



Digital Ways of Women Centred Working

Adapting and developing women centred
principles with women migrants
in the pandemic and beyond

Veronika Susedkova and Kate Smith



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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. Ten organisations that specialise in working with migrants are offering tailored support, cultural orientation, English language classes and other training across West Yorkshire and part of North Yorkshire (Craven, Harrogate, Selby and York). The project is also creating new local connections, with opportunities for local people to be volunteer mentors and befrienders, and for employers to provide work placements to help people get a foothold in the job market.

Connecting Opportunities is funded by the European Social Fund and the National Lottery Community Fund. It is part of the Building Better Opportunities programme.

What is Digital Ways of Women Centred Working?

Digital Ways of Women Centred Working is part of WomenCentre’s work with Connecting Opportunities and women migrants. It emerges from the specific challenges the pandemic presents for women migrants and women centred working in organisations at a time when measures in the UK mean that face-to-face service provision is not always possible.

A flexible, responsive and progressive way of working, Digital Ways of Women Centred Working has built on Women Centred Ways of Working, which 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. There are five previous booklets in our Women Centred Working series:

- 1. Defining An Approach
- 2. Showcasing Women Centred Solutions
- 3. Taking Forward Women Centred Solutions
- 4. Applying Women Centred Principles.
Special Edition: Women Centred Working with Women Migrants
- 5. I had to dig deep.
Special Edition: Isolation experiences of mothers living apart from their children during the 2020 pandemic

Acknowledgements

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

The artwork in this report was all created by women migrants as part of a Connecting Opportunities creative call out that WomenCentre made during 2020 - ‘Women, lockdown and the future’.

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.

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Contents

Foreword	page 7
Introduction	page 8
Digital adaptation of six principles of women centred working with women migrants	page 10
Principle 1: Provide services informed by women’s voices	page 12
Principle 2: Know your local specialist support for women	page 16
Principle 3: Provide learning opportunities about gender	page 20
Principle 4: Support staff learning around gender specific issues	page 24
Principle 5: Creatively resolve childcare support	page 28
Principle 6: Enable access to wider services	page 32
What can Women Centred Working offer?	page 38





“I consider it important to allow ourselves not to get overwhelmed, hence being realistic about what is possible and in doing so, celebrating each day’s achievement while embracing and supporting one another whether young or old. I appreciate that the authors both champion women migrants’ resilience, experiences and skills and at the same time recognise that women need spaces to simply be.”

Lilly Ntuli, Co-Founder of Tales of a City

Foreword

The impacts and implications of the pandemic have been and continue to be different for women compared to other groups such as men and young people. I agree with the authors that the pandemic has created greater inequalities for people who can be in vulnerable positions, such as women migrants, exposing the very well-known inequalities in our society and exacerbating existing inequalities for women in almost all areas of life, I think especially mental ill health.

Some specific risks that the pandemic created for migrant women like myself are job insecurity, socio-economic challenges, xenophobic rejection, overload of care work, increased gender-based violence and greater insecurity of protection against the virus. The report mentions, among others, isolation, lack of income and childcare responsibilities as specific challenges for women migrants. Combined with the unknown of how or when things would go back to normal or improve, these have been the biggest challenges during the pandemic for me.

It is important that the report highlights the balancing act many women migrants have had to do. Juggling home schooling for children of different ages, personally I was just about managing but certainly not skilled to become a teacher overnight. While having my own studies to consider, that has been difficult. Having to step back and reflect on what was important and a priority at the time, has helped me in being realistic and honest with the challenges I have.

While I have used my planning and organisation skills, I also needed flexibility to look after myself and my children’s wellbeing. I consider it important to allow ourselves not to get overwhelmed, hence being realistic about what is possible and in doing so, celebrating each day’s achievement while embracing and supporting one another whether young or old. I appreciate that the authors both champion women migrants’ resilience, experiences and skills and at the same time recognise that women need spaces to simply be.

Gratitude and looking after my wellbeing are ways forward for me. Accepting things might never be the same while embracing new ways of doing things and taking each day as it comes while appreciating little things in life, like spending time with my girls.

Digital Ways of Women Centred Working explores technology as a new norm of working and the report encourages organisations providing support to keep learning and adapting alongside women migrants and keep listening to what matters to women migrants – personally, family have become even more important than ever before in celebrating and enjoying each other’s presence.

Lilly Ntuli, Co-Founder of Tales of a City
Lilly previously joined WomenCentre as part of Connecting Opportunities as a guest and inspirational speaker

Introduction

Digital Ways of Women Centred Working is based on lived experiences and contributions from women migrants who were working, studying, volunteering and learning on Connecting Opportunities between July 2019-March 2021. Our specific focus emerges from some of the challenges the pandemic and policy responses present for women migrants.

Since the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic on **11th March 2020**, countries across the world responded in a multitude of different ways. The vast majority of places of work partially or completely shut and restrictions on migration were widely imposed. At the time of this report being published (June 2021), the pandemic is an ongoing global issue.

The stakes are high for women migrants who are on the frontline of the pandemic as caregivers, nurses, social workers, doctors and volunteers. While some women migrants have been able to contribute to critical decision making about public health and social and economic consequences of the pandemic, at the same time it has been recognised *“targeted measures to address the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women and girls are needed,”* as the UN Office of the High Commissioners for Human Rights **formally** stated.

In the UK, the government imposed a national lockdown in March 2020, banning all ‘non-essential’ travel and contact with people outside one’s household, shutting almost all schools, businesses, venues, facilities, amenities and places of worship. Those who had symptoms of the virus were told to self-isolate; people considered the most vulnerable were asked to shield themselves; everyone was to socially distance in public.

“Women had always felt the safety of accessing our services face to face in women only spaces. We knew this would not be possible once lockdown started. For many women, the concerns about being locked down in their homes/houses, where they had never before felt safe, only added to WomenCentre’s worries that women would face further levels of coercion, control and abuse that would not be on anyone’s radar. We raised these concerns at a national level alongside other women’s organisations.

Our women centred working has always recognised the need to consider a full range of ways to work alongside women. Utilising digital technology has further added to our women centred approaches. So we have adapted and changed. Technology has worked for us as an organisation and the women we support. It has broken down barriers to engagement and some of the challenges that women had before, so no more long bus rides to groups with children, but 1-1 support, groups and counselling in their own homes when it has been safe to do so.”

