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London Borough of
Tower Hamlets

ahca.hannan

WOMEN, WORK AND WORKLESSNESS FACTSHEET



What is worklessness?

The Department for Work and Pensions definition of 'worklessness' is people of working age who are not in formal employment but who are looking for a job (unemployed), together with people of working age who are neither formally employed nor looking for formal employment (economically inactive). So 'worklessness' refers to people who are unemployed or economically inactive (including students) and who are in receipt of working age benefits.¹

Why did we commission the local research?

The borough faces significant challenges in tackling deprivation and particularly in raising employment levels as a way out of poverty. We know that the difference in levels of economic activity is greatest and most stark in the employment rate amongst women. Almost 78%² of the borough's Bangladeshi/Pakistani women are economically inactive compared to 30% of white women.³ Women are also likely to be more adversely affected as a result of welfare reforms being introduced over the next two years.⁴ In order to better understand the issues faced by these groups the council commissioned two research projects to help explore the barriers experienced by these women and the approaches which might improve their access to employment⁵.

This factsheet summarises the key findings of the research and is intended to help shape future policy and interventions.

¹ Understanding workless people and communities: A literature review, by ies (Institute for Employment Studies) on behalf of DWP, (2005)

² ONS, Annual population Survey, (four year average, 2008-11)

³ ONS, Annual population Survey, Nomis-Oct 2011

⁴ The Impact on Women of the Budget 2011 (Fawcett Society)

⁵ "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) and Women and Worklessness in Tower Hamlets A multi-factor risk analysis (DRAFT) by Les Mayhew and Gillian Harper (January 2011)

The qualitative research study by Kabeer and Ainsworth drew on interviews with 35 Bangladeshi and 29 Somali women. 26 of the Bangladeshi women grew up in the UK and 9 who came here as adults. Of the 29 Somali women interviewed 20 came to the UK as adults compared to 9 who grew up in the UK. The researchers also interviewed community workers and Council staff working to promote women's access to work. They explored the differences between women who arrived in the UK as adults in the 1970s, second generation women who were born in the UK and more recent arrivals. A further report by Mayhew Harper Associates looked at the profile of women who are workless to explore key factors and trends related to this group.

Tower Hamlets labour market characteristics

Only 70% of the working age population of Tower Hamlets are economically active. Our female economic activity rate is very low at 55%, much lower than London (66%) and England (70%)⁶, and second only to Newham.

Accurate local data on Somali residents is limited but some national data shows that Somali born migrants have the lowest employment rate of all migrant communities in the UK. GLA analysis (2005) found in London only 16% of the Somali population are in employment,⁷ 50% have no qualifications and only 3% have higher education qualifications.⁸ It is estimated that amongst women the level of

⁶ Annual Population Survey, Nomis 7 Oct 2011

⁷ DMAG Briefing, 2005/1, Jan 2005, Country of Birth and Labour Market Outcomes in London

⁸ The Somali Muslim Community in England, Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities, Communities and Local Government: London, March 2009

education and language proficiency is even lower.⁹

In contrast the Tower Hamlets economy is worth over £6 billion and provides some 200,000 jobs, 5% of London's total employment.¹⁰ In the last decade the borough has seen job growth of 60%, five times that of London, yet levels of resident employment remain well below the London average. This reflects an acute mis-match between residents' skills and the employment opportunities that are available.

Historical context of Bangladeshi and Somali

Women in Tower Hamlets

Very few of the first generation of women to migrate to the borough from Bangladesh took up employment. The assumption that this would change over time and that second generation women would work in ways that mirror the wider UK population has not happened as expected. Although many more second-generation women are in work compared to their mothers, they continue to be the group with the highest level of economic inactivity in Tower Hamlets and the UK. A contributing factor may also be that Bangladeshi women have continued to arrive in the UK as wives of British Bangladeshi men over time. In Kabeer and Ainsworth's sample only one recently arrived woman had any experience of work.

The majority of the Somali population migrated to the UK in the 1990s due to the civil war. In contrast to the Bangladeshi community, Kabeer found that most Somali women, whether in Somalia or in the UK, have grown up with the idea and experience of women participating in economic activity alongside having responsibility for domestic duties.

⁹ The Somali Muslim Community in England, Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities, Communities and Local Government: London, March 2009

¹⁰ Tower Hamlets Employment Strategy, April 2011

There may be a number of factors that explain Somali women's absence from the labour market despite this 'tradition' of work. The civil war context and often enforced flight interrupted education and work experiences. Many also encountered problems in getting legal migrant status once they arrived in the UK and many women described their first few years in the country as 'scary' 'difficult', 'rough' and 'traumatising.'

