

From Surviving to Thriving



Learnings from the
Voice of Migrant
Women Project
2017 - 2024

Foreword

Avila Kilmurray, Social Change Initiative

Space to laugh, sing, cry, share food and dance – not the headlines in many organisational Strategic Plans – but it is the stuff of this report. The Voice of Migrant Women funding programme supported nine initiatives in different contexts, enabling migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women to thrive. If the buzz word ‘agency’ has any meaning, then this is it. In one of several personal stories captured in these pages, Salwa deplores that so many institutional responses to her refugee status made her seem weak. A photographer and artist, Salwa survived violent conflict and displacement in Yemen, coming to Northern Ireland to create a new life for her family. Salwa is strong.

This report reflects how institutions and systems speak down to people and exercise power, making people feel weak. From trying to secure childcare for single parents facing Home Office interviews or pressing for basic rights to education, housing or healthcare, many of the 850 participants experience this on a regular basis.

This report also speaks to funders. The monies provided to projects were small (£5,000 per year per project), but delivered in a flexible and caring

manner. When flexible funding allows new directions to emerge, identified by the participants themselves, then people can grow and be heard. They can use their existing skills and knowledge to solve problems instead of being passive recipients of ‘capacity-building’.

The other magic in this report is gender awareness. Stories tell how women who report domestic violence can be supported. Access to language translation is emphasized. Women-only spaces offer caring mutual support to rebuild confidence and celebrate survival. Given the right circumstances the hand that rocks the cradle can still rock the world – without external experts dictating which hand should be used.

The final message in this report is about partnership working and shared learning. There is frequent reference to the impact of a study visit to Glasgow. Hiba also tells us - ‘To do good work you need two hands – you can’t clap with one hand’. Partnership with external organisations is helpful where the relationship is equitable.

There is hope in this report. Seeds are being sown that will benefit not only the women involved, but communities across Northern Ireland.



Historical Context

Researchers Dr Elaine Farrell and Dr Leanne McCormick share reflections on the history of migration from these shores – a helpful context as we think of how those arriving here in search for a safe and better life are perceived and welcomed.

For centuries, Irish residents have left the island in search of new lives and prospects abroad. Emigration peaked during the Great Famine years of the 1840s and early 1850s, as the Irish fled starvation and disease at home, or saw better opportunities overseas.

Almost as many girls and women left as boys and men, but towards the end of the nineteenth century, female emigrants outnumbered their male counterparts. Some went to find employment; others in search of adventure. We also see girls and women migrating because they were pregnant outside marriage at a time when it was not generally accepted, or to escape bad marriages.

Irish girls and women were unique among European migrants as they often travelled without relatives, whereas women from other countries generally migrated as a wife or daughter or part of a family group. The youth of Irish emigrants was also

commented upon at the time; we see girls as young as seven travelling to North America without relatives.

Emigration meant many Irish women left their families behind. Sometimes this even involved leaving their children in institutions or with family members as a desperate survival strategy. Some of these women settled abroad, had families of their own and never came back to Ireland. Others felt isolated, without family or friendship networks to rely on. Historical records point to mental health problems and alcoholism.

These new countries were not always particularly welcoming of the Irish. Our research project ‘Bad Bridget’ examines the experiences of Irish girls and women in North America who found themselves on the wrong side of the law. Many faced discrimination in the courtroom, the workplace or the press, stereotyped as ignorant, drunken or immoral. The story of Irish emigration is often a rags to riches tale. While that might have been the case for some, it was not the experience for everyone.

About the Project

In 2017, The Voice of Migrant Women project began supporting six organisations working on the ground with refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant women in Northern Ireland. It aimed to explore the challenges faced by this community as well as the interventions that could transform those challenges, removing barriers to women claiming their rights, becoming active citizens and finding solutions to issues affecting their lives.

Funding was targeted at groups already carrying out work on the ground with these communities. The support was flexible, allowing facilitators to listen to and be led by participants, to seize opportunities and experiment with how best to respond to the women's interests, challenges and evolving needs. By 2023, a total of nine organisations had been supported:

Homeplus NI a Belfast-based charity working with people who find themselves destitute or homeless, funded to support a women's group, Sawa.

Anaka Women's Collective participant-led organisation, which emerged from Sawa members, formed to share skills, support each other and advocate on issues affecting members.

NIACRO supported migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women in the criminal justice system, both in custody and the community.

NI Community of Refugee and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) received support for their women's group, which in time emerged as an independent organisation, Bomoko.

South Belfast Roundtable established Women of the World as an informal, regular space for women from all backgrounds to meet and share.

South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) supported migrant and refugee women in Mid Ulster, through one-to-one advocacy and group activities.

YMCA North Down established a regular multilingual women's group, bringing together migrant women from Eastern Europe and women fleeing war in Syria.

Corrymeela ran a women's group in Magherafelt for recently resettled refugee women, part of their marginalisation programme.

NI Somali Association, a small charity supporting Somali and other new arrivals to Belfast, running a variety of activities for women.

