to not only engage with the researcher, but to respond to and interact with each other. This can provide rich information to capture the lived experiences of women migrants, which comes directly from women migrants, rather than simply generated from the researcher's questions. Focus groups can enable designated time to ensure we listen to women migrants and make time to hear what they are saying. They can also make us consider creative and engaging ways we can support women to tell their stories in a shared space.

Connecting Opportunities ran four women-only focus groups to review and evaluate services.

*'I now know about my dreams. I attend an art course and an interpreter course. It is very good for me. It is like a beginning. I am very excited.'*

*Participant in a focus group which was run as a pottery session.*





## Principle 2

# Know your local specialist support services for women

We think it is vital to know and understand your local services, including specialist support in women only spaces and women only services. This includes, for example, projects that support mental health and wellbeing, have expertise around immigration, and/or address issues of gender based violence and abuse.

Consider how you ensure women know about specialist support and how your service can effectively refer on to these specialist services.

Knowledge about your local specialist support services for women can help ensure women receive the right level of support in critical situations and the right advice in terms of prevention, safety, rights and protection.

### Practical ideas about local specialist support services for women:

- Share information with women and talk to women about services they find useful
- Create effective and mutual referral routes with specialist services
- Maintain an up-to-date knowledge base of, and contribute to, relevant local specialist boards and communicate with decision makers (e.g. MARAC boards, safeguarding and multiagency panels)
- Facilitate multiagency cooperation and referral pathways with specialist organisations

### Good practice example – Mapping exercise of specialist services

Carry out a mapping exercise of local specialist services; involve women migrants so they will share their perspectives in terms of accessibility, usefulness and relevance.

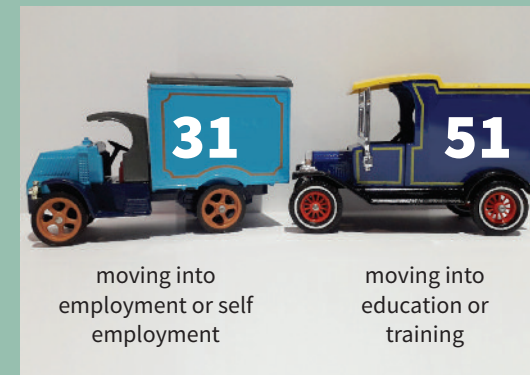
‘ESOL has been very inspirational. I learnt about suffragettes, we got a little paper with their story. Now when children go to sleep and I feel lonely I read the page with their story. It's all about women and that they can do anything for themselves.’

*Participant in a case study session exploring her learning achievements.*

### The ways in which women's lives improved.



### The progress women made in the first 18 months.



## Principle 3 Provide learning opportunities about gender

We think it is important to listen – and hear – women migrants when they talk about their lived experiences. Consider different opportunities within your service where you discuss challenges connected to gender-based issues and gender stereotypes. Creative tools and ways of working are essential to help open up discussion in a safe environment. We suggest that services should be welcoming, trustworthy and inclusive for women migrants to access.

Taking a holistic approach with women migrants can be achieved by providing opportunities to talk about a wide range of topics and issues that may be impacting a woman's life.

### Practical ideas of how to provide learning opportunities about gender:

- Actively promote gender equality, diversity, human rights and the law across services
  - this can be done with both women and men who use the service and
  - can be achieved in a range of different spaces, such as one to one meetings, group work, focus groups and ESOL sessions, or more informal environments such as sport and leisure activities
- Develop and share case studies as a way of working directly with a woman with lived experience and listening to what has really made a difference in her life

### Good practice example – Participatory tools

It is important to ensure that women migrants are aware of and supported into a diverse range of employment opportunities (including male dominated sectors such as industry, transport, trade, construction and management). We also need to improve the social and economic value afforded to work typically carried out by women. Support women to engage in sessions around career aspirations in the UK and ensure that aspirational thinking is included in your projects, such as an ESOL module or as part of a support/mentor learning approach.

‘Before I joined CO, there were lots of things I didn’t know about myself, I didn’t know what skills I had...I feel independent and proud of myself. And that happiness when you get your first wage!’