Angela Everson
CEO, WomenCentre

Since the first national lockdown there have been ongoing changes in policy and conditions of national lockdowns, quarantine and partial/tiered restrictions of varying severity across different geographical areas. As a result, vast numbers of women migrants have not been allowed to move freely, meet family and friends or engage in social, cultural and face-to-face activities. These conditions have a profound effect on both women migrants’ lives and the organisations that support them.

Policy responses to the pandemic required whole sectors of society to plan quickly, make changes and review them responsively in an ever-changing situation. In the case of Connecting Opportunities, this shift involved moving online and into digital spaces across almost every aspect of the project. Digital adaptations were necessary to sustain engagement with women migrants, local communities and our project partners.

In this report we reflect on some of the ways Connecting Opportunities adapted and developed women centred working with women migrants for digital spaces. We explore how online creative methods, underpinned by women centred principles, can enhance organisations that support women migrants as well as improve the lives of women migrants. It is likely that some elements of remote working and digital service delivery are here to stay, so we consider digital adaptation a vital way forward for women centred working with women migrants for lockdowns and beyond.

“Connecting Opportunities’ response to the pandemic meant extraordinary action was taken across the entire project to ensure we could continue to work with new migrants and respond to the rapidly changing context. The impact of the pandemic and policy responses exerted sudden pressures, particularly on women, many of whom were already facing barriers to employment and education. With WomenCentre’s help and that of all our delivery partners, we have been able to continue to include women at the forefront of remotely and digitally delivered services.”

Vanessa Lendzionowski
Project Manager – Connecting Opportunities, Migration Yorkshire

Digital adaptation of six principles of women centred working with women migrants

In this report we draw on the six recommended principles of women centred working with women migrants that emerged through the previous work with **Connecting Opportunities (2017-2018)**. These principles are intended to bring about change that can transform the quality of life and opportunities of women migrants.

Digital adaptation of the six principles has been essential in responding to the specific challenges the pandemic presents for women migrants and women centred working practices in organisations.

Based on WomenCentre's evidence-based **women centred working framework**, in this report we outline practical, achievable steps to women centred ways of working online and in digital spaces. Our work is not simply about technology and gadgets; while these are necessary, women centred ways of working goes beyond the usefulness of technology to explore how online spaces can be set up, facilitated and adapted by and for women migrants.

We share some key areas of learning which have come out of the process of digital adaptation with Connecting Opportunities and explore the impact of digital transformation.

We use good practice examples that showcase new ways of digital working that Connecting Opportunities developed to ensure ongoing support and engagement with women migrants amidst changing conditions of the pandemic.

We draw on a mix of stories, photography, poetry and artwork shared with us by women migrants.

Placing the lived experiences of women migrants at the heart of our work, this report serves to remind the reader of the adversity many women migrants face during the pandemic, as well as women's strengths, creativity and capacities.

1. Provide services informed by women's voices

Create spaces for women to engage with and influence design, delivery, feedback and evaluation of services whilst moving services online and facilitating services in digital spaces.

2. Know your local specialist support for women

Ensure women know about available specialist support whilst services are provided remotely and online. Share up-to-date information about the referral pathways you can offer and consider temporary emergency provision so women receive essential support in critical situations.

3. Provide learning opportunities about gender

Develop different opportunities to discuss and learn more about gendered aspects of the pandemic and policy responses, such as lockdowns, restrictions and quarantine. Facilitate awareness-raising about intersecting inequalities that impact on women's lives in a global crisis. Creative and inclusive facilitation can support safer online spaces and help open up discussion in digital environments.

4. Support staff learning around gender specific issues

Facilitate spaces for digitally adapted learning so staff can take up opportunities which support flexible working patterns. Encourage and enable staff to contribute to building and developing shared learning, co-facilitating and refreshing knowledge, as well as learning about new specialist topics.

5. Creatively resolve childcare support

Work with women to design, deliver and promote flexible and welcoming digital online spaces that enable women to participate both on their own and with their children if they need or wish to. Keep women updated about available and accessible childcare options.

6. Enable access to wider services

Consider equity of access to digitally-based service provision. Aim to address digital exclusion through budget reallocation or additional funding. Review your service delivery formats regularly and keep exploring blended and offline ways of working to ensure better equity of service access.

Principle 1

Provide services informed by women's voices

Create spaces for women to engage with and influence design, delivery, feedback and evaluation of services whilst moving services online and facilitating services in digital spaces.



'Outdoor beauty'

Service provision for women migrants should be informed and shaped by women migrants. Women migrants' views, needs and aspirations should be considered and reflected in decision making, ensuring the protection of women's rights in the pandemic, during recovery and beyond. Consider how women migrants can influence your service provision and where you can learn from women who already manage and deliver services. When face-to-face service provision is not possible, this can be particularly important. Women migrants are a source of experience and knowledge that should be valued in (and beyond) lockdown circumstances.

In times of increased levels of health risk, limited social contact with other people, and when it may be difficult to access support services or selfcare, ask women what your organisation can do so that women are well, safe, able to access education and to work.

Women migrants' locations, in real, tangible (shared) homes and remote spaces, can impact participation in services. Online interaction may be more challenging to navigate and interpret. Women might have a lack of privacy or experience conflicting demands on their time. But women migrants need to know it is possible to contact your service and make requests in flexible ways to receive support.

It is vital to evidence and capture the impacts and effects of crises on women migrants, especially in a rapidly evolving context such as the pandemic. Service providers need to bear in mind how the impacts and effects of such crises raise issues of capacity and emotional burdens for women. Additionally, equality gains have quickly dissolved, particularly in relation to lockdowns and school closures, which have often reinforced gendered work in the home. Involving women migrants in plans and decisions for managing a response to the pandemic could help to mitigate some of the loss of previous equality gains.

“Initially [during the first lockdown and school holidays], women have asked us not to engage for a while. Because of childcare commitments it was most useful for women not to attend and not to be asked to attend. They couldn't commit and asked for things to be put on hold.”

