

**Life chances, life choices: exploring patterns of work  
and worklessness among Bangladeshi and Somali  
women in Tower Hamlets**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **1. Objectives of the report**

Large numbers of the population in Tower Hamlets are not in work, and have not been in work for prolonged periods of time. This ‘workless’ population is likely to belong to the poorest households in the borough and those relying most heavily on benefits. Quantitative data suggest that Bangladeshi and Somali women are disproportionately represented among this ‘workless’ group. The aim of this report is to provide detailed qualitative insights into the factors that impede and facilitate access to paid work among women from these two communities.

There are a number of rationales for such analysis. First of all, facilitating women’s access to the labour market is likely to help reduce poverty in their households. As a corollary, it would also reduce the number of households living on benefits. And finally, barriers to women’s labour force participation within these communities represent barriers to women’s participation more broadly defined. Enabling women to engage in some form of paid work is likely to constitute the most important route through which women within these ethnic minority communities can become active citizens in the wider society in which they live. Such participation holds the key to breaking the inter-generational cycle of deprivation that has characterised the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets and preventing it from developing in the more recently settled Somali community. This executive summary summarises the key findings and recommendations of as well as providing a road map for the longer report.

### **2. Ethnicity, work and poverty in the UK**

National statistics have repeatedly confirmed the relevance of ethnicity to patterns of poverty and inequality in the UK. Although statistical data about Somalis tend to be subsumed within the general category of black Africans, a variety of indicators show that the Bangladeshi community is among the most disadvantaged in Britain. A higher percentage of Bangladeshis are to be found in the lowest earnings quintile than any other ethnic group and there are no Bangladeshis in the highest quintile. While there is little difference in the levels of labour force participation between Bangladeshi men and men from other ethnic groups, they are more likely to be in part-time and self-employment. Bangladeshi women have the lowest levels of labour force participation of any ethnic group. The community also reports the highest levels of child poverty and the greatest reliance on benefits. Available data on the Somali community suggest a high incidence of depression and physical health problems, possibly a reflection of the trauma of civil war and forced migration. In Tower Hamlets, they are as likely as Bangladeshi households to live in the most deprived areas and in households receiving benefits.

### **3. Methodology**

The study carried out in-depth qualitative interviews with 35 women from the Bangladeshi community and 29 from the Somali, using a loose life history approach. These were supplemented by interviews with key informants working within the community and the council to promote women’s access to work. Prior statistical analysis carried out by Mayhew Harper Associates synthesized data from a number of local surveys to estimate factors predicting the risk of economic inactivity within the borough: these included being of Bangladeshi origin, being female, living in social housing, not having English as a first language, having no qualifications at diploma level or higher and suffering poor health. We used these factors to select a purposive sample of women from each community using ‘cold-calling’, word of mouth and introduction through community workers.

We sought to include women currently at work and currently inactive. The latter category proved to be very heterogeneous and included women who have never worked and do not see themselves working in the foreseeable future, women who have worked in the past and plan to work again and women with no prior work experience but interested in finding work. In addition, we tried to ensure that our sample included women with and without command of English and with various housing statuses. All respondents were informed of the purpose of the research and assured full anonymity. They were asked for permission to tape the interviews and to give their consent on tape.

While Bangladeshis and Somalis share the status of being among the most disadvantaged ethnic groups in the UK and a common religious affiliation, the history of the two communities, the factors behind their arrival in the UK, the processes by which they came, the cultures they left behind and the communities they came into are markedly different. Our research also highlights differences *within* these communities, in particular between those born or brought up in the UK and those who have arrived relatively recently. These differences have important consequences for their relationship to the labour market, and not only in relation to their command of English.

#### 4. **Culture, history and the shaping of Bangladeshi women's life chances**

The social norms governing marriage and family life have a direct bearing on women's labour market choices. In the case of the Bangladeshi community, we are dealing with extremely unequal family structures with older men exercising considerable authority over other family members, particularly women. There is a clear gender division of labour within the family which requires men to play the role of breadwinners and be responsible for family status and reputation in the public domain and assigns women primary responsibility for care and domestic chores. Women are defined as dependents on men for much of their lives, first fathers, then husbands and finally sons.

They generally marry outside their own kinship group - usually outside their villages - and move into their husbands' home upon marriage. Daughters-in-law occupy a very lowly position within the family hierarchy in the early years of marriage and come under the direct authority of their mothers-in-law. Their position begins to improve over time as they become more integrated into their new family and start to bear children, particularly sons.

What we are describing is a normative ideal. Actual family structures are likely to change as broader conditions change. The move from Bangladesh to the UK is an example of such a change but in fact was accompanied by a defensive interpretation of cultural norms. The first significant wave of migration began in the 1960s and was almost entirely male. This was followed by a second wave of migration in the 1970s and 1980s as these men were joined by their wives and children.

Research on this first generation of female migrants showed that they faced many barriers to participation in the larger society. Restrictions on women's mobility in the public domain meant that few took up employment opportunities. While men worked in various forms of wage and self-employment in a restricted range of occupations, mainly catering and clothing, the few economically active women were concentrated in home-based machining for the local clothing industry. It was assumed that their daughters, brought up and educated in the UK, would adopt attitudes to paid work prevalent in the wider community. This has not happened to the extent expected. Many more second-generation Bangladeshi women are in paid work than was the case with the first generation but they continue to report some of the highest levels of economic inactivity in Tower Hamlets - and in the UK.

Two broad explanations can be put forward. First of all, the early research underestimated the extent to which the conservative values of the first generation of migrants would shape the socialisation of children that were born or brought up in the UK. Secondly, it is evident from our own and other studies that the cohort of women who grew up in the UK has been joined by women who have migrated as adults in recent years to marry UK-based Bangladeshi men. In other words, the effects of being born and brought up in the UK have been diluted in the current working age cohort of women by the presence of many women who were born and brought up in Bangladesh. Given rising levels of female education in Bangladesh, these recent migrants had higher levels of education than the first waves of female migrants in the 1970s and 1980s.

Of the 35 women in our sample, 10 were in full- or part-time employment, 7 were actively looking for work, 15 had worked in the past, and 8, mainly recent migrants, had no work experience of any kind. Most of those not working expressed an interest in working at some time in the future but only 7 were actively seeking jobs. **Given the existence of strong cultural restrictions on Bangladeshi women's ability to engage in paid work, the question that this component of the research sought to answer was: what enabled the Bangladeshi women in our sample to take up paid work?**

##### **5. Factors inhibiting women's labour force participation within the Bangladeshi community**

Given the values transmitted by parents, we would expect most women in our sample, regardless of where they had grown up, to view marriage and children as an inevitable aspect of their life choices. However, the extent to which they did also engage in paid work varied considerably between the first and second generation immigrants. Almost all the 26 UK-born women in our sample were either working or had worked at some stage in the past. Only one of the recent migrants had any work experience. **The large presence of recently arrived Bangladeshi women within the UK community is thus one factor contributing to high levels of economic inactivity among women within the community.**

Second, **the overwhelming majority of women in our sample, regardless of where they were born or brought up, were the first generation of women in their families to have the opportunity for higher education.** Many had to struggle with traditional-minded parents to be allowed to continue in education beyond what was compulsory in the UK (GCSEs) or the norm in Bangladesh (completion of secondary education). Those that were married off very soon after this stage of education had been reached found it far more difficult to enter the labour market at a later stage.