In Numbers

869

women
involved

1,911

group work
sessions

£250,000

funding from the
Pilgrim Trust & VSB
Foundation

40+

mother
countries

1,504

case work
sessions



But numbers cannot reveal the full impact of this work. The activities took place during a period of huge change marked by the Covid pandemic, the 'cost of living crisis' and new conflicts around the world, prompting increasing numbers of people to seek sanctuary in Northern Ireland. The projects adapted and evolved as new issues emerged – this flexibility was enabled by the strong focus on reflection and collaboration embedded in the Voice of Migrant Women programme.

While funding was small – just £5,000 per year for each organisation – this long term, sustained, flexible, collaborative approach allowed the projects to shift and morph as need and circumstances dictated. Over seven years, the partners, funders and evaluator developed relationships of mutual trust which allowed participants to share their difficulties, have courageous conversations and explore new possibilities for the work, often in collaboration.

As the project draws to a close, we have distilled nine key learnings from our work - a legacy and a resource for those passionate about best supporting people who find themselves in similar circumstances.

1

Women's experiences are different and complex

From the beginning, it was apparent the experiences of refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant women could be more complex and challenging than that of newcomer men, or those faced by local women in similar situations.

For example, women living with trauma and poor mental health encountered additional difficulties accessing appropriate healthcare, due to language barriers, limited understanding of their rights and local systems and lack of funds to travel to appointments.

This was particularly gruelling in single-parent families where the primary caregiver was usually a woman. Often women carried the dual load of managing households and caring for their children while trying to engage in essential activities, such as attending English classes or appointments, often without family networks to lean on.

Many projects supported women facing domestic violence. Accessing help was more testing for women with limited English or where their immigration

status was connected to their partner or his employment.

This points to a need to use a gender lens when considering the impact of any policy, service or issue. Time and again, groups found when a woman was supported, the whole family benefitted. Peer assistance enabled women to navigate unfamiliar welfare and housing systems. Workshops on the local education system helped mothers access school places for their children and engage with their learning. English classes allowed mothers to gain voluntary work or take courses for paid work. During Covid, women ensured their families were provided for and stayed safe.

The Voice of Migrant Women partners actively listened to refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant women and saw that the activities were shaped by them. Participant-led groups were able to take into account the multifaceted issues faced by women, drawing from their first-hand understanding of cultural and language differences, while also being sensitive to trauma.



One Woman's Story

STEP supported a number of women facing domestic abuse, and uncovered how their immigration status, right to work, housing and benefits entitlement could be entangled in these toxic relationships.

One woman, for example, arrived from East Timor with her partner in 2015 and both were employed in a local factory. “After a few months, cracks began to appear in the relationship with her partner becoming violent towards her. She felt unable to break free,” a staff member recalled. In 2018, the woman became pregnant, and the violence increased. She reached out to STEP, where bilingual advocacy staff supported her to make a police report and through a court case. Unfortunately, she was excluded by the East Timorese community after speaking out about the domestic violence. STEP continued to support her with access to housing and healthcare.

When the woman experienced complications in labour, she was urgently transferred to Belfast. She called a STEP bilingual support worker, who arrived at the hospital to find her distressed and confused about what



was happening. Only then a channel of communications opened between patient and medical staff. She learnt her daughter had a heart problem requiring expert care in Dublin, where Tetum language support wasn't available. For several weeks, STEP staff convened conference calls with doctors, social workers and the new mum to keep the flow of information, and later supported the new mum after she and baby were discharged.

The flexible nature of this funding along with STEP's long-term experience of multilingual advocacy work, including in immigration, was key to supporting this woman to access the rights and services she needed: “As a result of this support and intervention she now lives safely and securely with her young daughter. She continues to grow in confidence and is becoming more independent as the weeks go by. She now looks at her future with a positive view.”

Artwork by Salwa Alsharabi

2

Seeing Women as Strong and Skilled

Among the projects' participants were acclaimed artists, civil engineers, medical professionals, graduates, community organisers and more.

People with experience of the immigration and asylum systems are often portrayed in the media as passive, victims, who need other people to speak for them or to help meet their basic needs. Service-providers sometimes see those they serve as a blank sheet of paper, taking a 'deficit' approach rather than seeking to learn what strengths and assets participants bring to the table.

The experience of the Voice of Migrant Women Project is that migrant,

refugee and asylum-seeking women are resilient, creative, articulate, strong and individual – they do not all share the same views, challenges or skills.

While circumstances and the immigration system may have left them with fewer material resources and opportunities, the more than 800 women who participated were keen to contribute their talents, knowledge and hard work in Northern Ireland. Allowing space and time for people to use their skills is vital.

When people are defined purely by their immigration status or needs, we miss the qualities they bring and limit their potential to shape their own future, address their own challenges and make that contribution to our economy and society.

Several projects resisted the pressure to bring in outside experts to educate or 'empower' their members. Instead, they created spaces where participants could practice and share their knowledge and skills. External organisations were invited to collaborate or for dialogue on key issues – so the learning was not one way.