(listening to women when pandemic restrictions were first put in place)

Practical examples of digital ways of women centred working informed by women's voices

- 1) For online platforms (such as Teams, Zoom, Google Classroom) to work well, offer participatory activities; this supports active learning rather than passively receiving information. Time spent online needs to support the confidence of those participating and create space to discuss issues which matter to women.
- 2) Equally, time spent online does not all have to be about achieving specific outputs; having a space to be social and meet friends, to support each other and simply be yourself and have fun, can help support wellbeing and challenge the constant call for productivity. There isn't a woman who doesn't work, there are only women who are not paid for what they do!
- 3) When a group or individual session is run online, a follow-up discussion can happen on a messaging platform; this can help increase learning after the session and reduce isolation during the time between sessions.
- 4) Sessions that run online need to be shorter than if they were held face-to-face; this can help with concentration and wellbeing, as well as the additional demands of home schooling and housework. **Women have been doing a lot more than men** in terms of unpaid work and looking after children during the pandemic!
- 5) Digital solutions are not the right support for all women. With lower levels of English proficiency, many women do better with the support of materials sent by post. Offering resources, such as ESOL worksheets/books or art and craft supplies, delivered or posted directly to women, provides an opportunity for learning at home. Enclosing stamped envelopes with learning materials will support women to send materials back and enhances accessibility of learning. To learn more about equity of digital access, please see Principle 6 of this report.

Good practice examples – Adapted services

Responding to suggestions made by women, Connecting Opportunities was able to provide food and emergency payments and distribute clothing and shoes. In light of the pandemic, putting additional support in place to ensure everyone is able to access basic essential resources was a vital service adaptation for women experiencing financial difficulties or self-isolation. As poverty levels continue to increase for many women migrants, adapting services is a critical response during lockdowns and beyond.

In North Yorkshire, where only a small number of women migrants accessed Connecting Opportunities support, women were able to benefit from ESOL and employability learning through digital platforms (available to wider groups of Connecting Opportunities participants). At the same time, women particularly enjoyed and thrived in smaller dedicated women-only sessions. Such sessions offered time and space to share tips about local parks and places to visit, time to learn about and from each other, and contributed to reducing isolation, creating safer online women only spaces.



Opposite page:
'Outdoor beauty'

Principle 2

Know your local specialist support for women

Ensure women know about available specialist support whilst services are provided remotely and online. Share up-to-date information about the referral pathways you can offer and consider temporary emergency provision so women receive essential support in critical situations.



Managing the flow of information in organisations is important to keep abreast of changing provision in the local area. Support for women migrants is often greatly reduced or sometimes completely unavailable during lockdowns. It is also important to recognise that lower English proficiency and digital inequality can hinder women from accessing information and the services needed to stay well and safe, especially when these are provided remotely or online. Don't forget to ask for feedback from women migrants to ensure you are able to address gaps in support that women need.

It is important to maintain open communication channels to facilitate multiagency working, to cooperate and think outside the box when solution seeking. Many specialist support and women centred organisations dedicate a lot of time to ensuring they share up-to-date contact and service details with women; listen to what women say works best for them, as well as offer interpretation and translation. Securing access to good quality legal advice and information while digital service delivery prevails, can be critical to meet women migrants' protection needs and to keep pathways to justice open.

It is important not to lose sight of barriers to accessing support and outright dangers women migrants may face, which are exacerbated by lockdowns, restrictions and reduced social contact. Remember, there are often conditions attached to a woman's immigration status in the UK. These conditions, as well as precarious immigration status and delays in decision making about a woman's visa or residency application, can deter women migrants or render them unable to access basic welfare support. Additionally, in the times when people have been asked to stay at home, some women migrants have no option but to stay in poor, unsafe or inadequate housing.

During the pandemic, women have continued to be impacted by domestic violence. With limited options for safe accommodation, lockdowns make reporting domestic abuse harder. It has been officially recognised by the UK government that abuse at home is a legitimate reason for leaving the house, even in the toughest lockdowns. However, some women migrants are also subject to an immigration control, as defined in section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 called **No Recourse to Public Funds**, and cannot access benefits or housing assistance, unless an exception applies. No Recourse to Public Funds can have far reaching consequences for women living with abuse or violence and can prevent women from accessing the social security safety-net and restrict financial and housing support. Women migrants who often depend on their perpetrator for money, food and accommodation might find it very difficult to leave the relationship. As a consequence, women are often forced to decide between staying in an abusive relationship and environment or facing poverty and street homelessness.

Left: 'Woman'

Practical examples of digital ways of women centred working so women know about local specialist support

- 1) Be aware of up-to-date ways that your local domestic abuse support services are working to support women migrants. Make sure you also know your local specialist legal and benefit support services, this will help to ensure you can advocate for women migrants effectively about immigration, housing and benefits, including when a woman subject to the 'no recourse to public funds' condition can apply to the Home Office to request a change of conditions to get the condition lifted.
- 2) Stay informed about mental health support and groups that exist in your local area for women migrants so that you can signpost to them, even in lockdowns. Look out for newly emerging or adapted services, including those providing emergency support and essentials such as books and toys. In some areas these might be connected to local mutual aid groups and organised by women migrants.
- 3) Provide emergency phone numbers and websites for women to call and access specialist support information online. Ensure women get the relevant and correct information as safely as possible. Include learning about how to be safe online such as scam and fraud awareness, recognising fake news and knowing how to keep your personal information protected online.
- 4) Promote ways to access services both digitally and over the phone to ensure women are aware of the specialist support available. Information should be made available in different languages.

- 5) Communicate with organisations frequently via newly created or adapted channels, such as newsletters or flexible drop-in virtual spaces. This can be an opportunity to share details of the availability and capacity of services, and up-to-date and relevant opportunities for women migrants.
- 6) Remember that digital solutions are not the right support for all women. When women need emergency support which is not accessible online, such as food parcels or refuge space, have information available about local support. Consider what you can provide within your adapted services. This is sometimes made possible through the flexibility of funders.

Good practice examples – Loss and bereavement support and wellbeing helpline

Loss and bereavement have affected everyone in the context of the pandemic. Women migrants on Connecting Opportunities have been impacted by loss both in the UK and in countries where women have families and friends. Many women carry the emotional and practical burdens that loss and bereavement bring. There have not been opportunities or community spaces to hold traditional rituals when someone dies; informal support has been limited due to social distancing and other restrictions.

Some of the staff on Connecting Opportunities were directly impacted by the loss of family members and grief. The project was able to offer additional training and support that benefitted both staff and

others around them who were grieving. Staff were asked what support would be useful and both formal and informal arrangements were introduced to support the teams, such as flexible working hours, time off, accruing leave and informal team support systems, e.g. working 'together' through Teams 'live' to have informal chats and support each other as peers.

