The Wonder Foundation is a charity dedicated to empowering vulnerable people through education. We work with local-led partners around the world to help women, girls, and their families access the education and support they need to exit poverty, for good.

In 2016, we released our report, *Empowerment through Education: Women Breaking the English Barrier*, to give a voice to vulnerable female migrants and share their perspective on the barriers they face in learning English and accessing English classes in the UK.¹ We are now building on our findings by conducting new research on the impact of women-only ESOL provisions on promoting integration and pathways to active citizenship for vulnerable female migrants.² Therefore, given the scope of these 2 research projects, our written submission is focused on addressing questions 1, 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12.

1. As part of our research, we spoke to both vulnerable female migrants and service providers to understand the role English learning provisions play in the lives of migrants in the UK. What was frequently articulated to us was that improved access to and quality of English learning provisions could improve an individual’s confidence and ability to build a life in the UK and become active members of their communities.

Therefore, for many vulnerable female migrants, this potential outcome from learning English is how they have come to understand citizenship and civic engagement. That is, they view these terms as intertwined concepts, which collectively represent someone who is able to engage and interact with their fellow community members and make a positive impact on their community-at-large.

Moreover, they view citizenship and civic engagement as being more than just rights and opportunities afforded through laws; they recognise that the environment of the society also matters to ensure migrants have the support and means needed to be active and engaged. For example, several of the women we interviewed expressed how they continue to participate in English classes, despite their good command of English and understanding of UK society, because the classes were one of the few spaces where they felt comfortable and confident using English and socialising with others.

The OECD’s *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2015* report supports these anecdotal accounts on the multidimensional nature of citizenship and civic engagement. For example, by analysing the citizenship and civic engagement outcomes of migrants to OECD member countries, the OECD was able to show that the more successful countries were those that had a more welcoming attitude towards migrants. More specifically, they argued that by being more accepting, these countries were fostering and creating the conditions needed for migrants to feel capable of engaging with and contributing to their new community.³

Ultimately, by recognising citizenship and civic engagement as this shared experience between an individual and their fellow community members, it can help to construct an individual’s identity within a society. In other words, a collective understanding of

¹You can find our report here: http://wonderfoundation.org.uk/resources/report-women-breaking-english-barrier
²You can find more information about our new research here: http://wonderfoundation.org.uk/resources/current-research-how-migrant-women-learn-english
citizenship and civic engagement can help strengthen an individual’s relationship with society and, in turn, foster a sense of belonging and inclusion. This point is particularly relevant to the vulnerable female migrants we spoke to throughout our research. Many of them emphasised how they value English learning because it will help improve their lives and wellbeing in the UK and subsequently support their goal of being recognised as a member of UK society; however, they also expressed how the latter goal is difficult to attain without the backdrop of support from individuals outside of the English learning spaces.

7. In our report, *Empowerment through Education: Women Breaking the English Barrier*, we explored the role English classes play in improving the lives and wellbeing of vulnerable female migrants in the UK. From the interviews we conducted with both learners and instructors, we learned the value in incorporating every day themes into language learning to improve a learner’s understanding of British society and customs. Additionally, we learned that classes covering practical skills and knowledge were preferred as they better aligned with the day-to-day needs of the learners and made learning more enjoyable and salient.

Our findings are supported by other studies analysing English learning provisions offered in other English-speaking countries, as well as literary programs aimed at females. For example, in 2 different studies where female migrants in ESOL classes in the United States and Australia respectively were observed, the researchers concluded that content focusing on pragmatic skills led to improved engagement and subsequent improvement in language proficiency amongst learners. In the context of women-only literary programs, UNESCO indicated in their 2013 report, *Literacy Programmes with a focus on women to reduce gender disparities*, that literacy programmes that were more effective in promoting literacy, breaking down socio-cultural barriers, and reducing gender-based disparities were those that had clear linkages to daily life skills and interactions.

Given how language learning can be an appropriate space to discuss social and cultural topics, we believe that they can pave a path towards civic engagement. Therefore, we believe that the Government and Parliament could support migrants who want to become active and engaged citizens by developing a UK English-learning strategy that: a) is practical and sensitive to the learning needs of the various learners, b) improves access to English learning provisions for all migrants, and c) recognises both formal and informal settings for English learning, as vulnerable female migrants especially find value in community-based learning provisions as they can create a safe, welcoming, and empowering place to learning English. Moreover, we also recommend that any national strategy be reinforced by promoting collaboration and cooperation amongst service providers who work with migrant populations, so the needs of migrants are addressed from a whole-person approach.

Finally, even if migrants are given the resources needed to understand how to navigate and engage with their new surroundings, they will still face barriers in becoming active and engaged unless the society has created an accepting and inclusive environment for all. In

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5. UNESCO (2013), Literacy Programmes with a focus on women to reduce gender disparities, Case studies from UNESCO Effective Literacy and Numeracy Practices Database (LitBase): http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002225/222588e.pdf
other words, effective civic engagement across society means empowering an individual to be active and empowering this same individual to support others to be active, too. In our report, as a means to create this type of environment, we recommend funding national and local mentoring and befriending initiatives as they can help migrants, particularly vulnerable females, in meeting British people and feeling welcome and included in British society.