Third, regardless of when they married, **marriage and child bearing is the stage at which many women dropped out of the labour market, often for extended periods.** In some cases, the decision was imposed on them by husbands and in-laws. In other cases, it reflected their own interpretations of their roles as wives and mothers. **An unusually large number of married women in our sample are also looking after other members of the family aside from children, making it even harder for them to consider returning to the labour market.** These other members include ailing, elderly, depressed or disabled husbands and in-laws.

Fourth, 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, faced **the problem of relevant skills and qualifications.** For recent arrivals, command over English was the first barrier. Most were attending, or had attended, ESOL classes, with varying degrees of success. Those brought up in

the UK faced other problems. They either had no market-relevant qualifications or their qualifications were out of date, or the long absence from the market - often cloistered within the home - had eroded their self-confidence and their ability to deal with the work culture.

**Fifth, the structure of benefits is a factor in explaining patterns of work and worklessness.** There was evidence of widespread ignorance about how benefits work and fear that engaging in even a few hours of paid work would jeopardize housing and other benefits. Those who understood the system better had to make their own calculations as to whether full- or part-time work would leave them better off. And there were also women for whom benefits had become a way of life, with entire households relying exclusively on benefits over extended periods of time.

**Sixth, there are cultural barriers to work.** These could be *externally imposed*: many of our respondents felt that visible signs of Islamic identity – beards for men, *hijab* for women – undermined their chances of getting a job, particularly outside the public sector. However, they could also be *self-imposed*. It is possible that many practising Muslims rule themselves out of jobs ‘in the city’, for example, because they would be expected to work late hours, there is less provision for regular prayers and, for those in client-facing roles, the job may require winning and dining clients.

Finally, **there is the problem of availability of work.** A number of those actively seeking work in our sample had failed to find it because of the current recession. This has been exacerbated by the limited number of jobs that the women will consider and the strong preference for work within the council. It is also exacerbated by what a number of respondents described as the unhelpful attitude encountered in Job Centres.

## **6. Factors facilitating labour force participation among Bangladeshi women**

What were the factors that contributed to women’s participation in the labour market? There were 10 women in our sample of 35 who are currently in full- or part-time employment and most of the rest expressed an interest in finding work, but with varying degrees of immediacy. Three key facilitating factors emerged.

First, given that limited parental aspirations combined with cultural norms within the community accounted for the weakness of so many women’s attachment to the labour market, it is not surprising that it was **the presence of supportive relationships** that explained the strong attachment of others. The support of parents was the most frequently mentioned, but encouragement by teachers (both their own and their children’s), friends, husbands, mothers in their children’s school, youth workers, employers and council officials also made the difference in the lives of a number of women.

Second, **positive experiences in training and voluntary work** provided a number of women with the technical qualifications as well as the basic life and work skills and experience (e.g. writing CVs, dealing with the public) that helped close the distance between them and the world of work.

Third, the value attached to full time motherhood within the community made **the availability of acceptable childcare arrangements** a critical factor for women with young children. There was widespread mistrust of childminders expressed and most working mothers relied on family or neighbours. However, nurseries, breakfast clubs and after-school clubs were other institutional arrangements that featured in their accounts. Where they found little support was in care of the elderly.

And finally, while this does not lend itself to short-term policy solutions, **there was the question of motivations to work.** The strength of these motivations varied considerably. There were those who were the primary breadwinners for their families because they were divorced, because their husbands worked part-time or were unemployed or just earned much less than them. There were those who had been brought up with a strong work ethic and an aversion to living on benefits. There were those who worked because they enjoyed their financial independence and the sociability of work. There were those who valued the ability to contribute to the advancement of the community, many with specific interest in working with women in the community. And finally, there were those who were bored with housework and wanted to get out of the four walls of their homes.

### **7. Culture, history and the shaping of Somali women's life chances**

Somali culture, like Bangladeshi culture, is traditionally patriarchal and pro-natalist; all children are considered blessings, but boys are more valued than girls and women and girls are traditionally assigned an inferior status to men and boys. In Somalia family roles are traditionally well-defined with the father responsible for financial security, and mothers responsible for domestic work and raising children. These responsibilities are often undertaken collectively, with resources being pooled – and children are regarded as the responsibility of the whole community.

There are, however, differences in how women's subordinate position plays out in the Somali compared to the Bangladeshi community. Despite the patriarchal structure of society and the primacy of women's domestic roles, a lot of Somali women are free to trade and many have had small businesses. Within most groups women have always played a significant role in the economy and are traditionally allowed to work outside – especially when it is in the family's interests such as with nomadic or agro-pastoralist groups. The outbreak of civil war brought many women into dominant roles in the household economy as men lost their jobs or had to leave their families, or as families migrated to other villages and towns and then abroad. A number of our Somali migrant respondents therefore had experience setting up small trade businesses and other income-generating activities before migrating.

Our sample of 29 Somali women included 9 who had grown up in the UK or Europe and 20 who had come as adults, often via other countries. Fourteen of the women are currently in full- or part-time employment with a number studying at the same time. Of the rest, 4 are looking for work for the first time, 7 used to work and would like to work again and 3 are in full time study. Just 1 respondent had never worked and is not looking for work. Most of those currently in employment have 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. **Given the absence of strong cultural restrictions on Somali women's ability to engage in economic activity, the question that this component of the research sought to answer was: what inhibited the Somali women in our sample from undertaking paid work?**

### **8. Factors promoting labour force participation among Somali women**

An examination of the childhood experiences of Somali women, both those who grew up in Somalia and those who grew up in Britain, suggests that **economic activity is an accepted aspect of Somali women's roles**, even if access to education has not always been. **This stress on women's economic roles does not negate their domestic responsibility but it does mean that taking up employment in the UK does not constitute a major break with gender norms for these women.** The destabilizing effects of war and forced migration further strengthened the need for women to work. Respondents who had grown up in the UK generally



reported working mothers while those who migrated as adults expected to work, at the very least to support their families back home. The Somali women in our sample expressed a strong desire to find work, and many had, as newly arrived migrants, accepted whatever jobs were available, regardless of their qualifications.

A number of factors help explain why some research respondents have been more successful than others in finding jobs. First, partly because of cultural norms that do not prohibit women's economic activity and partly due to the conflicts and disruptions that have made women's economic contributions more critical to their households, **most Somali women expressed a strong orientation to work.** Many backed this up with **a very proactive approach to the labour market**, accepting whatever jobs they found, however menial and whatever their qualifications.