Some facts about Bangladeshi and Somali women living in Tower Hamlets

- Bangladeshi and Somali women are more likely to live in social housing; much less likely to have English as a first language or to have any educational qualifications above diploma level¹¹.
- Bangladeshi and Somali communities often live in the most deprived areas¹².
- Women from these groups are also twice as likely to live in households on benefits than their White counterparts.
- Almost 26% of Somali women live in a single parent family compared to a very small percentage of Bangladeshi women. However, higher percentages of Bangladeshi women live in three-generation households. Almost 63% of the three generational households are Bangladeshis suggesting that

¹¹ Women and Worklessness in Tower Hamlets A multi-factor risk analysis (DRAFT) by Les Mayhew and Gillian Harper (January 2011)

¹² Women and Worklessness in Tower Hamlets A multi-factor risk analysis (DRAFT) by Les Mayhew and Gillian Harper (January 2011)

Bangladeshi women are more likely to have caring responsibilities than women in general.¹³

- Bangladeshi women begin families at a younger age and typically have more children closer together. The peak age for births amongst Bangladeshi mothers is 25-29 compared to 30-34 for other groups. Bangladeshi women on average have 2.73 children compared to 1.87 for all ethnic groups.¹⁴ This means that Bangladeshi women have often not been able to train or get any work experience before they become mothers and that the potential time span of women looking after young children is longer.
- Approximately 7,000 Bangladeshi women do not have English as a first language nor any educational qualifications, which significantly increases the probability of their being economically inactive.
- Poor health is also a barrier. Hospital admission rates in the 20-64 age range (for both men and women) were over 50% higher than for other groups.¹⁵
- Somali women share certain risk factors with Bangladeshi women; income deprivation, educational attainment and language. However, the data suggests that there are differences in housing and household type with for example, an

¹³ Women and Worklessness in Tower Hamlets A multi-factor risk analysis (DRAFT) by Les Mayhew and Gillian Harper (January 2011)

¹⁴ Women and Worklessness in Tower Hamlets A multi-factor risk analysis (DRAFT) by Les Mayhew and Gillian Harper (January 2011)

¹⁵ Women and Worklessness in Tower Hamlets A multi-factor risk analysis (DRAFT) by Les Mayhew and Gillian Harper (January 2011)

even greater proportion of Somali women living in social housing and more single adult households.

Given the facts listed above we need to identify and understand the causes that are producing these outcomes. Kabeer and Ainsworth's research highlights some of the issues:

Employment and Training

The extent to which women engage in paid work varies considerably between the first and second generation of Bangladeshi and Somali Women.

Almost all the 26 UK-born Bangladeshis in Kabeer and Ainsworth's sample were either working or had worked at some stage in the past compared to only one in the recent migrants group of women who were typically joining their husbands in the UK.

Many women looking for work cited the current economic situation as a factor. This was exacerbated by the limited range of jobs that women would consider and the strong preference for work within the immediate surrounding area. *"I've been to interviews, I have tried literally everything but zilch. Looking on the internet, asking friends and families... .."*

Of the sample of 29 Somali women 14 were in full or part time employment or education. Of the rest, 4 were economically inactive but were looking for work, 7 were not in work but had been in the past, 3 were in full time study whilst just 1 had never worked and was not looking for work. Most of those currently in employment had experienced long periods of unemployment and even now, many can only find temporary or part-time work although they would like to work full time.

Women who were interested in paid work, whether for the first time as in the case of many recent arrivals or after extended periods of

absence, often lacked relevant skills and qualifications. For recent arrivals, command of English was the first barrier.

Those brought up in the UK faced other problems. They either lacked relevant qualifications or the long absence from the market had eroded their self confidence and their ability to deal with work culture. *“For me, I can read and write and speak English, but it’s just as difficult to get into employment (as if I couldn’t). Sometimes, I think that it’s a lack of confidence because I haven’t been around people. Believe me, when I’m around people, I get tongue twisted and I don’t know how to speak properly. Around white people mostly. I’m always around my kind of people and I’m always in a community where I’m most comfortable. And all of a sudden I meet a white person or a black person and I don’t know what to say.”*

For some recently arrived Somali women the lack of English language skills is a significant barrier to work. Almost all the women who arrived as adults had attended some kind of ESOL classes but some had failed to learn the language, even after a number of years.

Caring responsibilities

Marriage and motherhood were key stages when Bangladeshi women dropped out of the labour market, often for extended periods. Some married women were also looking after elderly or ill members of the family which prevented them from returning to work once children were in school. Care responsibilities were sometimes so significant as to cause exhaustion and leaving little time for work or training for work. *‘I was his sole carer. Getting him up, he was in a wheelchair, bathing him, looking after him and there was the little one as well so it was a 24 hour job’.*

There was widespread mistrust of childminders and most working mothers relied on family or neighbours. However, nurseries, breakfast clubs and after-school clubs were viewed positively by women. There was less available support in caring for the elderly.

