

# Supporting marginalised and excluded migrant women

For over three decades Hibiscus has supported some of the most marginalised women, many of whom are not afforded equal rights to protection and support: migrant women caught up in the immigration and criminal justice systems (CJS). All have had traumatic experiences and over half have been subjected to trafficking. The Women and Girls Initiative, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund), enabled Hibiscus to create a Women's Centre, a community hub for their work. Over the five years of funding, the women they supported became the centre of everything they do.

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## What is Hibiscus?

Established in 1986, based in North London, Hibiscus is a charity which provides support to Black, minoritised and migrant women who are caught up in the immigration and criminal justice systems, most of whom have experienced multiple and compounding traumas. They have grown to a team of 25 delivering a range of services to women (in prison, detention centres and whilst living in communities) and with many funders (see [hibiscusinitiatives.org.uk](http://hibiscusinitiatives.org.uk) for more details).

A holistic model, developed over time, combines advice and support on legal issues, ESOL classes and a changing menu of training and workshops that increase women's confidence, skills and knowledge. One of the unmet needs was for connection, community and solidarity: many are separated from families and have been further isolated in prisons or detention centres. The Fund's Women and Girls Initiative enabled Hibiscus to fulfil a dream: The Women's Centre, in the same building as their offices, was conceived and designed in consultation with service users.

The centre was hugely appreciated and widely used before having to close for 18 months due to COVID-19. It is now open again, although not yet back to its original levels. Over the five years of the funding, the centre – in person and online - has welcomed over 440 women from 64 countries, with close to 200 being supported each year, delivering 384 educational classes, 505 workshops and 309 group or individual sessions. Classes and workshops cover rights and entitlements, English language, and a range of well-being activities from yoga to crafting and regular celebratory events.

Hibiscus also offers casework, which needs to be long-term and often open-ended: the complexity of women's situations means they stay with Hibiscus for 18 months to two years. Counselling is a core provision, and increasingly so as access to other mental health services shrank over the last two years.

The Women's Centre is now a space that women can still access when they no longer need a case worker but do want the solidarity and community.

## Why is it needed?

The profile of women referred to or contacting Hibiscus has changed over time, with the last year seeing more EU nationals who no longer have the right to live in the UK. Many have no networks or community and are facing multiple challenges, including destitution. Their immigration status means many fall outside other welfare and social support provision: Hibiscus is literally a lifeline.

*"It is like a warm arm, we know we have her just in case."<sup>1</sup>*

*"It's helped me get to the next step, I don't want them to let me go."*

*"I had no-one else to go to court with me. She was the only one."*

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<sup>1</sup>All quotes are from women supported by Hibiscus. They are taken from the project's evaluation reports, written with the support of Women and Girls Initiative funding.

*"When I call [the housing association] sometimes they don't do stuff. If she doesn't chase up, they won't help you unless you have someone of authority."*

*"I can talk to her about anything. I feel she got me. I got loads of caseworkers, and they think this is a job – she does it with a passion from her heart. With nothing given to her, she comes out every day with a smile and fight for you."*

*"They are empathetic, there is no judgement. The connection with them is a big help for me."*

Hibiscus is a responsive learning organisation, flexing in order to respond to changes in trafficking routes and immigration laws. This served the group well in adapting to the pandemic: it showed the vital difference which a comparatively small amount of funding can make to women facing destitution. During the pandemic Hibiscus provided for basic needs through supermarket and clothing vouchers, emergency accommodation and internet-enabled phone or tablet along with data top-ups to enable women to participate in activities and access support. This learning has resulted in an emergency fund being added to the core model.

The first two years of the Women's Centre saw referrals and casework double, more women were able to access this specialist culturally sensitive, trauma-informed service. Hibiscus recognises the crossroad that the women they work with are at, and how critical quality immigration advice is. Several Hibiscus staff are certified to give this, since getting it wrong can result in destitution and even deportation. Women also struggle with housing, mental and physical health. Recognising these struggles and their impacts means that Hibiscus adapts their offer according to each woman's needs and capacities, and ensure the staff team and volunteers have a range of cultural backgrounds and languages. These are part of what enables building and maintaining trust.

Whilst some women found attending sessions easier online, others missed the Women's Centre and the community it enabled.

Online access meant Hibiscus were able to support women outside London: these learnings mean that a hybrid model will be trialled over the next period, including having an IT specialist volunteer to upskill women on technology.

*"Well the only thing I'm up to [looking forward to] is like to be comfortable and be safe so I can bring my daughter, To play with kids ... with other moms to have a conversation to learn new things."*

*"I had many caseworkers.... Then came [name] who could speak Albanian; I can speak more comfortable, and more."*

*"Just to have a good few hours a week to spend with other people and my baby playing because being an asylum seeker, you don't get many chances to go and take your daughter somewhere."*

## What difference does it make?

Hibiscus provides a safe, women's only space for migrant women that enables multiple disadvantaged women to regularise their status and rebuild their selves and their lives by centring on their needs and voices. A welcoming women's only space is an essential starting point in feeling safe to engage with the service.