Second, **those that had supportive partners were able to better combine their domestic responsibilities with the demands of paid work** but they were an exception in our sample. For many more **it was their networks of friends** and acquaintances that provided them with information about jobs and advice on how to go about finding work. Third, a few women spoke of receiving **enabling institutional support** in the form of advice from Jobseeker's Allowance staff or various charities and community organisations. These often provided them with basic support such as help reading letters, advice on dealing with the welfare system and in some cases, assistance setting them small businesses.

#### **9. Factors inhibiting labour force participation among Somali women**

However, despite this apparent predisposition to work, there are a variety of barriers obstructing women's actual labour market participation. Some of the factors which had led women to migrate also help explain their difficulties in finding work in the UK. First, **the disruptions associated with war and enforced flight interrupted their education and their ability to accumulate skills and qualifications.** Second, **many encountered problems getting legal status once they had arrived in the UK.** These problems were, of course, particular to those women who had migrated as adults. Most respondents who had grown up in the UK are studying and likely to take up jobs if they can find one – some are already working to pay their way through university.

The traumas associated with war and forced migration help explain the **levels of ill-health, stress and depression** reported by a number of women in our sample and noted in the wider literature. While they may be receiving sickness benefits, it is a factor preventing them from taking up regular or full-time work. Some of those who were working were forced to leave jobs because of health problems.

One major factor which distinguishes the Somali women in our sample from the Bangladeshi women is **the large number of mothers coping on their own.** Husbands who were described as present were sometimes obstructive and sometimes supportive but the more common feature was one of male absence. For women with a number of children under school age, coping with bringing up children in an environment that they still do not understand practically rules out the possibility of anything but part-time and casual work of the kind unlikely to be picked up by official statistics.

**The absence of extended family and community networks tends to exacerbate the social isolation of women bringing children up on their own.** It also means that many feel there is nowhere they can turn to for advice and support in finding jobs. Several respondents

discussed the community's lack of connection to public services and housing agencies and contrasted it with the dominance of the Bengalis in the council and wider public sector.

**Poor command of English and lack of familiarity with local conditions means that many recently arrived migrants face major difficulties accessing work.** Almost all the women in our sample had attended some kind of ESOL class since arriving in the UK. However some have been less successful than others, failing to learn the language even after 8 or 10 years in the country. Many of those with poor English went into cleaning as their first jobs, suggesting that language competence is not important in such employment. However, until they have the opportunity to learn English, it is unlikely they will be able to progress out of menial labour.

Some of the respondents who are not working have obtained qualifications, often in childcare and health and social care. However, many who start courses have to drop out because of the stress and pressures described above. Many women have experience with or ideas for starting small businesses but not the know-how and capital to develop them in the UK – or even to see their potential profitability.

**Dealing with the complexities of the UK welfare system** has proved to be a particularly difficult aspect of daily life in Britain for members of the Somali community. **Respondents repeatedly brought up the lack of clear guidance and information about the benefit system – in particular how working affects benefits.** Younger respondents invest a great deal of their time helping older family members, unused to how things work, sort out housing and benefit issues. One key problem raised by most respondents was a lack of translators. But even when there are translators, many find dealing with the welfare system frustrating, confusing and humiliating.

A number compared their experiences in Britain unfavourably with their experience in other European countries, particularly Holland where they had received helpful advice and direction upon arrival from designated social workers. These workers helped the women with a range of issues, from explaining how and where to do their shopping, to showing them how they can use existing training productively. In the UK, by contrast, the women might receive accommodation and income support, but feel they get little guidance on how to find work or develop skills.

**Finally, a number of respondents believed that they faced discrimination in the labour market on the basis of their identity.** Like the Bangladeshis, they believed discrimination was on grounds of visible markers of their religious identity rather than race or skin colour.

### **Ways forward: what does the research suggest?**

The point of departure for our research was the high levels of worklessness observed among women in the Bangladeshi and Somali community. We have sought to go beyond some of the more immediate and obvious factors which gave rise to this outcome, such as lack of skills and overwhelming childcare responsibilities, which are important but which are reflections of other deeper structural factors. We were concerned to highlight practical ways in which local government interventions might support these women, and their wider communities, towards greater self-reliance and prosperity. The research findings suggest a number of ways forward to avoid the inter-generational transmission of poverty and social exclusion. These draw on suggestions made by our respondents, on our interviews with key informants who know the local labour market and, of course, our own observations. They are discussed under three headings: expanding children's aspirations, building work-readiness in working-age women, and promoting pathways into work.

### ***Expanding children's aspirations***

A first set of measures relate to children from the Bangladeshi and Somali community. The challenge is to develop aspirations in children that go beyond the limited ones that they may be receiving at home and in the community around them. The geographical concentration of these communities, particularly the Bangladeshi, means that children within them grow up with a very limited knowledge of the possibilities available to them.

**The schooling system is clearly an important site for expanding children's horizons** but there may be need for additional measures to realise its full potential. Support may need to be provided, for instance, for Somali children, particularly boys, to adjust to the demands of schooling; they are often a minority in their schools and seem to be systematically under-achieving. And with Bangladeshi children, who are often the majority in their schools, ways need to be found to promote systematic interactions with children from other ethnic groups and to promote knowledge of the values of other cultures.

**The educational curriculum could promote planning for future work and challenge gender or ethnic stereotypes.** There is a need to promote the idea among both boys and girls that working mothers and/or caring fathers can be an acceptable alternative way of organising family life. Young girls and boys need to be encouraged to think about careers beyond the limited range that characterises their communities. Extra-curricular activities can be used to promote employability behaviour in children, their ability to deal with challenging situations, their interactions with others not like themselves.

**More active involvement of parents with the schooling system could have positive benefits.** For many isolated mothers, it can offer the possibility of socializing and learning more about the world beyond the home. Ensuring Somali speaking workers in schools would be of particular benefit to Somali mothers. Parent-teacher forums could be used to explore ideas about good parenting in different cultures and the need to give children a stronger sense of future possibilities. Parents too need to be persuaded to teach their children values of tolerance and respect for difference. Many mothers from the Somali community speak of their inability to communicate with their children. Could such forums be designed to help them close the communication gap? And finally, how possible is it to involve fathers, where they are present in their children's lives, with such forums?

### ***Building work-readiness in working-age women***

A second set of measures is necessary to reach out to particular groups of women who have little or no experience of the labour market. Those who have no desire to enter the labour market are clearly not a priority. Others, however, may have simply been unable to consider the possibility of taking work because of their distance from the world of work, their lack of self-confidence and the variety of stresses and responsibilities that wear them down on a daily basis. Such women are unlikely to be transformed overnight. They will require a step-by-step and holistic approach that goes beyond merely providing supportive services towards guiding them into using these services.