Azadeh Sobout

Azadeh came to Northern Ireland as an academic and former urban planner studying the role of artists as visionaries in post-conflict reconstruction in Lebanon and Syria. She attended South Belfast Roundtable's Women of the World group, and found it a unique space: "The narrative built around relationships was so different: I felt I had an equal space. Instead of groups which categorise us, Women of the World didn't categorise or put hierarchies in place for anyone. There was no distinguishing people; any woman was a woman of the world. There was space for being seen and connected."

Azadeh reflected that Women of the World reframed the concept of culture which can often be superficially treated in good relations projects. Inviting people from other



cultures to bring their traditional food to a cultural event can be tokenistic: "like we are exotic, it has the effect of making us feel more isolated."

"We don't have minorities, we have people who have been minoritized... It's not about the number, but about how you are treated by the structures of power."

"No one is just one thing; we have multiple layers and complexities. Women of the World gave space to explore that, space for everyone."



3

Value of Women-only Space

For participants, particularly women experiencing the asylum system, it was incredibly important to have women-only space to meet, connect and collaborate to address the challenges they were facing. The specific circumstances of newcomer women can be very isolating, with uncertainty about immigration status, poor housing, extremely limited means and lack of right to work. The typical roles of women within their families, as caregiver, problem-solver and household manager, put immense pressures on them.

One early participant with Homeplus said: “You don’t have anything to do at home but sit down and think about your problems, like with immigration, will you be deported? You wallow at home. [Instead I can] sit down and see people and do some interesting things. It makes your spirits high.”

Holding space to connect with others in the same situation was often described by participants as ‘a lifeline’. The groups had a key role in tackling isolation and poor mental health, and this opened opportunities to support women to address practical challenges and grow confidence, knowledge and often ability to resolve issues and claim rights.



In a 2019 survey, participants were asked where they got support with the challenges they were facing. The top response was from the Voice of Migrant Women projects in which they participated, above health services, advice centres or the internet. At that time, very few said they would go to a mainstream women’s group or local community group for support. But often after joining in the projects, women reported they felt more connected to the wider community too – involvement in a migrant group prepared the ground for integration to naturally happen.

Dalia Samir

Dalia has worked as an Arabic interpreter with YMCA North Down since 2017 and has been a consistent and active support to their women's group. Many participants arrived under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme from 2015-2017. Dalia described how a safe and welcoming space to meet together has impacted them in the years since: "There are dramatic changes in the personality and way of thinking of most of the ladies.

"They now have self-confidence and are willing to communicate and be part of the community, most of them ask if there is an opportunity to work or have their own business, especially in cooking and sewing."

In a 2019 survey, when the group had been going just two years, women reported they were happier, more confident, less anxious and healthier after joining the YMCA group. Most felt better able to speak up for themselves and felt family relationships had improved.

Asked what difference it would make if the group wasn't there, one participant said: "I will return again to depression and isolation and my mental health will get worse." Another said: "I love the project, because I feel welcome. There were other people like me who didn't talk the language."



4

Creating Space for Leadership

When we recognise the strength, skills and autonomy of participating women, it shapes our approach to any engagement. Women in these circumstances may well be under-resourced, but are not without capacity. They may need information about the new context, their legal rights and how to access them, but support needs to be provided in a way that doesn't remove agency.

Migrant people do not need external leaders to direct them, speak on their behalf or tell them what they need. Instead, the role of organisations is to remove the barriers to accessing services and to unlock women's potential to advocate for themselves and solve their own problems.

That doesn't mean women need to find solutions to their difficulties alone. The opportunity to do this together with others, through peer support and building connections with people in different situations is valuable.

Space to evolve and step into leadership is crucial – and it may take time when women are moving from 'survival mode' of fleeing to safety, into thriving lives. Anaka Women's Collective started as a fortnightly women's group sharing knowledge on their rights and connecting them with service providers to understand the issues. Topics were chosen by participants and in response to the problems they were experiencing.

Over time, Anaka made space for women to share skills: members ran English, art, craft, driving test theory, gardening, yoga and hair and beauty classes. This laid the foundations for a committee made up of members, with 11 co-ordinators taking responsibility for different aspects of the project and meeting to develop structures, services and programmes which served everyone.



Twasil Mohammed

Twasil is an IT engineer and activist from Sudan. She came to Belfast with her two children seeking sanctuary.

“You can say I was a leader in Sudan in many ways, I’ve always done organising with activism and politics. I know I have some skills, but definitely I didn’t see myself as a leader here, because it’s a completely different context, it’s difficult to understand the language.

“I always spoke publicly in Sudan in Arabic, but I was very hesitant to talk publicly here in English. The first time I spoke was in the Black Lives Matter rally, I said no, no I couldn’t do this in English.”

Other women at Anaka encouraged and supported her and she said she is now a regular public speaker both for Anaka and in her full-time job as a PPR campaign organiser.

Twasil was one of the founding members of Anaka and volunteered from her earliest days in Belfast, helping newly-arrived people with translation and navigating local systems. Here she found there was space to step into that leadership role again: “It feels good, because no one feels they are the boss or they need to tell people what to.



It has always been ‘we are a group of people and we are doing this together and anyone can contribute.’