A wellbeing telephone helpline was set up to offer mental health support across Connecting Opportunities. The helpline was an important resource because it offered an option to access support over the phone in a range of languages and enabled access to tailored, one-to-one support without reliance on the stability of an internet connection. Participants were able to get support through an online platform as well as via phone or messaging service.



Right: 'Women helping women'

Principle 3

Provide learning opportunities about gender

Develop different opportunities to discuss and learn more about gendered aspects of the pandemic and policy responses, such as lockdowns, restrictions and quarantine. Facilitate awareness-raising about intersecting inequalities that impact on women's lives in a global crisis. Creative and inclusive facilitation can support safer online spaces and help open up discussion in digital environments.



'Earth- still life'

Listening to and working with diverse groups of women migrants, including those who are disadvantaged, can help organisations understand the wide range of impacts the pandemic has had on different groups of women. This knowledge can help organisations develop solutions and approaches that are informed by the experiences of women migrants. It also enables the sharing of learning about gender with women who access support from wider organisational services and other stakeholders.

Gendered approaches to learning and support spaces benefit from understanding that women often support women during challenging life experiences like lockdowns and school closure. Online spaces should facilitate and uplift women to share their lived experiences of what helps (and what doesn't) with mental health, wellbeing and general coping so we can all learn from women migrants' expertise and strategies.

The fallout of the pandemic weighs on women migrants in a host of ways. Many women have experienced a decline in mental health and emotional wellbeing, increased feelings of loneliness and isolation, tiredness and exhaustion. General wellness has also been adversely affected by the pandemic and lockdowns. It is important to consider how to ensure women migrants have access to support, information and guidance to stay well – from keeping active, to managing anxiety, to nurturing motivation and the aspirations women have.

The pandemic has brought a sharper focus on longstanding inequalities affecting black and brown women living in the UK, putting lives at risk and exacerbating existing injustices. [Public Health England](#) (2020) found that people who are black or of Asian origin are most likely to be diagnosed with the virus and death rates from COVID-19 in these groups in England have been higher than any other. The restrictions on movement, loss of income and economic activity, gender-based violence and erosion of rights have further deepened existing gender inequalities.

Tea & Talk poem

Together we trust & make and absorb
Energy, and enthusiasm with equality
And hope, being ambitious & amazing.

Always welcoming with amazing artistic action
Never giving up, keeping nostalgic emotions and
Diversity in dialog.

Tranquility while travelling online, having
Adorable understanding between each other
Loving to learn and chat, the
Key to discovering the world.

'Tea and Talk poem'

Practical examples of digital ways of women centred working to provide learning opportunities about gender

- 1) Create safer and more inclusive digital spaces by inviting women to participate in ways that share power and responsibilities in sessions. Support women migrants to engage as fully as possible through creative facilitation alongside women migrants, raise awareness of women’s own skills, value women’s lived experiences and encourage peer learning. Online spaces offer an opportunity for women migrants to talk about gender and issues that matter to women.
- 2) Make full use of online resources available to support learning. Use available free creative tools (such as [Canva](#) or [Menti](#)) to create engaging content about a wide range of topics and issues that may be impacting women’s lives. Ensure women are introduced to new digital tools to both contribute to the development of women’s digital skills and to enable participation as much as possible.
- 3) Use ESOL classes as an effective platform to share learning and ideas while developing English language proficiency. Integrate discussions about inclusion, discrimination and equality into your syllabus alongside other contemporary topics and pressing issues. Ensure relevant follow up when there might be need for more support.
- 4) Engage with current news, media stories and events, offering discussion points in online sessions for women to ask questions and discuss topics that might not be straightforward. This can enable women to explore contemporary issues which impact women migrants during the pandemic, such as access to services and support, safety online, healthcare, home schooling, (in)equality, social justice, racism and discrimination.

- 5) Provide clear, tailored communication in a wide range of languages. This can be particularly important at times of crisis and can help protect women’s health and wellbeing. Good communication can offer more clarity and confidence in understanding messages from government and other authorities. Spaces for discussion can help reduce the uncertainties connected to how a crisis, such as the pandemic, is being managed, i.e. through law, rules and regulations, and vaccination rollout.
- 6) Prioritise women’s wellbeing by providing opportunities to talk about any difficulties and share coping and wellbeing strategies.



‘Healthy eating’

Good practice example – Creative call out

A creative call out – ‘Women, lockdown and the future’ – was delivered by women during the whole of 2020 to offer women only, creative and stimulating online art workshops. The main aim of the creative call out was for women and girls to have space to explore creativity, share art-related skills and talents, discuss and learn more about how creative activities can support wellbeing and produce a gallery of artwork. The online spaces were co-delivered with women keyworkers and volunteers to support women to feel safe and confident in the online sessions.

Each session was guided by women’s energy, contributions and topics that women wanted to discuss which included multitasking and responsibilities; societal expectations and roles; isolation and the impact of limited social contact. In between the workshops, women had opportunities to further share experiences and learning via online peer platforms (e.g. through messaging groups); these enabled women to stay in touch, reduce isolation and have an additional informal space to experiment with ideas and creativity. The online gallery of work can be seen [here](#).

“I enjoyed been part of the group because I always feel we are doing a great job and that makes me happy. I think this group doing very well because all of us work as a team, also we had a different discussion that gives women a chance to speak and learn more. Women group only, I think it gives some of the group chance to be more confident and not shy... I think these creative sessions are very useful for all of the group because it encourages them to do new things which they never done it before and helping us to develop our skills and knowledge also to be more creative.”

(thoughts on women only spaces and creative activities)

Principle 4

Support staff learning around gender specific issues

Facilitate spaces for digitally adapted learning so staff can take up opportunities which support flexible working patterns. Encourage and enable staff to contribute to building and developing shared learning, co-facilitating and refreshing knowledge, as well as learning about new specialist topics.

The need for understanding gender specific challenges during the pandemic is huge, along with the ability to deliver support and effectively refer to specialist services. Women thrive with support from skilled, knowledgeable and adaptive women centred professionals.