8. Britain can be a place for diverse populations to live and work together if people are able and willing to welcome and support all who want to make Britain their home. As we have witnessed through our research, this is an attainable goal if we can share the values of inclusion, equality, and tolerance across Britain.

Some of the strongest examples on the importance of these values comes from the vulnerable female migrants we spoke with. For those who were beginning their journey of learning English, they expressed anxiety over how they are perceived and often treated due to their limited English proficiency. For example, one new leaner stated, “People, when they look at me, think that I can read and write. And once someone said to me, how can’t you read and write. You are a big woman and you can’t really read and write. And I felt so bad.”

Unfortunately, even amongst women who had been living in the UK for many years and had improved their command of English, the feeling of not belonging persisted. Additionally, it was common for women to become discouraged from learning, which could further be exacerbated when compounded with other barriers they face (e.g. caregiving responsibilities).

What these accounts shed light on is how these barriers to English could affect their citizenship. This is why our report included 2 recommendations focused on building a culture of acceptance. The first advocates for empowering community spaces where women feel safe and welcome as it can help them build relationships and integrate, which in turn can pave the way towards citizenship. The second articulates the need to recognise integration as a two-way process; instead of having migrants, such as vulnerable female migrants, bear full responsibility for how well they can become a part of British society, we believe in preventing separation and isolation by fostering inter-cultural dialogue across the diverse populations who live in the UK.

9. Using the term “left behind” fails to recognise the multidimensionality and complexity of creating a society that empowers its members. Moreover, it blames disadvantaged individuals like vulnerable migrants and ignores how social constructs (e.g. how media can help to shape the public’s perception of migrant groups) can exacerbate the barriers they face in being able to be active and engaged members of their community.

These barriers can be eradicated, though, by shifting away from victim blaming and instead building up the infrastructure and education needed to promote a societally-shared understanding of how active citizenship is a collective experience. What we mean by this is

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advocating for and implementing initiatives that bring people together, so they can work together to enrich the community they live in and share.

In our new research, we have explored this question in-depth and found examples of this type of approach in the U.S. These initiatives have, in fact, continued to push forward despite the immigration control agenda set forth by the current administration.

One such example is Welcoming America, which is a non-profit and non-partisan organisation that challenges cities across the U.S. to find their own ways to celebrate newcomers and long-term residents in their community and make their community a home for all. And to help support these grassroots movements of making the country a ‘nation of neighbours’, they facilitate connections, share and build on best practices, and promote change through the work of the cities and towns. Already the organisation is making an impact on its participating communities, such as Nashville, Tennessee; by working with the organisation, this city’s “climate for immigrants was transformed from a particularly toxic one to one that embraces immigrants, and the city and its residents have reaped the economic benefits.”

In the UK, a similar movement exists through the work of City of Sanctuary. As an organisation committed to building a culture of hospitality for all who seek sanctuary in the UK, they are helping to make hospitality a part of UK society. They have supported and developed over 90 different initiatives and have subsequently become a strong advocate for refugees and people seeking sanctuary.

Welcoming initiatives are gaining even more traction by extending the conversation to everyone in the UK. While only an annual celebration, the Great Get Together, which was inspired by Jo Cox, invites people to come together to celebrate their community in a fun, inclusive, and welcoming way. This year’s celebration alone resulted in 100,000 events being held across the UK, which suggests the feasibility of adopting a more long-term approach of recognising active citizenship as a collective experience.

11. English proficiency plays a vital role in an individual’s life in the UK, as it is a tool that can help an individual to understand and navigate their surroundings, as well as meet and befriend their fellow community members. Thus, newcomers to the UK, having recognised this link between English proficiency and their life in the UK, often seek English learning opportunities as a means to improve their command of the English language.

Unfortunately, accessing English learning provisions has become increasingly more difficult, in part due to aggressive funding cuts that occurred between 2008 to 2015. For example, funding for accredited ESOL was reduced by 40%, despite the growing number of migrants from countries with low rates of English proficiency. Moreover, even with the Government recently announcing a £10 million investment over the next five years in

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7To learn more about Welcoming America, you can visit their website: https://www.welcomingamerica.org/about/who-we-are
8Welcoming America, Stories of Impact: https://www.welcomingamerica.org/spotlight
9To learn more about City of Sanctuary, you can visit their website: https://cityofsanctuary.org
10To Learn more about the Great Get Together, you can visit their website: https://www.greatgettogether.org/
English learning for resettled Syrian refugees, it will not be able to compensate for the vast cuts made to English learning over these past five years.\textsuperscript{14}

In short, the current demand for English learning is outstripping the supply of providers, which has led to less people being able to participate in English lessons. In fact, in a recent report by Refugee Action, they found that for the majority of the English language providers they interviewed in England, their waiting lists stretched to almost 1,000 people. This same report also highlighted how the funding cuts have led to a reduction in options and time-spent for English learning. This is because providers have had to consolidate and/or shorten their classes in order to cope with the cuts. For many learners, this has meant the inability or increased difficulty in accessing provisions that match their learning needs and interests.\textsuperscript{15}

With access to English learning clearly being a challenge for migrants, we decided to explore this question in-depth, but specific to the experience of vulnerable female migrants. Our focus was driven by the fact that in discussions about English learning, these women are often presented as individuals who need to learn English for their families and wider society, rather than how it is a good in and of itself.