For those who have arrived relatively recently in the UK, particularly Somali women who might lack the community networks of the Bangladeshi women, **a designated support worker along**

**the lines described in the Dutch system,** would help reduce the transaction costs associated with dealing with multiple agencies. Recruitment of Somali women into the system would also cut down the stresses involved. Many of the services they need exist but they do not know how to access them.

**There is need for a more systematic approach to mentoring that could respond in a more holistic way to the problems that women are facing.** We have seen women who had one or more supportive parents were the most likely to consider education and employment as important elements in their life choices. Others were motivated by friends or through encounters with teachers, youth workers, community activists and employers. A systematic mentoring system to reach out to isolated women would help to compensate for their lack of support.

**Finding more immediate pathways into the public domain could provide a long term pathway into the labour market.** This would require outreach programmes that could persuade mothers to join in cultural activities or voluntary work. Community initiatives of various kinds can play an important role in this. A large number of women spoke favourably of Sure Start as an initiative that had brought them into contact with the wider community.

One community organisation working with Somali women runs an English-language project which takes groups of women to explore different parts of London. Creating forums for women to come together around coffee mornings or gardening projects or cookery classes are possible options. Arranging meetings and discussions with women from the specific communities who have overcome barriers to work would help to reduce the mental distance from work and provide ideas about *how* to get into work.

**Providing clear and accessible information about the benefit system might address some aspects of the perceived benefit trap.** Such information should be provided through a variety of outlets, leaflets, local radio and community centres and obviously translated into the relevant languages. One of the problems mentioned by our respondents is that while a great deal of information is available, not everyone knows how to get it. Fear of the loss of benefits, particularly housing benefits, is a factor that prevents many people from even looking for work. For those who do casual work or run small businesses, with uncertain flows of income, entitlement to housing benefits becomes very complicated since incomes may exceed the legal minimum some months and fall short in other months. Clearer guidance on how to set up your income from self-employment could help people overcome these obstacles.

**Practical support for women's care responsibilities is critical.** As far as childcare is concerned, there seems to be a widespread antipathy to individual child minders, unless they are already known to the mother. Developing more collective and neighbourhood based childcare options, particularly crèches and nurseries, seems to be regarded more favourably. And as one Somali woman pointed out, employers needed to be far more responsive to the care demands that mothers had to deal with.

**There is also an obvious need for support for elderly care, particularly in the Bangladeshi community.** As one woman said, even providing an hour of help with housework would be an enormous help. There has been some take up of meals-on-wheels. A more targeted expansion of such services to the elderly could lessen the burden on their carers. Organising outings for the elderly would help to build their links in the community and leave them less reliant on their immediate family.

***Promoting pathways into work***

**Building relevant skills and training is an obvious and well-tried route.** But these may need to be adapted more closely to the needs of particular communities. Large numbers of newly arrived women in our sample attend ESOL classes. Yet the way that ESOL classes are currently structured does not appear to make them very effective. Many Bangladeshi and Somali women have been in and out of these classes and are still struggling with basic English.

**One alternative could be to organise and deliver ESOL classes to promote a focus on employability,** skills and arrangements (such as managing childcare arrangements) needed for the workplace, **and a broader understanding of British society and the meaning of citizenship in the UK context.** Both Bangladeshi and Somali women are coming from societies where the links between the rights and duties of citizens, between public expenditure and taxation, are not particularly strong or well understood.

**Providing assistance with how to go about finding jobs appears to be another much valued service.** Respondents have spoken of the benefits of training in basic work skills, including writing CVs, speaking in public, interacting with others and so on. Many of those who have arrived recently do not have any idea about how to begin looking for work.

**Other forms of training relate to enterprise development and financial management.** Such training would be of particular benefit to the Somali community, given their background in trade, but would have to be supplemented with guidance on how to register organisations, set up pay roll, bank accounts and tax. The possibility of an enterprise loan scheme might help to provide necessary start-up capital to translate ideas into reality, although there should be demanding threshold requirements, possibly including experience of paid employment.

For Bangladeshi women, the possibility of transforming some of their skills in cooking, sewing and caring for children into organised home-based enterprises might provide a first step into the labour market while their children are still young.

As we have noted, **voluntary work also provides an important bridge into the labour market.** It helps bring isolated mothers out of the home and for those who are ready to work; it provides practical skills or upgrades skills that they had allowed to deteriorate during their time away from the labour market. Voluntary placements run by Tower Hamlets NHS appear to have been very successful in building the confidence of women who have been out of work for some time.

**One of the reasons for the success of the council's graduate training programme and the Tower Hamlets NHS volunteer placement programme is that they offer a lot of emotional and practical support.** Senior staff described themselves as mentors playing a significant hand-holding role. While the presence of Bangladeshi staff had the advantage of attracting women from the community to the programme, having someone from outside the community is also useful because many Bangladeshi women are not happy talking to other women from their community because of their fear of gossip. The need **for a gradual 'step-by-step' approach in order that women who have no work experience or have not worked for a long time do not get discouraged** was emphasised again and again by those who have been engaged in this work at the community level. The sustained emotional support offered by the work placement programmes at Tower Hamlets NHS and by the Tower Hamlets Professional Post-Graduate Programme seems to be key to their success.

**Public sector apprenticeships should also be developed as a route into work.** The council and strategic partners also need to use their procurement and planning relationships to lever apprenticeship opportunities in the private sector.

**Using these schemes to promote women's interactions with others outside the community might also help to expand their horizons.** One idea that has been tried out on the graduate training programme is to bring national and local graduate recruits together in a training session. The senior staff member running this noted the huge contrast between local and national graduates' life experiences, with the latter being well-travelled, mainly middle class achievers. Local recruits had insights into how the system worked on the ground but were perhaps less confident – the Bangladeshi women in particular were reluctant to travel even outside the borough. The encounter allowed for very fruitful exchange of very different experiences in the outside world.

**A more proactive outreach may be required to reach Somali women.** There is a clear perception in the Somali community that Bangladeshis monopolised most of the training and job placement opportunities available, particularly through the council. This appears to be the result of a combination of a better networked community, more effective word of mouth dissemination and the suggested tendency of Bangladeshis to favour their own community. Word of mouth and passive advertising on council websites and East End life clearly does not work for communities that have not yet penetrated the system. **Somalis could be specially appointed to attract potential candidates. It could be made mandatory that one or two places on various schemes go to Somali women.**

**More generally, a 'knocking on doors' approach may be necessary to inform sections of each community about job and training opportunities.** Anecdotal evidence from community organisations suggest that women do take up work opportunities when they hear about them. The problem then is largely one of information. This does not require the creation of a new job role but the broadening of existing roles with high levels of community interaction.