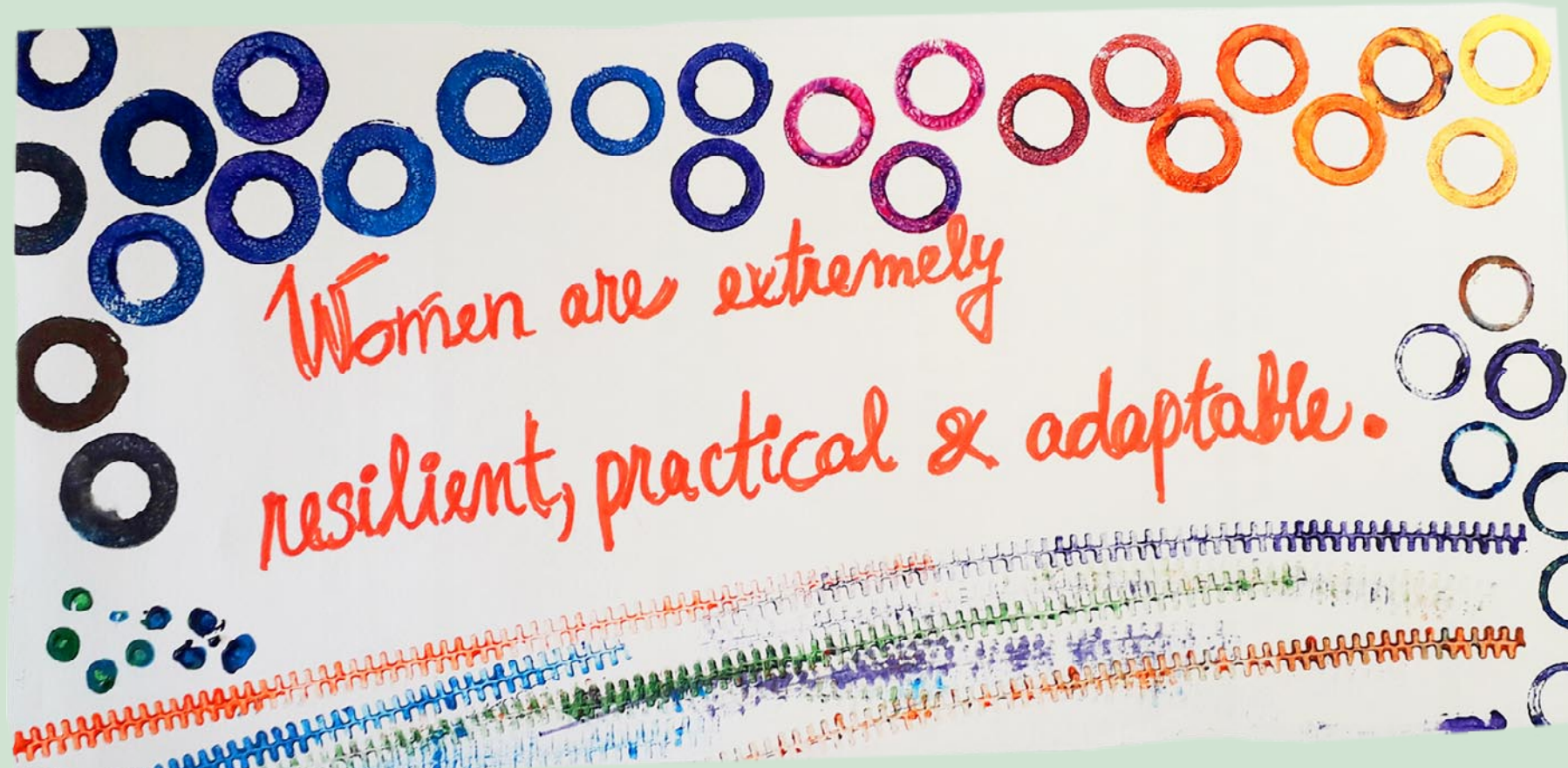
To create women centred spaces online and ensure your teams have the skills and confidence, they need to deliver the right support for women. It is important to consider your team's learning needs and address relevant learning around gender specific issues. For example, Brexit and the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 will have a profound effect on the rights and wellbeing of women migrants in the UK and staff need to be trained about such topics.

The European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 and its imminent impact on EU nationals will also require staff to offer guidance explaining the changes to eligibility of women EU nationals. It is important that staff learn how women currently using services may be affected and that organisations support their staff and volunteers to offer reassurance, relevant support and signposting, to ensure services don't stop altogether for women migrants.

The principle of equality is enshrined in UK law, along with many women's employment rights, maternity rights, trafficking laws and measures to prevent violence against women and girls, many of which derive from EU treaties and directives. These protections not only support women migrants and organisations working with women migrants

to address discrimination against women, they also provide a legal basis for eliminating inequalities. However, Brexit puts some of these protections at risk and means that future EU equality and human rights protections are not binding in UK law.

It is as important to support women migrants in the choices they make for themselves and their children, so they are not held back by limited expectations. Having discussions about current affairs as part of learning sessions can highlight existing inequalities. Actively promoting a broad range of career opportunities, which open up possibilities and challenge gendered stereotypes about jobs, will contribute to greater awareness and breaking down barriers.



'Women are...'

Practical examples of digital ways of women centred working to support staff learning around gender specific issues