In speaking with these women, we learned how English is an essential part of their journey to feel empowered and able to make fulfilling choices, raise their aspiration and those of their friends and families, and to integrate and feel at home in the UK. We also learned of myriad, often pronounced barriers they faced in accessing English learning opportunities even with their strong motivation and desire to learn the language.

While funding could help to diminish some of these barriers, we found that other changes were also needed in order to empower these women to truly break down and overcome the barriers they face. These changes, which we included as recommendations in our report, are to:

a) adopt a whole-person approach to learning where service providers work together to ensure the various needs of the learning are being met (e.g. providing access to childcare so the learner can participate in classes),

b) ensure all countries have a national strategy on language learning that takes into consideration the wide-range of learning needs and interests of English learners, and

c) recognise the role of community-based spaces in fostering English learning as they can create a safe and welcoming place where a learner can gain the confidence and support needed to begin engaging with the language.

Our new research builds on these recommendations, most notably the latter. By exploring the unique space of women-only provisions in community spaces, we hope to understand how they may further breakdown learning barriers and, in turn, pave the way towards better integration and opportunity for citizenship. Through our initial data collection, we have already seen how these providers are helping females of various backgrounds re-gain confidence, pursue their respective personal and professional goals, and become

\textsuperscript{14}Refugee Action (2 March 2017), Refugees forced to wait up to two years for English lessons: http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/4360-2/

independent and active members of their community. As we continue our research, we hope to deepen our understanding of these positive impacts.

Finally, while we do recognise the value of English proficiency, we do not want to promote English learning as the one and only way to promote integration and active citizenship. As noted in the other sections of this submission, migrants need to feel welcomed and supported by the community-at-large in order for English proficiency to be a meaningful tool for life in the UK. In the same vein, changes to the naturalization and citizenship process should take into consideration how the country can better promote an overall culture of inclusion for all the diverse populations who have come to call UK their home. The current system and existing recommendations tend to focus on what the migrant can do, rather than what the migrant and the society can do together.

12. The Baytree Centre is one of our partner organisations and its mission is to, “create supportive pathways towards social inclusion for inner city families through education and training programme for women and girls.” As they are an organisation with whom we have a strong relationship and is regularly offering English learning services and activities to women, we have included them as a case study and a source of information for our research.

In studying and evaluating their work, we found that they have been able to effectively promote tolerance and help the individuals they serve in becoming meaningful members of society. This success is perhaps best explained by the fact that they offer contextualised support in a supportive, welcoming, safe, and inclusive community-based spaces. For example, their PEARL programme, which offers ESOL classes coupled with social activities, helps to bring women together to learn English in a fun, engaging, and social way.

Their impact is truly felt by the people they serve. One of their former students shared her experience with Baytree and her account captures the impact of this organisation in shaping her life in London. Specifically, she explained how the English classes she participated in helped her gain the confidence needed to pursue her goal of working for the NHS, as well as learn how to make meaningful and lasting friendships with women from different countries and cultures. More importantly, she shared that the support she received from Baytree motivated her to pursue outreach work with her community on health promotion campaigns and maternal health.

Another former student also had a similar experience. As a refugee from Kosovo, she arrived with a very limited command of the English language. However, by enrolling in the English and literacy classes at Baytree, she was given the support and guidance needed to not only learn English and acquire the skills needed to become a qualified accountant, but also become an ambassador and friend to newcomers to the Centre and London.

The success and impact we have witnessed at Baytree has subsequently led us to take on a new project, Helping Hands, that will complement the research we are conducting. This project which brings together service providers in Latvia, Poland, Slovenia, and Spain, has developed mentoring initiatives and engaging resources to welcome and support new migrants and refugees in these countries. While Baytree itself will not be involved in the

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16 You can learn more about the services offered at The Baytree Centre by visiting their website: http://www.baytreecentre.org/
17 You can learn more about this project here: http://wonderfoundation.org.uk/helping-hands-mentoring
development of this project, we will use the qualitative evidence we have gained from them to help inform our strategy.

**Conclusion**

Working alongside vulnerable female migrants, we have learned from them that they believe in citizenship and civic engagement. However, while the enthusiasm is there, societally and institutionally-constructed barriers have hindered their ability to feel accepted and welcomed as equal members of society. We hope that these barriers can be eradicated by implementing pragmatic and durable solutions that change the way our society views migrants and refugees.

Therefore, we are supportive of the Citizenship and Civic Engagement Committee’s effort to better understand the landscape of how the diverse populations who live in the UK experience citizenship and civic engagement. We hope that by sharing our work with vulnerable female migrants, we have been able to give voice to their perspective.

*30 August 2017*