

2012

London Borough of
Tower Hamlets

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PROMOTING EDUCATION

EDUCATORS' FACTSHEET



Key Messages from Research

1. Our research identified that a poor command of English was one of the most prominent barriers to employment for Bangladeshi and Somali women, particularly among those who have recently arrived in the country. This was closely related to a general lack of job related skills and qualifications and a lack of familiarity with how to go about getting a job.
2. Demand for ESOL in the borough is very high, particularly among women. There are a wide range providers in the public and voluntary sectors who offer a variety of courses at different levels and targeted at different groups. However, our research found that it is not uncommon for Bangladeshi and Somali women to attend ESOL classes for many years and make limited progress in developing their proficiency.

Background

The 2011 Census results show that in 19% of households in the borough, English is not the main language spoken. Tower Hamlets Annual Residents Survey in 2008/09 found that 26% of Bangladeshi adults main spoken language at home was Bengali. There is no comparable data available for adult Somalians but our research found that 3% of Tower Hamlets pupils speak Somali as their mother tongue and 6% used Newham Language Shop (2008/9) Somali interpretation and translation Service¹.

Tower Hamlets Health and Lifestyle survey (2008/9) showed 38% of Bangladeshi women rated their proficiency in spoken English as poor. There is a strong correlation between language proficiency and worklessness. Those residents with English as an additional language who were workless were more than four times (30%) as likely to rate their proficiency as poor than those in full-time work (7%)².

This Factsheet is aimed at educators - schools, further education providers, organisations providing ESOL courses, career advisors and managers commissioning lifelong learning services. Learning from our research 'Life Chances, Life Choices', 'Women and Worklessness in Tower Hamlets: A quantitative analysis, consultation with local women and the 'Overcoming the Barriers' project have been used to develop this Factsheet. The research explored barriers to work for women from Bangladeshi and Somali communities and included recommendations about how the council and local agencies could support them into work. In addition, we consulted with women from both of these communities and the support agencies that work with them. We have also commissioned four community organisations to work with different age range of women from these communities to get them job ready and help them into employment.

¹ Research Briefing (June 2010), A profile of residents by language: Key facts about language use and need in Tower Hamlets, Published by Tower Hamlets Corporate Research Unit

² As above

What the evidence shows?

- Poor quality and disrupted schooling for some Somali women back in Somalia meant that many had low levels of education with basic literacy in their mother tongue. As a result it takes them much longer and harder to learn English.
- Women didn't get much chance to practice speaking English outside of their ESOL class therefore, many reported feeling shy when trying to communicate in English.
- Typically a lack of language skills had a multiple impact in that it reduced women's self confidence in the English speaking environment. Even when they had good English they expressed that they were not confident in using their language skills in unfamiliar environments.
- Many recently arrived women faced double barrier of needing to develop English language skills and gaining relevant qualifications. Many women were not able or confident enough in English language to complete their course work or pass exams for popular courses they wanted to do such as childcare or social care which requires NVQ level 3 qualifications.
- Newly arrived women who tended to be younger were highly motivated to learn English and eventually find employment. One woman who wanted to learn English and work said *"If my mother in-law knew English, she wouldn't constantly need others to take her to the hospital and things. I don't want to be like her. I want to look after myself"*³.
- Many women, even after attending ESOL classes for many years, made only limited progress in developing their proficiency in English. Many of these women found the pressure of their domestic and other responsibilities acted as a barrier to developing their language skills, *"I know mothers from our area who is here more ten years and who can't write... These people, the country has oppressed them, they have become stressed"*⁴. It appears one of the main reasons why these women did not progress with English was because they did not have contact with people outside of their community who routinely spoke to them in English. *"Though I struggled at first to learn I eventually picked up the language while working"*
- Evaluation of our pilot project working with UK- born younger women who had good English language skills faced other barriers to finding work. While many young women have successfully found work, others reported low levels of motivation to find work and were not able to identify role models of women amongst their family and friends who were working. Our research 'Life Chances, Life Choices' found having a supportive person in a young person's life often made a crucial difference to a young woman's ability to get a job whether this be a sibling or parent, teacher or a friend.
- Our research also suggested that short term funding for ESOL courses acted a barrier to supporting women to progress successfully. Data from the Council's lifelong learning service shows that on average it takes five years for a learner to progress from entry level 1 to entry level 3 in ESOL, and for many women with limited prior

³ "Life chances, life choices: exploring patterns of work and worklessness among Bangladeshi and Somali women in Tower Hamlets by Naila Kabeer and Peroline Ainsworth (June 2011)

⁴ As above

experience of formal learning, it can take significantly longer.

- Among Somali there was significant interest in training support to enable them to set small business or become self-employed.

How Educators can support

- Some of the issues that have given rise to unemployment among Bangladeshi and Somali women can be traced to their childhood. There is a significant role for schools and information, advice and guidance services for children and young people to continue to promote employment opportunities for the young generation which instils confidence, career aspirations and challenges gender and ethnic stereotype. We know that “young people are influenced by many interacting factors, such as their own circumstances and the views of their families”⁵ and we need therefore to work with these young women throughout their school years rather than waiting to start career guidance at transitional period when they have reached 14 years of age.
 - More active involvement of women with limited English with the school system could have positive benefits. Some schools are actively working to engage wide range of communities in their school activities but others need to be more proactive in this. Women could help with catering, and participate in cultural activities during school functions. This can offer the possibility of socialising and learning more about the world beyond the home.
- As well as classroom teaching we might want to think about informal ways of teaching ESOL. For example combining it with trips to places of interest and attractions. Some organisations are already doing this but it needs to be more widespread. It will have a myriad of benefits such as practicing English outside of the classroom, using public transport, improving self confidence and independence.
 - It might be worth exploring combining ESOL with other popular courses that women want to do such as ESOL with Childcare / Social care even if it is at a very basic level. This might also open up the opportunities for women to have work experience placements. Not only will they be learning about the subject matter and practicing English in a new environment but also understanding and experiencing ‘the world of work’. The recent APPG inquiry into Ethnic Minority Female Unemployment: Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Heritage Women (Nov 2012) recommended that the government should look at ways to encourage more work-focused ESOL classes for those who want them. This could involve course syllabuses being linked to vocational information, as well as a link to job searches⁶.
 - Although many organisations like East London Small Business Centre and the Council’s Employment and Enterprise Team are working to support and develop SMEs in the Borough, women in our research sample need an even more basic level of help that meets their specific needs in setting up their own businesses.

⁵ McCrone, T and Filmer-Sankey, C. (2012). *A review of careers professionals' involvement with schools in the UK* (NFER research programme: From education to employment). Slough: NFER.

⁶ All Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Community, Ethnic Minority Female Unemployment: Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Heritage Women, First Report of Session 2012–2013.

This is support by the recent findings by APPG inquiry into Ethnic Minority Female Unemployment: Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage women (Nov 2012). Support agencies need to work in a targeted way to teach them about how to register their company, about limited companies, tax and payroll / PAYE, business rates, opening business account and finding suitable accommodation as well as helping with identifying funding support or applying for small business grant etc. Most of these women have limited English so attending a standard 'business course' is not an option for them. They are looking to start very small like sewing clothes and doing door to door selling, catering / supplying food or having a food stall in a market / festivals etc.

- Some of the points mentioned above will depend on the availability of funding and others may just involve making adjustment in our commissioning procedure. Commissioners might want to re-think how they fund ESOL projects in the future. Yearly funding forces projects to stop and start which provides no security for learners or the organisations that run them. Exploring opportunities to fund projects for longer periods with an outcome target of 'women being 'job ready' at the end of the period may prove valuable.

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