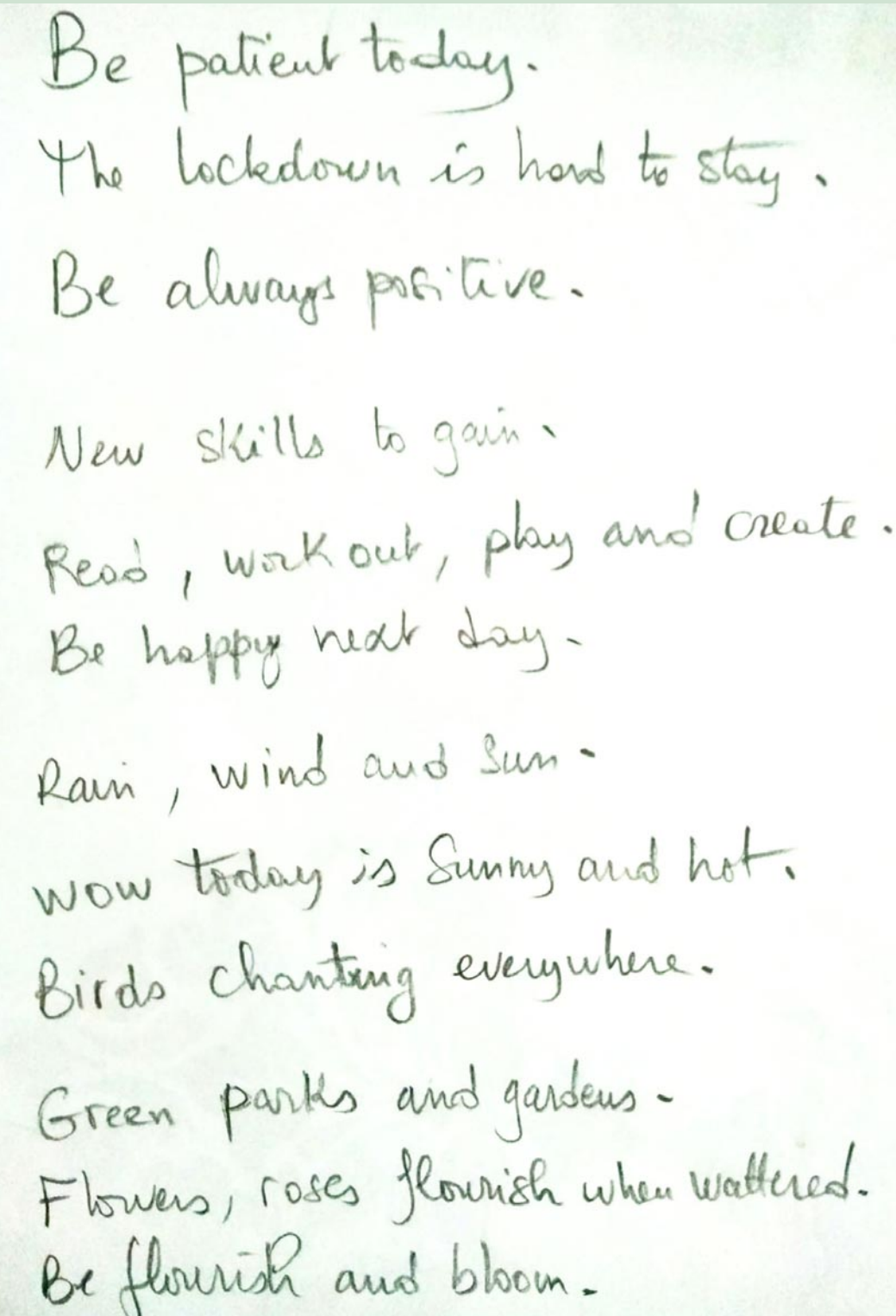
- 1) Design and plan online learning opportunities for staff and volunteers, content that is varied and interactive. Make use of the benefits of online learning – sessions can run at different times of the day and be repeated to allow for team members to participate flexibly. At the same time, keep wellbeing in mind as you design your sessions – integrate regular breaks, short physical activities (e.g. stretches) and ‘offline moments’.
- 2) Co-design and co-deliver with women migrants, ensuring that you offer relevant support to women who have less experience in delivering presentations. Ensure the expertise of women migrants is visible through learning sessions, including staff and volunteers as well as participants. Encourage team members to learn about inclusive facilitation techniques to support equality in digital learning spaces.
- 3) Ensure staff have access to information about changing rules, regulations and laws. Offer ongoing training to staff and volunteers to enable them to consider how changes can affect the eligibility and accessibility of support and services. Cover a wide range of topics – from refreshers and updates to exploring current issues and themes – upskilling as new good practices emerge.
- 4) Offer a variety of resources to widen accessibility and opportunities for independent learning for staff and volunteers including live sessions, on demand video recordings, podcasts and downloadable and offline accessible topical ‘libraries’ focusing on specific issues.

Good practice example – Digitally adapted learning

The project partners facilitated online learning for staff which covered topics such as women centred working; no recourse to public funding; unconscious bias and white privilege; ESOL class delivery with limited or no technology for ESOL tutors. Some webinars were co-led with women migrant team members who offered specific expertise in particular areas, for example keyworking and therapeutic support. These online spaces brought together project-wide learning about women centred work with women migrants in the pandemic and raised the visibility of women migrants’ skills, experiences and expertise.

“At the beginning it was challenging because it was not possible to read facial expressions, body language cues. Now I am listening carefully and more intensely being attuned to breathing changes, pauses; I became more comfortable with silence.”

(women’s experiences of digital adaption of therapeutic support)



‘Lockdown Haiku’

Principle 5

Creatively resolve childcare support

Work with women to design, deliver and promote flexible and welcoming digital online spaces that enable women to participate both on their own and with their children if they need or wish to. Keep women updated about available and accessible childcare options.



'Leaves, petals & flowers'

The lack of affordable, flexible and suitable childcare is an ongoing challenge which impacts women disproportionately all the time in the UK. The pandemic has added to the pressures of competing priorities that many women face.

Confinement to the home along with nursery and school closures, at different points during the pandemic, have impacted women migrants. The responsibility for children's wellbeing and education at home has **mainly fallen to women** who still have to navigate the challenges of balancing language learning; courses and training; remote and frontline working at home or in critical worker roles; volunteering and mutual aid support; alongside home schooling, caring responsibilities and housework.

When lockdowns began, many women suddenly found working and studying from home to be a challenge. For some women, however, there was also relief from the everyday routines, such as long and challenging commutes to places of education or work. While there was extra work involved in caring for families, neighbours and communities, some women were able to spend more time with family and children.

Online learning spaces have broadened opportunities for many women migrants. For example, the capacity of on-site or a mobile creche would have limited the number of women that could attend an event or a learning session, whereas remote online learning has enabled women to access services and online learning in a more flexible way, at a time that suits them and their children. Whilst childcare providers remained opened to keyworkers or early-years, this was not always the preferred option due to worries and fears about the risks of the pandemic.

Practical examples of digital ways of women centred working that creatively resolve childcare support

- 1) Consult women about the best times to run online sessions whenever possible, and negotiate the length of the sessions, building in regular breaks, to take account of childcare (and other caring responsibilities). Negotiate the timetabling of online activities in advance with women, in order to support women’s changing and demanding routines.
- 2) Deliver online learning flexibly so that sessions happen several times and at different times of the day. Offer recordings (videos and audio) so women can access the learning resources at a time that suits them. Be creative in designing and delivering sessions to support independent, flexible engagement for women migrants who need to manage all the demands placed on them with childcare. Inspire, motivate and make it rewarding for women to take part.
- 3) Ensure that children are not spoken about or treated as if they are a disruption to women’s participation. Design sessions which can include children and encourage family learning. Facilitate wellbeing and creative sessions, offering spaces with engaging and fun activities that women are able to attend alone, as well as with children.
- 4) Keep up-to-date with available childcare options in connection to changing pandemic-related restrictions so that you can offer women migrants current information about access to childcare services.
- 5) Encourage peer support so that women can learn from one another and discuss the challenges and solutions to children being at home or homeschooling.