**Job creation in the care economy offers double dividends.** First of all, it would release large numbers of women from the main constraint that keeps many of them out of the labour market and secondly, it would create a form of employment that was particularly attractive to women in general, and women from ethnic minorities in particular. Job creation schemes would thus build on the various needs and deficits identified by the research.

The need for collective and neighbourhood based childcare is an obvious example, youth workers to provide support in schools is a second. Care services for the elderly and disabled is a third. Other more specific examples also emerged. One option might be to train translators in counselling support roles to fill one of the key gaps in the councils' interaction with the Somali community. Such jobs have the appeal of not only addressing expressed needs but also resonating with the kind of work many women within the community might be interested in apply for. The idea of working to advance the welfare of their community may help to overcome some of the community-based barriers that Bangladeshi women in particular appear to experience.

**There are also a number of possibilities for engaging the private sector.** Many of the care services discussed here could be provided in partnership with private companies. Internship schemes would allow young women from the two communities to gain experience within private sector companies. A number of Somalis in our sample found work through private employment agencies. Encouraging these agencies to recruit from within ethnic minority communities might provide an additional route to employment. Pilot schemes can be used to explore innovative pathways to work: a successful example is one that links up Somali and other entrepreneurs to people in the private sector with skills in web design, marketing, accounting and so on. Another is using a social enterprise approach to set up a company supplying Somali cleaning services.

**Filling knowledge gaps: future research questions**

This research has provided important qualitative insights into some of the structural roots of worklessness among women in the Somali and Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets. It has also drawn attention to certain gaps in our knowledge which are relevant to addressing this problem. Limitations of time and money meant that it could not include some of the hardest to reach women within the community in the research and hence cannot establish the extent to which they face the same constraints as other women, only in a more acute form, or whether they face different constraints. The research was also conducted at a significant moment when the public sector and welfare system on which many within the community rely is being dramatically restructured. There is a need to understand how these changes will affect poverty and worklessness within these communities, whether it will exacerbate or reduce them.

Men emerge in both communities as a critical influence on whether and how women engage in the labour market but again time constraints prevented their inclusion in the research design. There is need for an in-depth study into male attitudes within the two communities towards women's work, their children's future and their own roles as fathers and breadwinners.

Finally, this research has focused largely on the labour supply dimensions of women's worklessness. There is need for further research to throw more light on possible demand side factors that might be contributing to this problem. In particular, more research is needed to find ways of engaging private sector organisations, particularly those who have an interest in the kinds of products that can be produced within these communities. At a time when there are major cuts in the public sector, and hence in its capacity to provide employment, it is to the private sector that ethnic minority women will have to look if they are to find ways out of poverty.

## 1. Introduction: objectives of the report

This report was commissioned by the Equality and Scrutiny Division of Tower Hamlets Council to explore the factors behind the high levels of worklessness among Bangladeshi and Somali women in Tower Hamlets. Recent estimates suggest that 32% of the borough's population is of Bangladeshi origin (75,401 people), accounting for around a quarter of Bangladeshis living in the UK (Mayhew and Harper, 2010). Somalis make up an estimated 2% of the population (4,645 people).

The rationale for this focus is that the two communities are among the poorest in the borough and, as discussed below, employment is widely considered one of the key routes out of poverty. The concept of 'worklessness' is not commonly used outside the public sector in the UK, and needs explanation for a wider audience. According to a paper commissioned by Tower Hamlets Council (2010), the term originated in a national review carried out in 2009 on patterns of economic inactivity. It was used to refer to two specific groups: the economically active who were unemployed, and the economically inactive who wanted jobs. It thus referred to a fairly clear-cut category of 'jobless' people – those who wanted jobs but did not have them, some of whom were registered as jobseekers and some of whom were not.

The Tower Hamlets report expanded the definition to include anyone who was not at work: the unemployed, those in receipt of incapacity benefits, those claiming income support for lone parents, and those who are available for work but not claiming benefits. This change of definition was justified on the grounds that the boundaries between those who want jobs and those who do not are constantly shifting as people change their minds or attractive options become available. It therefore made sense to define as 'workless' anyone who is not currently working. However, this shift in definition has meant that a clearly defined population is replaced by an amorphous mass of very heterogeneous people. Furthermore, detached from its original meaning of people who want jobs but do not have them, the concept ends up lumping together all sections of the adult population who are not working, despite the fact that motivations and constraints might vary considerably.

Regardless of the precise definition, there are strong reasons to be concerned about 'worklessness' in Tower Hamlets. While the economic activity rate for men in the borough is around 81% (similar to rates for men in the rest of London), only 58% of women in the borough are economically active compared with 68% for London overall (and 74% for the UK). More than a third of women are not in work and do not want a job; this is twice as high as the average for the rest of London (Tower Hamlets, 2011). Current estimates suggest that there are 62,000 workless people in the borough. This includes 14,600 who are economically active but not currently in employment, 6,300 who are economically inactive but want a job, and 41,000 who are economically inactive and who may or may not be seeking work. Many of the latter are on Incapacity Benefit. To reach the average levels of employment found across London, around 13,300 residents will have to start working. This target is unlikely to be achieved unless those who are currently economically inactive are encouraged to enter the labour market.

National and local quantitative data suggest that women from ethnic minorities are likely to constitute a disproportionate percentage of the economically inactive population. In the context



of Tower Hamlets, evidence suggests that this is the case with Bangladeshi and Somali women. However, there is little understanding of why this might be so.

The aim of this report is to provide more detailed qualitative insights into the factors that either facilitate or impede access to paid work among women from these two communities in Tower Hamlets. There has been very little research carried out with these communities, particularly the Somali community. Bangladeshis do feature as a separate ethnic group in a number of large-scale surveys on ethnic disadvantage, so there are some basic statistics on this community. Somalis, however, tend to be included within general 'black African' categories, a classification which obscures the specificities of this community and its position in British society—both of which have a bearing on their patterns of labour market participation. There is also some qualitative research available, once again more on the Bangladeshi community than the Somali community. Much of this research has been carried out as focus group discussions, telephone interviews, and semi-structured one-to-one discussions, and will be explored later.

For this study, we carried out detailed one-to-one life histories with between 30 and 35 women from each community in order to locate their work decisions within the broader context that shapes their life chances and the choices they have made. This more detailed analysis will provide insights into the processes which lead these particular groups of women to occupy a persistently marginal place in relation to the labour market. This, in turn, will hopefully provide the basis for tackling the underlying causes of the problem of worklessness, rather than its surface manifestations.

Our interest in analysing the barriers to labour force participation facing women from the Bangladeshi and Somali communities is not a purely instrumental one. We agree with the view of Tower Hamlets Council that employment 'is a key means of raising the overall wellbeing of the community, including reducing child poverty, and helping residents to better their economic situation' (Tower Hamlets, 2011:15). We also acknowledge that greater labour market participation by women in the community will reduce the number of households drawing benefits – a major concern of recent governments.