“I’m proud of what Anaka became. We were 10 women that first meeting, I couldn’t have thought we would have a group of more than 300 women and everyone feel this is their organisation.”

Twasil noticed that sometimes assumptions are made that because people are less familiar with the context or language, that they don’t have the capacity to organise, design or direct work or campaigns themselves. Her advice?

“Give people real jobs and responsibilities and let them flourish.”

“I came here seven years ago, I feel that Belfast is my community, I feel welcomed and part of it, Anaka has been crucial to that.”

5

Importance of Raising Voice and Visibility

Many groups supported individual women with challenges accessing healthcare, housing, education and benefits to which they were entitled. They did this through formal case work, informal and peer support and signposting. This revealed patterns that affected multiple women.

All groups took opportunities to bring the voices of migrant women into new fora, allowing women to speak for themselves about their experience, challenges and solutions. Over time, some participants, particularly those involved in Anaka, became keen to highlight and address these situations in a variety of ways:

- Meeting with and proposing solutions to duty-holders, including in the Home Office, NI Departments, Education Authority, Housing Executive and the Assembly's Committee for the Executive Office.
- Building relationships with local politicians at all levels
- Collaborating with researchers, trade unions and human rights campaigners such as PPR and the Law Centre, on the right to education, housing and work.
- Using art, photography, creative writing and exhibitions, including at Arts for All, Belfast MAC, Golden Thread Gallery and Northern Ireland Assembly, to make visible the human impact and personal stories behind issues faced.

Groups collaborated with View Magazine on an edition focused on the Voice of Migrant Women, featuring the stories of 11 women, guest edited by Monika Ciok-Giertuga (YMCA bilingual advocacy work) and launched at an event expertly facilitated by speakers who were programme participants. This edition was an opportunity to raise awareness of the complex issues women were facing, but also to highlight women's responses and leadership. It was highly commended in the North West Migrants Forum for an Advancing Race Equality Award 2023.

Read it online at: <https://vsb.org.uk/the-voice-of-migrant-women>



Fatima Almasari

Fatima wants to be a doctor. She arrived in Northern Ireland from Gaza aged 14 and has been out of school since. In September 2023, she told an audience at Stormont's Long Gallery: "In my home country, I couldn't go to school because of the war. We fled from our country because of the war, and we felt we'd start a new life.

"I have been here a year and I didn't get any support or opportunities to go to school or college and it's the same for lots of other people.

"When I came, I thought I would go straight and start school. When I came here, I came with dreams and goals. But I am shocked, really, since I came here because I didn't find any opportunities in school or college."

"So I'm really hoping the authorities can do something for us... We've really got to get education because it's so important to us."

Fatima took part in a workshop with award-winning Belfast born children's author and illustrator Oliver Jeffers. She joined Anaka's 16+ education group, campaigning for the provision of education for young people.



6 Change Takes Time

There were some dramatic changes in context over the seven years of the Voice of Migrant Women Project. Yet, experience also showed that change can take time, particularly in areas of policy, law and culture.

A study visit to Scotland in 2019 came in the project's third year and almost 20 years after the refugee population in Glasgow had notably increased. Connecting with community leaders, networks and grassroots organisations allowed an exploration of how infrastructure had evolved, leadership had emerged and policy had slowly developed in response, as well as some of the challenges along the way.

Returning to Northern Ireland, there were many examples of change being glacial, even as issues, needs and context changed rapidly. Building up infrastructure, leadership and community organising takes time, especially as newcomer women are forced to initially focus on their basic needs for housing, status and more.

In 2019, participants identified a gap in provision of childcare for young children while their mothers undertook Home Office asylum interviews in Belfast's Drumkeen House, though it was common practice in other interview centres.



A meeting was arranged in late 2020 between women who had been through these long, intense and often emotionally traumatic interviews. Home Office officials shared their intention to roll out childcare to Belfast and welcomed the practical solutions offered on venues and provision.

Despite regular follow ups, the line of communication went cold and only when Claire Hanna MP enquired did a Home Office minister reveal in 2023 that the policy had been scrapped.

Northern Ireland's own political journey shows how long change can take, and the instability of local institutions has delayed progress on integration, childcare, hate crime and violence against women strategies.

Given this reality, it is clear complex work to bring about longer-term change needs supported over time.

Salwa Alsharabi

Salwa arrived in Northern Ireland in 2017, and while she applied for asylum and built a life for herself and her young son, she became one of Anaka's earliest volunteers and a committee member. Her gift is welcoming new people and spotting the links and opportunities which help them to belong.

“When we work with the community, it helps not only me, it helps others. When people arrive, they feel lost, but they will find links through Anaka – I believe in that. They can find their way; they can continue or find support or something to do for the community. I feel so proud, because whenever somebody comes to Anaka, they are welcomed.”

In Yemen, Salwa was a photographer and artist. It took years and the opportunities that came through the group to rediscover her art practise. Now, she has co-ordinated several art projects and exhibitions. One with the Belfast Mac, “At the Table” focused on the personal stories of artists, designers, tailors and others in the asylum systems: “Each of them has £9 a week to live on. They are in hotels where freedom and food is restricted. We found we could use our art to show how we are talented and send messages through our art.”