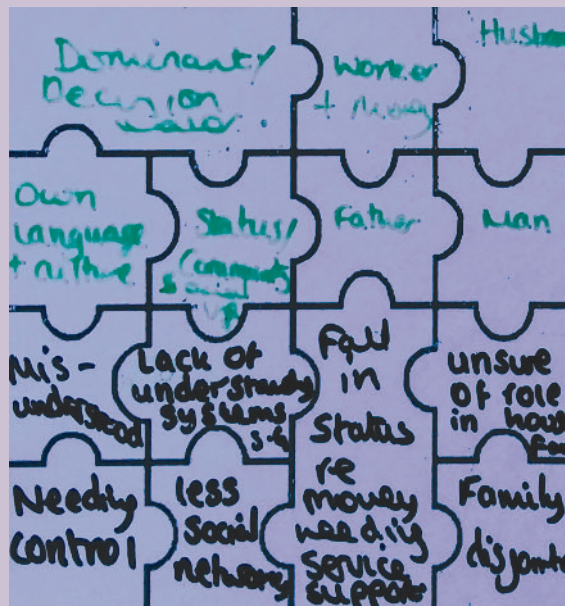
*Participant in Calderdale who is now working as an online shopper and hopes to become a police officer.*



*Left: These arrows are an outcome of an exercise conducted with staff at two meetings exploring ways of working and learning in partnership.*

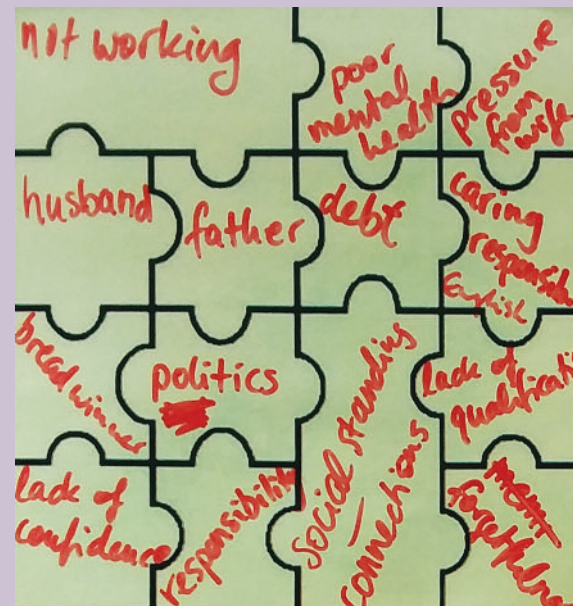
# Principle 4 Support staff learning around gender based issues

Below and opposite: Jigsaw puzzle toolkit to explore the intersection of gender with barriers and opportunities of participation in services.



We know that many organisations already use approaches that complement women centred working – such as personalisation, co-creation, resilience and asset building, and capacity releasing. Consider where women centred working can enhance and develop good practice that already exists in your organisation. Reflect on gaps for improvement, as well as aims and aspirations for women centred ways of working.

Examine existing data sets where gender considerations may be relevant in the organisation (for example, barriers and opportunities of engagement: childcare, travel, access to identification documents, domestic abuse, trafficking, forced labour, etc). The worker and team may not have in-depth knowledge about gender specific issues, but they should have enough knowledge to provide initial support.



## Practical ideas to support staff learning around gender based issues:

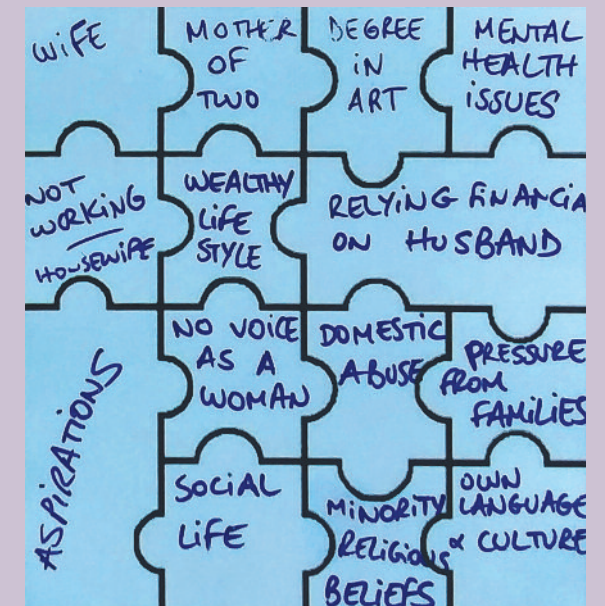
- Provide training on women centred ways of working to all staff as part of their induction and then regularly review through supervision/professional development
- Identify and increase where women migrants act as key assets within the organisation (such as peers, befrienders, volunteers, advocates) and develop opportunities to enhance their skills and contributions
- Support staff learning around gender specific issues such as domestic abuse, controlling behaviour, stalking, honour based crime, gender based violence, female genital mutilation, pregnancy and sexual health

## Good practice example – Training

Women centred working should be part of induction and mandatory training for all staff and volunteers. Training should be in line with your organisation’s policies - women centred ways of working are a pivotal part of equal opportunities, diversity and inclusion policies. Revisit and reflect on capacity and progress with specific areas of women centred working – this can include set-backs and reversals, as well as progress and achievements.

‘I tell myself, “Maria, you can speak English.” I can find friends, I can speak English. My life has changed.’