In addition, we argue that barriers to the labour market should be examined seriously because they often reflect barriers to women's participation more broadly defined. Enabling women to engage in some form of paid work, whether on a part-time or full-time basis, is likely to be the most important route through which women within these ethnic minority communities can become active citizens in the wider society in which they live. We believe that this holds the key to breaking the intergenerational cycles of deprivation frequently seen in impoverished communities. At the same time, we believe the issues which keep these groups of women out of the labour market cannot be addressed by generalised policies that aim to reduce unemployment alone. For this reason, we have taken a more holistic approach to the research into women's work patterns, locating our findings in the wider context of women's lives, because it is this wider context that explains the resilience of the barriers that reinforce their exclusion.

## **2. Ethnicity, work and poverty in the UK: a review of the evidence**

Worklessness among ethnic minority groups in Tower Hamlets must be located within broader patterns of poverty and deprivation in the country. Employment and affluence are closely related

in the UK context. Access to paid work is one element of the story; quality of employment and assets of various kinds also matter. As noted, there is currently little differentiated data on the Somali community at the national level, but several studies tell us that the Bangladeshi community in the UK is among the most deprived according to a variety of indicators.

Platt (2007) points out that while all ethnic minorities have higher than average rates of poverty, poverty was highest among Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and black Africans, reaching nearly two-thirds for Bangladeshis. Numbers of children per household (among households with children) was found to be highest among the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities, with 2.3–2.4 on average compared to 2 for black African households and around 1.5 for the rest of the population (Nandi and Platt, 2010). Platt (2009) found that Bangladeshis report the highest levels of child poverty by a number of different measures. Although child poverty had declined to a greater extent between 2001 and 2007 within this community relative to others, it remained higher overall: 58%, compared with 35% among black Africans and 20% among white British. Poverty was higher among lone-parent households for all ethnic groups, but there were lower percentages of such households among South Asian communities (10–17%) than black African and Afro-Caribbean communities (47–56%). Children were also more likely to live in poverty among households with three or more children, and there was a much higher percentage of such households among Bangladeshi households (67%) than, for instance, among black African households (50%).<sup>3</sup>

A report by Hills *et al* (2010) using 2006–08 data on economic inequality confirmed this pattern of disadvantage. It found that 40% of Bangladeshis were in the bottom quintile of the weekly earnings distribution, compared with 29% of Pakistanis, 18% of black Africans, 20% of white British and 16% of Indians. There were no Bangladeshis in the top quintile, compared with 15% of black Africans and 13% of Pakistanis. There were 13% of Bangladeshis in the second highest quintile, compared with 14% of Pakistanis and 25% of black Africans. Bangladeshis were also the least wealthy of the different ethnic groups: total median wealth was £221,000 for white British households, £97,000 for Pakistanis, £21,000 for black African households, and just £15,000 for Bangladeshi households.

Differences in employment patterns are clearly implicated in the ethnic distribution of poverty (see Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix 1). The percentage of Bangladeshi men in paid work (full- and part-time employment and self-employment) was not necessarily lower than some of the other ethnic minority groups. Around 80% of white and Indian men are in paid work compared with 60–70% of other communities, including Bangladeshis. However, Bangladeshi and Pakistani men reported higher rates of part-time and self-employment than other groups.

A more striking difference was observed in relation to female labour force participation among Bangladeshis and Pakistanis compared with other ethnic groups. Employment rates varied considerably: over 70% among white British women, 60–70% among black Caribbean women, 50–60% among black African women, and 20–30% among Bangladeshi and Pakistani women. Working women in the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities tend to be in full- or part-time employment. The study found very low incidence of self-employment among Bangladeshi and Pakistani women compared with women from some other ethnic groups and compared with men from their own community. Around 60% of women from the Bangladeshi community were economically inactive. This was higher than any other group, though they were closely followed by Pakistani women. The most common reasons given for economic inactivity were the need to look after family and being ill or disabled.

The low levels of pay earned by those who are in work further contributes to household poverty. The median hourly wage is around £11.30 for white British men but only £6.90 for Bangladeshi men. It was £8.80 for white British women and £7.80 for Bangladeshi women.<sup>4</sup> These low returns to labour may, in turn, reflect low levels of education. More than 40% of Bangladeshi men of working age have no qualifications above entry level, compared with 20% of white British and 30% of black Caribbean men. More than 50% of Bangladeshi women fell into this category, compared with just over 20% of white British and black Caribbean women. Finally, national surveys tell us that a much lower percentage of income coming into Bangladeshi households comes from earnings and self-employment, and a much larger percentage is in the form of benefits of various kinds; Bangladeshi women, in particular, were more likely to rely on benefits than women from other ethnic groups (Nandi and Platt, 2010; Platt, 2009).

A number of qualitative studies have sought to explain the lower levels of labour force participation among Bangladeshi women. One study of 60 Pakistani and Bangladeshi women from different parts of the UK noted the influence of generation and migration backgrounds, with younger and second-generation women holding less traditional views about education and employment (Aston *et al*, 2007). However, the centrality of the family was stressed by most women, including the importance given to marriage and motherhood, and the need to take responsibility for older family members and in-laws.

Another study of 634 unemployed Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, also scattered across the UK, found that 57% of their sample said they would like a paid job, while 39% did not. Of those expressing an interest in paid work, 43% said they wanted to support their family financially, 30% wanted greater independence, 19% wanted to relieve boredom and get out of the house, and 7% wanted to meet people. Most of the women interested in working said they wanted jobs in childcare, teaching and social work. A small number mentioned hospitality, retail, administrative and secretarial work. Only 6% mentioned starting their own business. The reasons given for not working included childcare and domestic responsibilities (49%), poor English (20%), lack of skills and qualifications (7%), and ill health (6%). Only 2% mentioned cultural reasons and none mentioned religion. Some 70% of the women said it had been their choice not to work, while 22% mentioned the influence of husbands and families. Eight per cent had sought and failed to find a job.

Two other studies have a particular bearing on this research. The first was based on focus group discussions with Bangladeshi, Somali and white British groups in Tower Hamlets and Haringey (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010). It found that many within these communities did not consider paid employment as a route out of poverty because the low salaries they were likely to earn would be offset by loss of benefits. Somalis reported sending a very high level of remittances home even when they were struggling on low incomes themselves. The study also found that the Somali and white British research participants appeared to attach a higher value to education than the Bangladeshis. Somali women felt that they faced many barriers to work because of poor language skills and the negative stereotyping they encountered. Bangladeshi women expressed concerns about having to travel too far to work as well as their language skills, and doubted whether they would be better off working. Many of the British women spoke about losing confidence when they had been out of work for a long time. Differences in notions of 'community' were also interesting. While British respondents identified those living in their area or borough as their community, Bangladeshis and Somalis were more likely to refer to other people from their country as constituting their community.