She recently represented the MAC on an artistic exchange to Berlin to explore the use of art to promote anti-racism.

It was three years before Salwa was granted refugee status, and another four before the family moved out of temporary housing: “For seven years I couldn't buy a trampoline or a pet; we couldn't have visitors. Now, I'm happy with the new house – but I'm exhausted.

“I decided to do more for the community, because before that I felt like I'm going to be destroyed just focusing on my situation. They make me feel like I am weak or I have this stigma of being an asylum seeker or refugee – so I decided to prove to myself and to my son and the community, how strong and capable I am. I want to change this perception – I want to be seen for my strengths.”

7

Small is Beautiful - But Must be Resourced

Throughout our project, we saw how small grassroots groups were the first to witness new challenges or issues emerging – and were often the first to find solutions.

At ‘the coalface’, they were involved in supporting women and their families in practical ways, to access their basic rights through casework and advocacy, and providing emotional and social support. This trusted, hands-on position made the projects the first port of call for new issues and well-placed to understand appropriate interventions.

For example, when the pandemic hit, groups were immediately aware of the challenges participants were facing. YMCA and STEP phoned women regularly to combat isolation, arranged food and activity packs for children, translated public health information and supported those women experience rising domestic violence while confined to home.

Likewise, when it became apparent that newcomer children were more adversely affected by school closures, Anaka promptly organised an ambitious online support programme, with 30 volunteer teachers holding small group tutoring sessions for 80 children.

An evaluation of this project showed the dramatic impact it had in a small timeframe, and highlighted gaps in educational provision for asylum-seeking and refugee children, helping Anaka to secure funding from Belfast Charitable Society for a two-year project.

Small, self-organising groups directed by women with lived experience could be much more flexible and responsive than larger charities or public sector bodies. They can respond faster, more innovatively and are often able to draw on peer experience to support those facing difficulties.

Small scale but timely and effective interventions can often be delivered at much lower cost – but these groups must be valued and resourced. Investing in the infrastructure and long-term work which puts these organisations in such a good position to respond is vital but at risk. Funders and government need to recognise the additional value that these grassroots groups bring and support them in a sustainable way.



Fatuma Maallin

Fatuma joined the board of the Northern Ireland Somali Association (NISA) in 2013. “My passion has always been to support people,” she said, and argues that small grassroots projects are best placed to do that: “We felt it’s important someone understands them, who has been through the same process they have. We meet their needs, we say this is your place, you belong. Whenever you have any issue, you can talk to someone with your own language, you can express yourself however you want.”

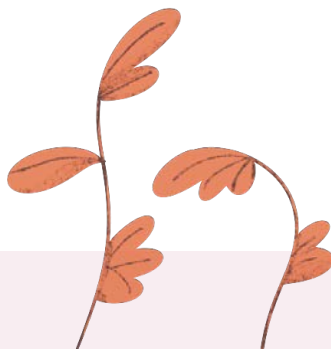
NISA signpost to other organisations – but without their interpretation and accompanying, often their members wouldn’t be able to access other services. The group reaches beyond Somali people, with many other nationalities joining in and receiving support. Fatuma says having that connection and place for belonging is a necessary condition for being ready to integrate with the wider community.

With the support of the Voice of Migrant Women Project, Fatuma ran NISA’s women’s group. The flexible funding was very valuable, she said, as well as the encouragement to let the women direct the work to what was



most needed. She said: “It’s amazing. You know how women are, whenever we meet and we come together, the smile on their faces, the confidence, the willingness to express how they want.”

Fatuma believes small grassroots groups like theirs are vital, but they need more support: “We are the ones who are first in contact; the bigger organisations miss people who are in need. NISA is not with big funders, we don’t get much and yet we do a lot. We need recognition and to be supported. People don’t realise we are working with so little resources.”



8

The Value of Working Together

When the Voice of Migrant Women began, few groups were working in this space. This made the opportunities to regularly meet together, share learning, challenges and identify common themes very useful.

The co-ordinator of the YMCA project noted how transformative this cohort approach was: “At the beginning, our staff and participants felt quite isolated because all the main services for refugee and asylum seeking people were based in Belfast. Meeting people working in the sector, learning from each other, sharing knowledge and skills helped us to increase our capacity and develop professionally.”

VSB Foundation and the Pilgrim Trust provided some resources to allow further exploration and collaboration around issues which emerged from this community of practice. A series of meetings and trainings with Women’s Aid around domestic violence among newcomer women and varied support needs resulted from a group discussion.

Groups shared information, advice, experience and explored ways to support their participants through the ‘cost of living’ crisis, hate crime and the Covid pandemic. Corrymeela and Anaka worked together on trauma informed leadership training. YMCA and Anaka participants organised food hygiene training for members interested in setting up catering businesses or social enterprises.