Participant in Leeds who was supported by a volunteer befriender.



## Principle 5 Creatively address childcare support

The childcare system has become increasingly challenging to navigate and access. It is not always aligned with the interests of women who are trying to work or study and move forward in their lives. A complex system of childcare funding and delivery requires that mothers/parents and carers spend time and energy in order to understand their childcare choices, and consider the impact that using childcare will have on their household income. All this can leave women unable to access the flexible childcare provision that they need to work, study or progress their careers.



Above: An aspirational card game toolkit about career and learning opportunities that challenges job related gender stereotypes.

### Practical ideas to creatively address childcare support:

- Hire a mobile crèche for specific activities where childcare is in higher demand
- Ensure the timing of activities matches the times of child-minders' provision (e.g. half-day charge times)

### Good practice example – Family-friendly ESOL classes

Set up family learning inspired activities where women can learn alongside their children. Your organisation could also provide travel costs (such as a weekly travel pass) and offer food or refreshments alongside service provision.



‘I enrolled into a four week English summer course at college but they did not offer childcare... It was very hard to sort out the childcare but eventually I found a place for both my sons.... It may seem like little help but it was a big help for me... I felt so happy about the opportunity to study English that I wanted to help my friend and do the same for her, so I looked after her children on other days when she had her college classes.’

Participant in Leeds who made use of childcare provision on the project.

## Principle 6

# Offer creative solutions to enable access to wider services

Gender can be a key factor in access to and advancement of training, formal education, volunteering and employment opportunities open to women migrants. Some women are placed in the role of homemakers and carers, where reproductive and domestic work are frequently seen as women's work. A woman might also be limited to accessing classes which are considered 'appropriate and useful' by her partner and/or family. Creating inclusive and safer spaces for women can be achieved in a range of different ways.

### Practical ideas that offer creative solutions to enable access to wider services:

- Attach additional support services (such as mental health support) on to provision that women are already accessing
- Put in place women-only services. In practice, not all organisations can provide women-only services, but there are some solutions, such as ensuring women-only spaces within the organisation and supporting women to set up women-only groups and individual activities delivered by women, including women peers, volunteers, staff and interpreters.
- Provide the option of a female worker and a female interpreter
- Ensure your organisation is breastfeeding friendly and also provide a private breastfeeding space
- Provide women-only toilets, where sexual health information and products can be made available; women-only toilets are a safe space to share specific information about issues affecting women such as trafficking, forced marriage, so-called honour crimes and rape

### Good practice example – Offer sanitary products in the women's toilets to help address period poverty

Period poverty is when women and girls struggle to pay for or cannot afford menstrual products. Many women migrants in the UK cannot afford even basic products, with significant impact on their hygiene, health and wellbeing. Menstrual products are not free or cheap; they continue to be taxed as a 'luxury'. But for anyone with a period, they are a necessity. Women centred working strives to contribute to ending period poverty by giving menstrual products for free to those who can't afford them. There's a wide range of different sanitary products available including pads, tampons, absorbent knickers and cups.

'I would like to open a business, if I could, something small, a family business... so that my children can be involved... Something connected to food, drink – maybe a little restaurant: langos, potato pancakes, dumplings...'

*Participant in focus group which was facilitated as a cooking session.*



*Left: Some charities receive free sanitary products to give to women. Many local women's groups are happy to provide these items on request.*

## What can Women Centred Working offer?

Women Centred Working has been established to share information on women centred approaches and assist in the design and delivery of more effective services for women with complex and multiple needs. Further online and printed resources are available to help inspire women centred working on a wider scale. There is also a mini summary of principles with targeted information to embed women centred approaches.

We are happy to talk to public sector leaders, policy makers, statutory agencies, commissioners, funders, voluntary organisations, other influencers and service providers about ways in which women centred solutions can help them respond to demands placed upon them.

A few ways in which WomenCentre can help:

- informal advice and conversations about women centred approaches
- resources, information and presentations to support women centred approaches
- strategic and community level presentations and workshops
- learning and training events
- development consultancy support
- implementation consultancy support

### Contact us

If you would like further information on women centred working or any of the suggestions listed above, please contact:

Dr. Kate Smith, Practitioner Manager – Women seeking asylum, refugees and new migrants  
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Reports referred to in this publication can be found on our website, along with further information about women centred ways of working.  
[www.womencentre.org.uk](http://www.womencentre.org.uk)



‘I would like to tell everyone – it is my life. I call it half-life. Don’t give up, dream, you can make your dream a reality. If you have problems, tell people and share it and you can get help. Otherwise you just sit at home and nothing will happen. You can be happy.’

Participant in a case study session exploring her future options.

Women Centred Working is an initiative to encourage the design and delivery of more effective services for women who are facing multiple disadvantages.

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