The other study by Phillipson *et al* (2003) carried out qualitative interviews with 100 'middle generation' (aged 35–55) Bangladeshi women living in Tower Hamlets. While the main aim was

to explore how these women, who were first generation immigrants, had adjusted to life in the UK, it noted that only two of the women in their sample were in employment, a further two defined themselves as unemployed, and around 91 described themselves as 'looking after the family, home or dependants'. Very few had ever been in paid work. The main reasons given for not working were the responsibility of caring for young children (31 women), lack of fluency in English (23), and no desire to work (15). However, 38 of the women said they would have liked to have worked. The study also noted the high level of benefits coming into these households: 86% received child benefit, 66% got housing support, 65% received income support and 34% received some kind of disability support.

### **3. Methodology**

Some background data on the Bangladeshi and Somali communities in Tower Hamlets is to be found in a report by Mayhew and Harper (2010). It found that of the 11 ethnic categories listed, 73.2% of the Bangladeshi community and 72.5% of the Somali community live in households receiving benefits and could be regarded as income deprived. Both communities have very youthful populations because of high rates of fertility: 45% of the Bangladeshi and 46% of the Somali community is aged 19 or under compared with 14% of the white British/Irish community.

In a later study commissioned along with the present research by Tower Hamlets Equality and Scrutiny Division, Mayhew and Harper (2011) drew on data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), the Tower Hamlets Health and Life Style Survey (HLSS) and their own Neighbourhood Knowledge Management (NKM) population database to explore poverty and worklessness among women aged 16–59 in the Bangladeshi and Somali communities. The fact that only 28 Somali women are included in this analysis makes generalisations regarding this group extremely tenuous, but does provide a crude indication of patterns.

The study found that Bangladeshi and Somali women are most concentrated in the most deprived 'Super Output Areas'. Women from these communities are twice as likely as the rest of the population to live in households on benefits, and this does not vary by age group or location. It also found that Bangladeshi and Somali women are: more likely to live in social housing (78.6% and 89.3% respectively) than the rest of the population (61.1%); less likely to be economically active (21.8% and 14.3%) than the rest of the population (39.4%); less likely to report English as their first language (12.8% and 3.6% compared with 42.9%) or to have any educational qualification above diploma level (13.5% and 3.6% compared with 29.4%).

One other characteristic of interest to this study is the distribution of household types. The report found that 67% of Bangladeshi women lived in households made up of two adults with dependent children compared with 46.3% of Somalis and 38% of the general population. Only 7.5% of Bangladeshi women lived in households made up of single adults with dependent children compared with 25.9% of Somalis and 9% of the general population. Fifteen per cent of Bangladeshi women lived in three-generational households compared with 6.7% of Somalis and 6.3% of the general population.

Finally, the study used data from the different sources to build up anonymised profiles of households based on characteristics such as poverty and wealth, age groups, household types, ethnicity, presence of children, receipt of certain benefits, geographical areas, and deprivation deciles. It used these profiles to identify a range of factors associated with the likelihood of being workless. These estimates of risk are based on observed correlations and do not necessarily

imply causation. The key findings for the purposes of our research are that an adult aged 16–59 is:

- 4.5 times more likely to be economically inactive if they are female
- 1.4 times more likely to be economically inactive if they are Bangladeshi (of either sex)
- 1.2 times more likely to be economically inactive if they are living in social housing
- 1.7 times more likely to be economically inactive if English is not their first language
- 2.8 times more likely to be economically inactive if they have no qualification at diploma level or higher
- 3.8 times more likely to be economically inactive if they are in poor health.

The estimated probability of worklessness is additive; people exposed to more risk factors are more likely to be at risk of being workless than those exposed to fewer factors. To illustrate what this means: the risk is 4.5 times higher for women than men; 5.3 times higher for women living in social housing; 7.6 times higher for women living in social housing who are Bangladeshi; and an extraordinary 137 times higher for women who are Bangladeshi, living in social housing, whose first language is not English, who have no educational qualifications, and who are in poor health. Unfortunately, there were only 28 Somali women in the sample used for this analysis compared with 541 Bangladeshi women. It is therefore not possible to generalise about their situation.

We used these findings to inform our sample selection strategy. We recruited a research team of six women, three of whom were fluent in Sylheti/Bengali and three in Somali. There were two interviewers and one person assisting in transcribing and translating per ethnic community. The interviewers all lived and worked in the Tower Hamlets area. They selected respondents for the study through a combination of ‘cold-calling’, word of mouth, and introduction through community workers. All respondents were informed of the purpose of the research, assured full anonymity, and asked to give their consent on tape as we felt that the use of signed forms might put many of them off. All names have been changed to protect the identity of respondents.

Our first concern was to ensure that our sample contained women who were currently in work as well as women currently not in work. Of those in the second category, we were concerned to include women who had never worked as well as women with some past experience of work. In addition, we sought to include women living in social housing as well as other forms of accommodation, and women with both strong and weak knowledge of English. It was not always easy to determine at the outset how a respondent fitted into our pre-determined categories, but the final sample does capture many of the necessary characteristics.

This purposive approach to sample selection means that our study is not representative of the two communities in Tower Hamlets. We have, for instance, a disproportionately high share of women in work compared with their share in the general population of women in these communities. The value of the study will lie in providing useful insights into the processes which lead to work and worklessness in these communities, rather than generalisable conclusions across the population. Some basic background on our two samples is provided in Appendix 2.

In addition to our interviews with these women, we also carried out interviews with key informants in Tower Hamlets who could provide us with information on the ‘demand’ side of the labour market equation. It was difficult to get access to private sector employers within the timeframe of the research, but we were able to talk to various organisations that sought to promote employment within the Somali and Bangladeshi communities. We will be weaving their observations into the analysis.

The fact that certain ethnic groups have found it harder than others to lift themselves out of poverty, and that constraints on women’s labour force participation appear to be a factor in explaining their disadvantage, points to the relevance of ‘culture’ to our analysis. However, it is important to distinguish between two different ways in which the concept of culture is used in academic and popular discourse. One way is as a convenient shorthand to refer to the norms and values of different ethnic communities within the UK, the kinds of neighbourhoods they live in, and the positions they are likely to occupy in the labour market. This is an externally defined notion of culture, which differentiates between different ethnic communities but emphasises their internal homogeneity. The other way in which the concept of culture is used is from the perspective of members of a given community. Culture in this sense differentiates the life chances of different members of a community on the basis of their class, gender and life course. This is the internally defined meaning of culture, but it may be interpreted quite differently by different members of the same community, depending on whether they experience it as a resource or constraint – or some combination of the two. Consequently, it is open to contestation and change.