Good practice example – Digital learning with childcare responsibilities

Innovative ways of supporting women with childcare responsibilities already existed before the pandemic – for example, using a mobile creche or organising family ESOL learning in a familiar dedicated space, with toys for children, and learning focused on practical everyday English skills.

Adapting support and learning into digital spaces as part of Connecting Opportunities meant tailoring delivery to the level of proficiency of the learners, as well as addressing issues of digital equity. Both have been achieved in part by offering varied ways of learning – from online classrooms, to materials posted to women, to additional one-to-one conversations over the phone. Flexibility in access to learning has been the most important and impactful way of adapting service provision.

“We have to be as flexible as possible with learning especially for the women centred work around family responsibilities. Sometimes the ladies will say ‘teacher, busy, cooking’... we try to catch them at another time. I would say remote learning has been very positive for most, as it is more accessible for a lot of women with other responsibilities.”

(digital transition of ESOL learning)



‘Back to school’

Principle 6

Enable access to wider services

Consider equity of access to digitally-based service provision. Aim to address digital exclusion through budget reallocation or additional funding. Review your service delivery formats regularly and keep exploring blended and offline ways of working to ensure better equity of service access.



'Dream desert island'

“[Women] have been accessing online learning. There was a lot of anxiety initially, but through one-to-one support and them supporting one another their outlook around tech savviness has been great. And we have been learning with the women and said that to them as well.”

(women's experiences of digital adaption)

Inequality of access to technology has always been present in the UK. While it would have been a barrier to many services prior to the pandemic outbreak, it now excludes many women migrants from access to essential support. It is always important to keep in mind that structural systems of inequalities can impact women migrants hard. While disparities of sustained access to digital provision are challenging for many different communities, the gap widened more substantially for some women migrants over time, especially for women on low or no income and with limited digital literacy.

Digitally adapting services presents particular challenges for women migrants and organisations. Not all women migrants have access to digital technology that is sufficient and suitable for engaging with support organisations, learning and working online. Some women don't have any access to technology at all. Digital inequality, including the lack of internet enabled technology and data poverty, may mean that women migrants are excluded from online support and opportunities. Technical and other issues ranging from internet connectivity, compatibility of apps and technology updates, can further challenge online access.

Power dynamics within some households also need to be considered as these can further limit women's access to remote engagement. For example, another family member working from home or children's education might take priority over women's own need to access technology.

While Connecting Opportunities underwent a transition to online and remote support, we also maintained and adapted elements of offline ways of supporting women migrants. Over time, complementary and mixed ways of working have started to emerge. We value some benefits that blended approaches can bring. Equally we recognise that the equity of access to digital spaces of support and learning and development opportunities has worsened for some women migrants.

The shift to remotely and digitally delivered services has been the pivotal aspect of this report and the most significant element of our services' adaptation in response to the pandemic. The practical examples from Connecting Opportunities that have made it possible for us to continue supporting women migrants are therefore more extensive.



'My desert island with snow'

Practical examples of digital ways of women centred working to enable access to wider services

- 1) Use a wide range of digital platforms and communication tools, in line with your organisation's digital policy, as well as in response to which platforms work for women migrants (it is important that women migrants inform your organisation's policies!) This could include: telephone calls; WhatsApp, Signal or other messaging platforms; text messages (consider buying multi-recipient messaging software or tools); social media; and email. Support women migrants to understand any changes that your organisation makes and ensure women are clear about how to get in contact for support and information.
- 2) Share information with agencies through digital spaces to ensure ongoing effective referral routes for women migrants. But also consider sharing information about your services through fliers and/or letters, for example during socially-distanced visits or food parcel collection or delivery. Women migrants living in houses of multiple occupancy could benefit from accessing information by word of mouth and leaflets.
- 3) Support your staff and volunteers throughout the digital adaptation. New ways of working impact all elements of the roles – from direct support for women migrants to evidencing official project eligibility. Ensure all staff and volunteers have up-to-date information to support their confidence and to maintain the quality, safety and confidentiality of support for women migrants.
- 4) Support women migrants' input into developing and delivering key public health information through feedback, translations and discussions in online sessions. Ensure all staff, volunteers and women migrants have access to information that is translated into the relevant community languages.

- 5) Consult women migrants regularly to better understand any barriers to accessing wider services and to share good practice with other organisations. This can help support the development of digitally adapted service delivery so it is responsive to women's needs and can address emerging gaps in women's support.
- 6) Offer a wide range of digitally adapted activities that make time and space for socialising and reducing women's isolation. Befriending and mentoring activities provide important ways of offering time and support. Work with your volunteers to ensure they are confident in offering support over the phone and on online platforms, equipping them with both the digital tools needed and relevant skills to be able to make video calls.
- 7) Adapt your ESOL learning provision – a combination of one-to-one and group sessions can be effective, with online platforms working better for learners with higher levels of English. Those with lower English proficiency and lower levels of IT skills are more likely to thrive if materials are posted to them and they are able to have a follow up conversation over the phone to support their home-learning activities.
- 8) Build awareness of both advantages and disadvantages of online spaces and remote working. Online digital engagement can be more accessible and inclusive, potentially reaching more women using digital services as well as offering downloadable or printable formats of information about wider services.
- 9) Adapt your budgetary resources to address digital inequalities and to increase access to wider services. Cooperate with your funders to

responsively adjust budget categories and innovative ways of working which enable ongoing service provision for women migrants despite continued changes.

- 10) Support women to access information about protecting their digital devices – computer, tablet and smartphone. This includes keeping passwords strong and installing security software on a computer or downloading anti-virus protection. Speak to women migrants about both the opportunities and pitfalls of online presence (such as confidentiality) and support improving digital literacy and confidence in and access to technology. But remember that digital solutions don't offer the right support to all women migrants and wherever you can, consider mixing the methods of your service delivery.

'Trees of Leeds'



Good practice examples – Data and gadgets

During the pandemic, Connecting Opportunities was able to respond and address some of the digital inequalities experienced by women migrants by providing a range of different support across the region. Partners were able to reallocate different elements of their budget to support digital equity; this includes lending or giving digital devices such as laptops, tablets and mobile phones; contributions to data packages and phone bills, or buying data-only sim cards, purchasing data and phone credit. Some organisations applied for additional funding to enable access for even more project participants; not everything was covered under the current funder's eligible costs.