Each group collaborated with a range of other partners, and as the work matured, realised the benefits and pitfalls. It was important that joint work was on the basis of equity and appropriately resourced. Anaka, for example, established an arts project on mental health, and pushed back on their partner’s initial plans to bring in outside staff to deliver the project. Instead 12 Anaka participants were funded to co-ordinate, facilitate and cater for the project, developing their confidence and skills in these roles – an approach which has much longer and more meaningful impact.



Hiba Hussein

Hiba came to Belfast in September 2016, with her 4 children and was a founder member of Anaka from its beginnings as Sawa. She said: “We used to work with different small organisations. There was a kind of competition to get the funding, the spotlight. My idea was we are all working with refugee people and people seeking asylum, why don’t we work together to deliver the services? Now it’s totally changed, people start to work together.

“Any work we have done in Anaka, I couldn’t have done it myself alone – it already needed people to do it together and partner to help us. To do good work, you need two hands - you can’t clap with one hand. Because of the lack of funding, Anaka couldn’t bring professional people to do the courses, but we used the skills from the women who participated in Anaka - they are the participants and the leaders, they are helping themselves.”

Being a committee member, trainer and participant in Anaka helped Hiba make connections which led to other opportunities. She participated in a residential at Corrymeela with people from Protestant, Catholic and refugee communities, and started volunteering with the charity translating and



interpreting. After some years, she got a paid position as Project Co-ordinator on their Marginalisation programme, bringing her experience and connections.

“The good thing is when you work with different organisations, you work with different skills and backgrounds. After I worked in Corrymeela, I decided to run the trauma-informed leadership training to bring groups and individuals working with refugee and asylum-seeking people together in one training, to help us work together.

“Women, when you give the chance to do the things themselves, when you are participant-led, you can see the effect on them. They know exactly what they need so it’s very important for them to be part of the process.”

9

The Need for Visibility and Vision

Both for those born here and those who make their homes here, we need to create and share an expanded vision of a positive, thriving, outward-facing, diverse Northern Ireland.

A necessary step towards that vision is building new narratives about who makes up our communities and who has a place here. People relate to personal stories more than slogans or ideas. We need to share and amplify more stories and examples of people who have made their homes here and are flourishing and contributing, such as those in this publication. But we also need our local leaders to share that positive vision.

Nandi Jola, South African-born writer, poet, artist and prominent cultural contributor, and took part in a number of Voice of Migrant Women events. She arrived in Northern Ireland in 2001, and by 2010, she began running cultural

awareness workshops: “part of that was to do with people constantly asking me very naïve questions, such as ‘So you are from South Africa, how far are you from Nigeria?’ That got me to think that perhaps some people didn’t realise that Africa is a continent.” (from VIEW magazine interview, see also the poem “Where Am I from?” by her daughter on the final page of this report)

The opportunity to visit projects in Scotland also broadened our horizons of possibility. Some 20 years along the process of welcoming ‘New Scots’, the lessons and examples of work to respond and support opened our eyes. One staff member at the YMCA reflected back some years later:

“A study visit in Glasgow, taught us to think big and not to shy away from new brave ideas!”



Denis Long



“For many organisations and services, the issues facing the migrant people come down to what they lack – rather than what our understanding, practices and systems lack. We are forever building people’s capacity while failing to recognise the capacity that is already there.”

When Denis Long arrived in Northern Ireland, she had everything going for her: “In Romania, I was the director of a charity I had set up with people from Northern Ireland. I came with language, qualifications, networks, experience, yet it was very difficult to find an opening. For example, I had an interpreting licence following a 3-year university degree studying English - here that wasn’t recognised. I did a 5-week course, one day a week, to be able to work as interpreter.”

Through her Romanian language skills, she gradually moved into managing education and community development projects – but was often described ‘as the interpreter’ despite the varied skills she brought.

“After a while, I didn’t even fit the ‘migrant’ label anymore. I have often been described as an ‘atypical migrant’, a subtle suggestion I wasn’t perceived as ‘vulnerable’ enough.”

“There seems to be a whole industry around working with migrant people - it suits that industry to have migrants standing up and saying ‘we need help’ or to be portrayed as lacking in ability.

“Misconceptions around culture, inclusion, racism etc are very common and inform many current approaches. This can only be addressed through education and by building on people’s fundamental commitment to social justice”.

Drawing on her experience, Denis sought to create a different kind of space for ‘Women of the World’ to come together without an agenda in a project under the South Belfast Roundtable.

“There was so much value in being given the freedom to do the work on our own terms. We regularly questioned our assumptions which continually directed us to different paths. This isn’t common, quite often you are expected to work from a predetermined template - that’s a very oppressive way of working.”

Despite her concerns about how intercultural work is understood and practiced, she believes “Northern Ireland offers a good opportunity to do inclusion right. There is genuine willingness to do right by people and that opens up immense possibilities - if you want to make a difference in people’s lives, you absolutely can.”

Questions for Reflection

In light of these learnings, we offer the following reflective questions for anyone seeking to support and work with refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant women in Northern Ireland, whether you represent a large public body, a funder, a community or voluntary sector organisation, a small group or individual.

