



Refugee Women Connect

Report to SAS from Alison Moore, May 2020

The COVID-19 crisis has presented great challenges for our service users and to our service provision but with resourcefulness, flexibility and the help of our funders we have been able to continue to deliver support and advocacy for refugee women.

As COVID-19 was unfolding, we took the difficult but necessary decision to move all of our face-to-face services to virtual formats. All group work, drop-ins, one-to-one sessions and home visits have had to be adapted to utilise whatever technology is available to the women we support. Wi-Fi is not available in asylum accommodation and not all women have smart phones. Those that do are often living on £5 per day asylum support - around 50% below the rate of mainstream benefits. With food prices increasing and access to food banks more difficult, women frequently have to choose between eating and buying phone credit. Phones and internet availability is a lifeline during this pandemic - providing a way to stay in touch with loved ones, home-school children, access important health advice or simply call for help. With digital poverty, social isolation has also greatly increased which is especially worrying for those already struggling with the trauma of forced displacement, sexual and gender-based violence and underlying mental health problems.

Working from home, Refugee Women Connect have been able to continue to offer services via WhatsApp, video calling and telephone, utilising language line when necessary. The mental health team have kept up their 1:1 sessions and carry out weekly check-ins with our most vulnerable service users. They have also rolled out a wellness programme which includes virtual art therapy, online yoga, an emoji support group and the distribution of home activities including colouring sheets, puzzles and English language resources. The outreach team have also continued to keep services going, providing phone check-ins, offering information on health and asylum updates, crisis prevention, anti-trafficking work, online ESOL classes and distributing isolation packs where needed. A temporary helpline was set up, running three days a week and new referrals continue to be received.

The destitution fund has proven to be a great form of support as it helps to provide basic essentials such as food, personal hygiene and cleaning products during this time of crisis. Having access to this fund is vital, particularly at a time like this, as it is supporting our service users in keeping themselves safe. Recognising digital and phone access to be an essential need at this time, phone top ups are being provided where needed and volunteers have helped us manage the additional demands of telephone working with the aid of five newly donated mobile phones.

We've been working closely with sector partners and our recently convened advocacy group of 'experts by experience' to influence improvements in conditions for our service users through policy change. Evidence gathered from our service users has been submitted to three Home Affairs Select Committee hearings and we have signed multiple joint letters to

ministers alongside Refugee Action, British Red Cross, Right to Remain, Women for Refugee Women and Asylum Matters. We have also partnered with University of Birmingham in a study looking at the effects of COVID-19 on refugee survivors of Sexual and Gender Based Violence and will be submitting findings in the next few weeks.

Despite the challenges of the current circumstances, we are finding that many women value the new ways we are working and some prefer virtual contact to face-to-face meetings. Women are also using our various online groups to offer each other support and encouragement on a daily basis, building an organic virtual community. We're all looking forward to seeing each other in person again and this period has not been without it's challenges but it has also taught us new ways of working post-pandemic.

Since the start of the pandemic...

- 300 text messages in 12 languages were sent to remind service users that we are available on the phone
- 200 service users were contacted over the phone since the start of lockdown and assessed for further weekly calls if particularly vulnerable
- 9 women have received weekly 1:1 mental health sessions
- 44 women have received weekly mental health phone check-ins
- 25 women have received Wellness Packs
- 14 women have received follow-up mental health support (arranging CMHT support, liaising w/ psychiatric services, GP support, etc.)
- 14 women have participated in the Art/Photography WhatsApp group, including daily tasks and one weekly live zoom session
- 13 women have participated in the Yoga WhatsApp group, including daily links to free yoga videos with daily self-care questions and twice weekly live zoom sessions
- 10 women have participated in the Worries group, including daily tasks and ad-hoc group check-in phone calls or video chat
- 28 food parcels have been delivered to the most vulnerable
- 10-12 deliveries made each week of clothes, hygiene packs, cleaning supplies and isolation packs including activities and toys for those with children
- 58 women have signed up for virtual drop ins
- 29 phones topped up
- 5 ESOL groups set up