For some women, access to online groups was still difficult due to problems with online fatigue, digital literacy or lack of confidence with the technology. To widen support from volunteer mentors and befrienders, without the need to be online, training on the telephone was provided to existing befrienders and volunteers. Those who accessed befriending support online benefitted from the [Digital Guide to Befriending in Pandemic](#). Many volunteers who adapted to the transition online were provided with tailored technical support, encouragement and recognition of the essential roles they play in supporting the project's participants.

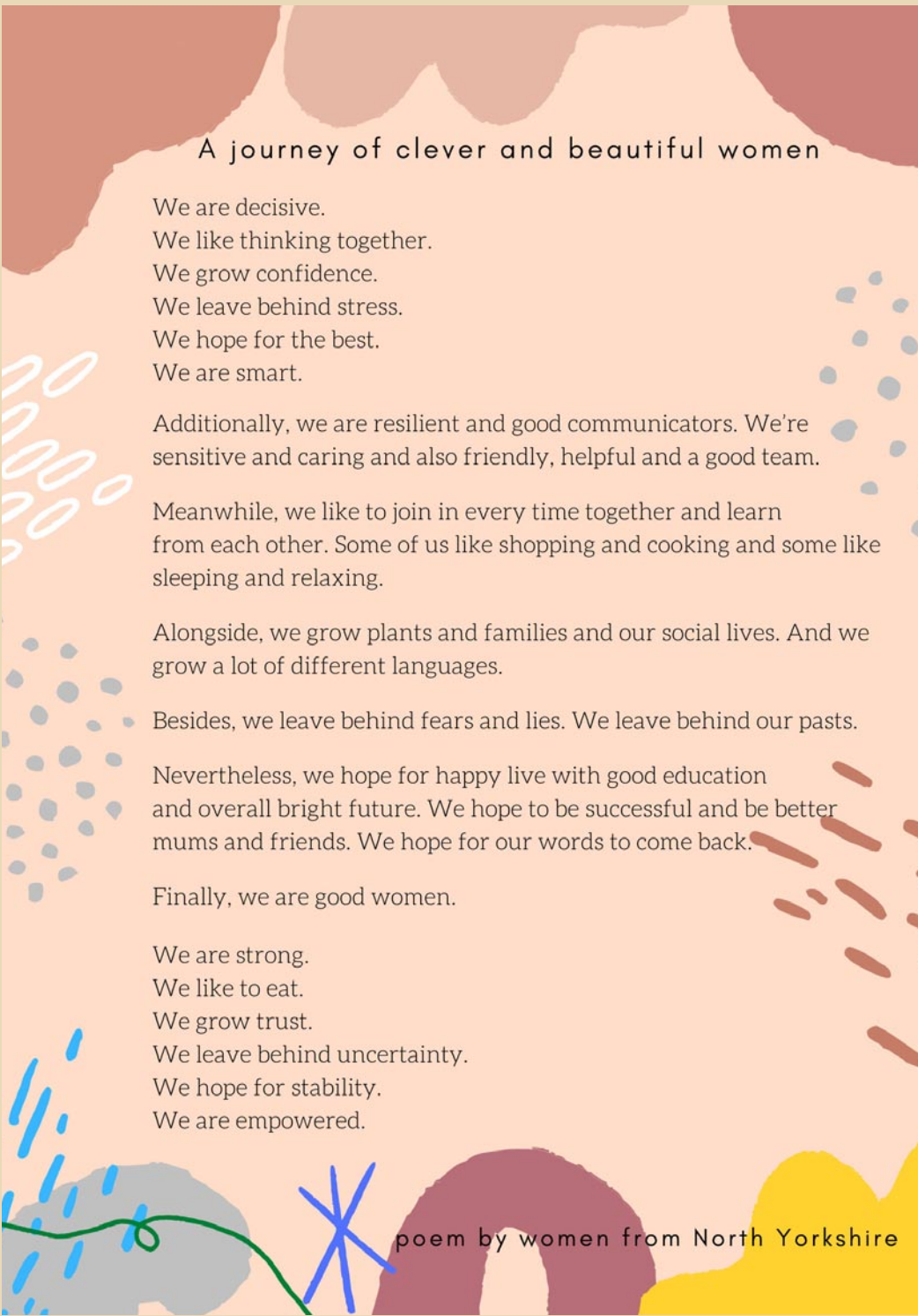
As we look at the future and the possibility of a time beyond the current pandemic, we offer further two suggestions:

- collaborate and consult with women when considering re-opening organisational premises and services;
- discuss with women the possible opportunities or worries and hesitations around face-to-face support to ensure you have the confidence of women migrants as well as your local partner/specialist organisations.

Despite the huge efforts by organisations and the advantages that online delivery and digital adaptation can offer, there are many situations when face-to-face learning, volunteering and working are the most effective ways to support women migrants.

“We made sure to offer online women-only activities that were designed and led by female volunteers... such as Yoga classes and a Mindful Movement programme delivered on Zoom... These wellbeing activities meant that we engaged people with limited English (who might struggle in an online conversation group), as well as people with children at home (as their children could also take part in the activity).”

(innovative ways of engaging women and taking account of childcare responsibilities)



'A journey of clever and beautiful women', written collectively by women migrants from North Yorkshire in a creative session. Women also chose their preferred colours for the poem's design.

What can Women Centred Working offer?

Women Centred Working has been established to share information about 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. 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 be embedded in your practices and help you respond to demands placed upon you.

A few ways in which WomenCentre can help:

- informal advice and conversations about women centred approaches, including adapting and developing digital services
- 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:

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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

Find out more about Connecting Opportunities at:
www.connectingopportunities.org.uk



“I would like to say that I appreciate your amazing support. Your session was very helpful for me as a woman as it motivated me to share with the group my pieces of art such as my modest poem and some drawings. I liked the size of the group and being a women only group, also the safety and the accessibility of the space.”

(sharing experiences of creative sessions exploring different art forms)



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

This report Digital Ways of Women Centred Working is part of WomenCentre’s work with Connecting Opportunities and women migrants.

www.womencentredworking.com

www.womencentre.org.uk

www.connectingopportunities.org.uk