1. How are you amplifying the voice and visibility of women who are in the immigration or asylum systems. How are you contributing to a positive vision of a Northern Ireland that welcomes and values people who want make this their home?
2. Are you creating space for migrant women to speak for themselves, rather than speaking on their behalf? Are you seeing them as skilled, experienced, current and potential leaders, or are you focused only on the challenges they face? Is your work, project or service 'doing with' rather than 'doing for'?
3. How is your work recognising that change and impact take time? Is your support for the long term, as well as flexible to new needs and opportunities? Do you leave space for emergence, for innovation, for participants to take the work in new directions?
4. How are you adapting to the individual experience and needs of men and women, and how is this influencing your work? The key role of women as problem-solvers, advocates and carers for their families means that investing in women secures better outcomes for whole households.
5. Does your work allow for listening, relationship-building, collaboration and developing infrastructure? These aspects take time and resources, but are as crucial as delivering activity and services. The unpredictability of recent years shows the importance of building resilience and adaptability.



6. How are you prioritising small-scale, flexible, participant-led responses and organisations? While this work is often authentic, targeted and offers good value for money, it is often squeezed out by lack of profile, capacity and onerous demands of funders or partners.

7. Education and the chance to access paid employment are critical pathways at all stages. How can you support newcomer children in school, access to education for young people and opportunities for adults to continue or redirect their careers?

8. How are you reflecting on your work, creating and responding to feedback loops and learning from experience? Simple monitoring and evaluation processes have been crucial to the Voice of Migrant Women Project, allowing partners to reflect and understand our impact and new areas to explore.

9. Are you working in a way that genuinely shares and redistributes power, between participants and providers, between funder and grantee and between long term and new communities? Challenging assumptions, structural inequalities and changing culture take time and require deep reflection and learning from our own practice and others' perspectives.



Acknowledgements

Joe McVey, Chairperson, VSB Foundation

“The cry of my heart at that moment was farewell, farewell, farewell my children, though not one tear could I drop. Yet many a silent tear I have dropped to the present, unknown to the world.”

These are the words of William Fife from Co. Fermanagh in letter to his son and daughter in January 1860. He is recalling his feelings of standing on the quay at Derry as the boat departs on the first leg of their journey to Australia. Emigration is a significant part of our past and current social history; migration was and is an emotionally charged and complex human experience.

In acknowledging those who supported the Voice of Migrant Women Project the VSB Foundation would firstly wish to thank all those volunteers, organisations and communities that work tirelessly to welcome, support, and provide sanctuary to our new neighbours. Arriving as strangers in a strange land, their journey, like many who have left

these shores, is filled with trauma, distress and fear. They therefore deserve our kindness, friendship, and hope for a better future.

The Voice of Migrant Women Project would not have been possible without the financial support and partnership of the Pilgrim Trust. Thanks are due to them not only for the generous investment but also their commitment to the project. We are very grateful to Sonja Forbes, Grants Manager for Social Change, at the Pilgrim Trust, she was always ready to listen and agree changes as the project evolved. This flexibility enabled the project to be responsive and respectful to the women as they articulated what would be of benefit to them.

In undertaking this work, we wanted to highlight not only the difficulties faced by migrant women but also their talent, skills and positivity that was enriching our community. To this end we are grateful to The View and Fortnight publications for carrying stories and articles on the work of the project and the individuals involved.

Quoted in David Fitzpatrick (1994) “Oceans of Consolation – Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia”

At the outset, the VSB Foundation was very fortunate to have enlisted the highly motivated Kate Campbell, her skills, abundant enthusiasm, and commitment has carried this project for almost eight years. Kate has facilitated, coordinated, planned and delivered group meetings, workshops, conferences, art exhibitions, cookery lessons, educational classes and study trips and assisted the groups to find sources of funding. Thank you, Kate, not only for the work but the joy and welcome you have brought to the women participating.

Chris McCartney has worked alongside Kate to produce evaluation reports, statistics and quantitative analysis of the work. Whilst highly important, data collation and evaluation are only part of Chris's contribution. Her ability to extract and narrate the personal stories of the women brought life and soul to the project. The VSB Foundation greatly appreciates the human insights and perspective you have shared through the evaluation process.

Ciara Smyth, senior finance officer at Volunteer Now, has been critical to the smooth running of the project, managing budgets and ensuring funds reached those carrying out the activities on the ground. Thank you Ciara for your diligence.

On behalf of the VSB Foundation Trustees I would like to thank all those organisations that became involved with the Voice of

Migrant Women Project and commend you for your willingness to open your doors and welcome our new migrants as neighbours and friends. This has not always been an easy direction of travel as migrants and those who support them are subject to racial abuse, intimidation and violence. I hope this small intervention by the VSB Foundation has provided practical support and encouragement as you grapple with the complexities of providing a much-needed service for migrant women with lots of challenges but limited resources.

Finally, the VSB Foundation wish to acknowledge and pay tribute to the participants. The journey from your homeland to this country, for most, has not been an easy one. The lingering pain of separation from your family and homeland is never far away. This strange land of Northern Ireland, with different culture, customs, food, language and climate, coupled with a backdrop of conflict, presents its own problems of adjustment. Acceptance by and integration into this community is therefore a challenging process.