In contrast a large number of Somali mothers were coping on their own. A common trend is of single parent families. *“Somali women don’t get help from their husbands and have to do everything themselves. Their men are often chewing ‘khat’ while their women are left to take care of their children and their homes. She is running everything from cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children.She doesn’t have time to study or work if she wanted to”.*

Social barriers

Some women faced barriers in terms of negative attitudes to work amongst their husbands and in-laws. *“My husband doesn’t tell me where the classes are held and I am tired of waiting for him to take me everywhere – he takes me to the shops and the doctors and anything I need, he gets for me.”*

Many Bangladeshi and Somali women said that visible signs of their Islamic identity e.g. the hijab undermined their chances of getting a job, particularly outside of the public sector. *“I think some retail places didn’t take me because of my headscarf. I’m pretty sure that is why. Places like Selfridges and things, you have to be a certain way. They see you wearing a headscarf, they look at you differently. You can tell because of the way everyone was dressed and their make-up was immaculate and I think it was because of that. I don’t wear any of that, so that doesn’t help.”*

Health

Around half of the Somali migrant respondents suffer from physical health problems, including injuries from war. *“work isn’t viable for me because I am not healthy. I have heart failure, my heart is not working well, I am functioning on tablets. I also have physical problems, my hands, physically, the nerves hurt me and it was too hard a job for me, you know, it was a job where you are using your hands and everything ... that is the reason why Tower Hamlets gave me resignation and I was told sorry you can’t do this job, you can’t work”.*

Many Somali women also spoke of mental health issues. Research by the Centre for Psychiatry found 14% of a sample of 143 Somali refugees was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁶

Knowledge and know-how

Some highlighted the lack of clear guidance and information about the benefit system, in particular how working affects benefits. Some feared that even working for a few hours would jeopardise housing or other benefits.

Many women did not know where and how to look for jobs. *“I would like to know what I can do to find a job, where do I go. Tell me some names. The Job Centre just says: “Go find yourself a job and if you find anything then tell us.” They have the Job Point, the machines in the centre. I know how to use them but when I phone someone about a job, they say that I need this kind of qualification and so I can’t do it, even though I think I can do it because I have been learning lots. The people there just say you have to find jobs, apply for jobs, that’s it. They tell you that you have to be active to find a job. They just tell you what to do. I would like them to find me a nice job that will suit me.”*

However, there were a number of factors that helped women in to work. Low parental aspirations combined with cultural norms against work accounted for worklessness whilst for others having supportive parents and partners helped them to better combine domestic responsibilities with paid work.

Positive experiences in training and voluntary work provided some women with the technical qualifications as well as the basic skills for the world of work. *“Because I have been working with community organisations, I know where to go to get a job and I know what to do. I know how to apply for a job and I have experience behind me.”*

Learning from Research

The qualitative research highlighted the significant extent of the barriers that still remain for enabling women into employment. Kabeer and Ainsworth made a number of recommendations to help challenge the cycle of worklessness and address the barriers faced by Bangladeshi and Somali women. These are outlined below for further discussion.

- Foster higher aspirations specifically about work amongst Bangladeshi and Somali children that mitigate against their current experiences of work and worklessness in the communities where they live.
- Highlight role models to young people of how individuals and families can achieve and benefit from a work-life balance. Young people to be encouraged to think about careers more broadly than the stereo-typical jobs categorised as for men or for women in the community.
- Identifying the best possible tools to improve parental engagement about education and careers
- Explore how to improve voluntary and civic participation options for people interested in employment as a bridging / skills development tool. *‘I would suggest that women are encouraged to focus on getting work.in a household where a mother is educated, the child advances better. I believe that the progress I have made can be credited to my mother...Because if the mother works, the child gets a positive image and they will think “My mother works, so I must work.”(a Somali respondent)*

¹⁶ Information Centre for Asylum and Refugees (ICAR), Briefing, 2007

- Providing clear and accessible information about the benefit system might address some aspects of the perceived benefit trap. Fear of the loss of benefits, particularly housing benefits, is a factor that prevents many people from even looking for work.
- Recognition of and practical support for those with caring responsibilities is critical not only for childcare but also support for carers of elderly or disabled family members.
- Review the impact of ESOL provision to improve outcomes from the service. A suggested improvement would be to focus on promoting employability, skills and aptitude needed for the workplace, and a broader understanding of British society and citizenship.
- Increase targeted advertising to better reach Somali women. Advertising on websites and East End Life does not appear to work for communities that have not yet penetrated the system. We need to consider how we can attract more Somali candidates when vacancies are advertised.
- As evidence shows, many Bangladeshi and Somali women prefer to work part-time and in the care sector so targeted recruitment in those sectors would potentially benefit this group. This could be provided through internships, partnerships with private companies and incentives for agencies to recruit from across these groups.