*"Feeling safe is the main thing because that's why we are here because we were unsafe before."*

*"For us to feel safe somewhere is a very big deal."*

*"[Hibiscus feels like] home; both the people and the space. We've done so much in this building. Loads of memories. Had so much fun, it's like a little sanctuary."*

*"I've cried tears in this room."*

Hibiscus's final evaluation report found that women "wouldn't want to change anything" within the Women's Centre or Hibiscus more broadly, reporting extremely high levels of satisfaction with the support they received. This is amplified by a desire to promote Hibiscus to others who might benefit. The National Lottery grant outcomes led to a commitment to develop an empowerment and agency strategy across all Hibiscus services which would recentre the voices of service users at all levels of the organisation. The Women's Centre will offer training, and flexible routes to involvement such as peer volunteers and lived experience internships: supportive mechanisms and platforms to encourage women to become lived-experience leaders to advocate for and use their voice to challenge inequalities and influence systems change. An example was a 'Stories with a Purpose' course taken by nine women.

*"Feel power in using my voice, feeling more confident"*

*"We each have a story to tell, not afraid to talk to let others know"*

*"Everyone has a layer of pain and a layer of gain"*

Hibiscus is strongly embedded in the landscape of provision for women in contact with the criminal justice system across London: they are recognised as a vital specialist service for migrant women, and have been commissioned as a specialist provider for this in multiple partnership contracts. Particular successes include the award-winning Protea Clinic partnership with King's Legal Clinic and Hammersmith & Fulham Law Centre and the recent partnership with the Maya Centre to provide intercultural therapy to women Hibiscus supports.

## Stronger evidence base and outcomes measurement

The diverse nature of Hibiscus' services and complex needs of the women it supports means it has always been challenging to demonstrate the impact of its work. They have used the National Lottery funding to invest in more robust systems and processes, including a case management system and using the outcomes star tool to better measure impact. Over the last five years Hibiscus developed and revised, in the light of learning, a Theory of Change. These are some of the ways women, as part of the evaluation, described the difference Hibiscus had made for them.

*"I've registered with a college. I will now try to do my bit and work out the papers, but I know they are there to help me if something goes wrong."*

*"I feel more connected and less isolated"*

*"It was after meeting them [Hibiscus] that I realised I was trafficked, I didn't even know what the word 'trafficked' was. People like me need to know about it... They don't use that word [trafficked] in Jamaica. I didn't even know I could claim asylum. And LOADS of us don't know."*

*"They ask me about domestic violence. I tell them everything. They invite me here for singing, I meet people, drink tea. We laugh instead of crying."*

*"[They] told me about college [and said] we are going to enrol you and you will do English and maths. I just got my GCSE. I'm so happy and proud of myself."*

*"It gives me hope. When you are crying they give a positive response. They calm me down. They give me faith and belief. Lift up my spirits."*

Other women talked about the importance of advocacy with the Home Office, housing and being enabled to navigate statutory services. The provision of emergency supplies, including clothing, mattered hugely to women who were close to destitution. As the quotes above illustrate, being able to meet with others, engage in joyful and new activities that lifted spirits mattered intensely.

## Why should you support it?

What Hibiscus does and how it does it is based on good evidence through their own internal feedback mechanisms and a series of external evaluations.

Women trust Hibiscus, they feel seen, heard and welcomed. The longer they are connected the more they are able to build confidence, a sense of belonging and connection, hope and courage. Increasingly women who have used the service are building their capacity and knowledge to advocate for themselves and others. This is made possible by reducing isolation and building their social capital so that they can use their own lived experiences to connect with others and influence perceptions and responses. Their stories and voices have the potential to shift perceptions of asylum seekers.

Hibiscus also has an emerging strategic direction that gives more prominence to working for policy change: this has the potential to make change not just for the individual women they support but more widely for black and migrant women caught up in the CJS and immigration systems. Systems change advocacy is rarely funded by national or local governments, since part of its intention is to hold them to account, but it is vital if more marginalised migrant women are to be treated with equity, respect and dignity.

This document draws on the final report to The Fund and the independent evaluation report on the WGI project by Cloud Chamber

Hibiscus Initiatives  
Resource for London  
356 Holloway Road  
London  
N7 6PA

[www.hibiscusinitiatives.org.uk](http://www.hibiscusinitiatives.org.uk)

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# Hibiscus

for social justice

The Women's Centre set up by Hibiscus has been supported by The National Lottery Community Fund's Women and Girls Initiative (WGI). This briefing has been produced by the WGI Learning and Impact Services partners. Further information, and other blogs, briefings and reports can be found on the [project page](#).

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