The VSB Foundation is grateful that you have been a participant in the Voice of Migrant Women and we hope that it has helped your journey from being a stranger in a strange land to being more at home in a strange land.

The Final Word

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STEP have worked with an extensive number of individual women since joining The Voice of Migrant Women Project and can clearly see the women becoming incredibly independent, growing in confidence through their time with the project. Our trip to Scotland was totally eye opening to see how much had been achieved and what could be possible to implement in Northern Ireland to assist in hearing the women's voices and advocate for change.

STEP staff member

Voice of Migrant Women proved to be an excellent funder and partner. Our team valued being given space and freedom to develop new ideas and work independently. During the funding period, we felt trusted and valued, both as individuals and as professionals. We loved various opportunities that came with the funding - meeting other groups, study visit, being able to publish our own magazine, conference and training.

YMCA staff member

Being part of the Voice of Migrant Women Project has been vital to our continued growth and capacity as it has given us access to mentoring and funding support. It linked us in with other organisations doing similar work in NI and Scotland and gave staff and volunteers the opportunity to undertake training... We have big hopes for our Anaka Art Collective and our Education Project and plan to continue to be a brave voice advocating for the rights of those experiencing oppressive immigration systems. All these organisational plans are dependent on the continued participation of Anaka members who shape all aspects of the work that we do and whose commitment and passion we depend on to be able to do any of it.

Anaka member

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Overall there has been a powerful shift in how women connected during the programmes and in their confidence to explore new activities, becoming visibly more curious, confident and empowered to learn and develop new skills, and share their experience, skills and expertise since participating in the programmes. Collectively we learned, laughed, sang, cried, shared food and danced together, many for the first time in many years.

Corrymeela staff member

The plan is to still carry out the same work and look for further grant assistance because we have already seen the difference it has made to the women. The women have participated by sharing their ideas and took part of training.... I see and know the women have good opportunities if well supported. Already with support the women have achieved quite a lot.

NISA women's project coordinator

Nearly everyone was from a different country but there were so many common themes.... It was a group which was very open and friendly and very welcoming. It just shows you when women get together culture is no barrier at all; it's the diversity brings the richness to the group.

Women of the World participant

I hope for a better Belfast, more people learn from each other as more people immigrate, they are accepted, there won't be racism or discrimination.

Homeplus participant

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Further Information

This report is available online at <https://vsb.org.uk/the-voice-of-migrant-women> along with more on the project's activities and evolution. On this webpage, you will also find shorter reports and publications which were produced over the course of the seven-year project, including:

- A briefing on the provision of childcare for Home Office interviews (Voice of Migrant Women/VSB Foundation 2020)
- VIEW magazine Voice of Migrant Women Issue 55 (View digital, 2020)
- Comfort Foods (produced by Women of the World and South Belfast Roundtable, 2021)
- Evaluation of Anaka's Education Project (Voice of Migrant Women/VSB Foundation 2021)
- Reflections on Togetherness – A practitioners' tool for developing intercultural competence (produced by Women of the World and South Belfast Roundtable, 2022)
- Opening Doors (An evaluation of art workshops with migrant women and the Golden Thread Gallery, 2022)



Where am I From? Anesu Mtowa

And he asked me,
‘No, where are you really from?’
I smile.
I smile the smile of a thousand children.
Who have all stood in this same spot,
And have all been asked,
‘Where are you really from?’
I answer,
I am from a million places.
Spin a globe, and you’ll find me there.
Like the last leaf on a tree, I will flow to wherever I’m taken.
And will seed.
I am from mother nature’s womb.
I was cradled in her arms until she planted me here, let me grow.
And then sent you to ask,
Where are you really from?’
I am from the textbooks, that have been pushed behind the bookshelf.
I am from the pages that were ripped out, and burned.
I am from the truth that will never be told.
I am from the voices that have been silenced by history,
I am from the voices that refused to be silent.
Rosa Parks, Nina Simone, Martin Luther King jr, Dr Nelson Mandela.
I am from the children of the Soweto uprising,
The Selma to Montgomery march,
The Rwandan Genocide.
I am from the children fed by the Black Panthers,
and the children set free by Harriet Tubman,
and the children whose grandparents were saved by Obama.
I am from my mother’s tears, the sweat on her brow.
I am from her blood.
I am from the soil she left behind.
I am from the same cloth as scientists, presidents, entrepreneurs, inventors.
I am the future generations, that can achieve anything.
But will still have their hair touched without permission.
Will still be called the N-Word, or a foreigner, or will be told to go back home even
though that’s where they are.
So you ask me, ‘Where are you really from?’
Would you like me to repeat my answer?



And he asked me,
‘No, where are you really from?’
I smile.
I smile the smile of a thousand children.
Who have all stood in this same spot,
And have all been asked,
‘Where are you really from?’
I answer,
I am from a million places.
Spin a globe, and you’ll find me there.
Like the last leaf on a tree,
I will flow to wherever I’m taken.



Extract from “Where am I from?” by Anesu Mtowa