It is this second notion of culture that informs our research. It was clear to us from the outset that while Bangladeshis and Somalis share the status of being among the most disadvantaged ethnic groups in the UK and an affiliation to Islam as their main religion, the history of the two communities, the factors underlying their migration to the UK, the processes through which they came, the cultures they left behind, and the communities they came into are markedly different. What also became clear in the course of our research were the differences between women *within* these communities. The most obvious (but by no means the only) example of such difference is between those born or brought up in the UK and those who have arrived relatively recently from Bangladesh. As this report will discuss, these differences had important consequences for individual women’s experiences of their culture and their relationship to the labour market.

#### **4. Culture, history and the shaping of life chances in the Bangladeshi community**

The social norms governing marriage and family life have a direct bearing on women’s labour market choices. In the case of the Bangladeshi community, we are dealing with extremely unequal family structures. In the ideal-typical Bangladeshi family, gender, age and marital status coalesce to create an extremely hierarchical structure that allows senior men to exercise a great deal of authority over other family members, particularly women. There is a clear gender division of labour within the family, which requires men to play the role of breadwinners, and guardians of family status and reputation within the community, and assigns women primary responsibility for care and domestic chores.

Women are thus defined as dependent on men for much of their lives– first their fathers, then their husbands, and finally their sons. They generally marry outside their own kinship group and usually outside their villages. They are expected to move to their husband’s home upon marriage and become part of his lineage group. As ‘stranger brides’, daughters-in-law occupy a very lowly position within the family hierarchy in the early years of marriage, responsible for the bulk of the

domestic chores under the supervision of the mother-in-law. Their position begins to improve over time as they become more integrated into their new family and start to bear children, particularly sons.

It is important to bear in mind that what we are describing is a normative ideal. Actual relationships of marriage and family change as the underlying context changes. The move from Bangladesh to the UK was an example of such a change. While there were some earlier settlers from Bangladesh in the UK, the first real wave of migration began in the 1960s and was almost entirely male. They were later joined in a second wave of migration by their wives and children in the 1970s and 1980s, when it became clear that the men would not be returning to Bangladesh.

Most of these migrants came from rural backgrounds in one of the most religiously conservative districts of Bangladesh. They had low levels of education, few recognised skills, and some of the lowest rates of female labour force participation in a country which was already characterised by low rates of female labour force participation. They brought with them their own norms, values and customs, including accepted models of gender relations within the family and the community, which they sought to reproduce in their new context, but in a very conservative form (Kabeer, 2000).

Research on this first generation of women showed that they faced many barriers to participation in their host society, including community and family restrictions on their mobility in the public domain (and hence on their capacity to learn English or to work), as well as racism encountered by the community more widely (Kabeer, 2000; Dale *et al* 2001). While men within the community worked in waged and self-employment in a restricted range of occupations, mainly catering and clothing, women were largely confined to the home. Those who did engage in paid work largely worked at home as machinists, subcontracted by local clothing firms.

It was assumed by this research that female labour force participation would increase over time, if only because the daughters of these women would be born and educated in the UK, would be more fluent in English, and would imbibe attitudes to paid work that were prevalent in the wider society (Kabeer, 2000; Phillipson *et al*, 2003). But this does not appear to have happened – or at least not to the extent expected. Bangladeshi women continue to report some of the highest levels of economic inactivity in the UK more generally, and in Tower Hamlets in particular.

We will discuss some of the reasons why this is the case in greater detail in the following sections, but two major contributing factors can be noted at this stage. First, earlier research underestimated the extent to which the conservative values of the first generation of migrants would shape the socialisation of children that were born or brought up in the UK. The fact that the Bangladeshi community settled in the UK in a geographically concentrated manner, with an estimated quarter of the UK community living in and around Tower Hamlets, has meant that these norms and values have shown considerable resilience over time.

Second, the surprising numbers of women in our sample who had arrived very recently in the UK was indicative of a broader trend. Nine of the 35 women in our sample were born and brought up in Bangladesh and arrived in the UK between 1 and 15 years ago through arranged marriages with British–Bangladeshi men. Some of the British-born women in our sample also referred to brothers who had married and brought over wives from Bangladesh. In addition, a number of the British-born women had themselves married men from Bangladesh. This does not appear to be a random finding. The high incidence of transnational marriages between British South Asians and those born in South Asia has been noted by Dale (2008); she reported that between 1998 and 2005, 50% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women married men from overseas, and around 40% of men from these communities married women from overseas.

One implication of the continuing in-migration of young women from Bangladesh marrying men in the UK is that the age-cohort of women who constitute second generation migrants, women born and brought up here, has been joined by women who grew up in Bangladesh. These women appear to be going through some of the same stresses and strains that their mothers-in-law had done in earlier times: arriving in a country as dependants, not knowing the language or culture, and often facing the same restrictions on their ability to learn the language and engage in paid work (Kabeer, 2000). However, these more recent Bangladeshi migrants are generally more educated than the largely illiterate women that migrated as part of the earlier wave. Education levels have increased in Bangladesh –for girls as well as boys; many of the recent migrants we spoke to had completed secondary education and some had been to college. Thus, while there may be some echoes of the past in women’s experiences, history is not simply repeating itself.

Given the norms of the Bangladeshi community, it is not surprising that all the women in our sample viewed marriage and children as a central and inevitable aspect of their life course, with labour market activity relegated to secondary status, to be engaged in only if it could be accommodated within their primary responsibilities. Low levels of economic activity among these women would therefore be expected. Yet the 35 women who made up the sample reported quite varied work histories. Around 14 are currently in full-time or part-time work or have just been made redundant, while 2 are on Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA). Some of the others have worked in the past and been economically inactive for varying periods of time. Around 8 have never worked. While only 5 women in our sample say that they are not interested in work in the foreseeable future, it is not always clear how serious the work intentions of the rest were. Nevertheless, these results suggest that considerable change has taken place over time in attitudes to work among women in the Bangladeshi community.

One of the problems with privileging culture in attempting to explain women’s life chances and life choices in the Bangladeshi community is that such an explanation is not sensitive to gradual forms of change over time, nor does it allow for varying, even dissenting, interpretations of cultural norms within the community. Culture has played a role in limiting the life chances of Bangladeshi women, but what explains the variations in their life choices? To answer this question, we examine some of the factors which continue to inhibit women’s participation in paid work, before turning to some of the factors which have facilitated it.

## **5. Factors inhibiting labour force participation among Bangladeshi women**

### **5.1 Becoming a Bangladeshi woman: the limits to aspirations**

The majority of Bangladeshi women in our sample, whether brought up in the UK or Bangladesh, grew up to regard marriage and motherhood as the proper destiny for women. However, there were important variations in the extent to which it was regarded as the *only* possible destiny and the extent to which education and employment could be accommodated within this vision. Many of the parents of the women in our sample—their mothers in particular—had little or no education. Some (though not all) had not thought to question the values they had learnt from their own parents. As Monwara Begum said of her mother: *‘She never went through the education system anywhere, not even in Bangladesh. And as a person, she wasn’t the kind of person who would work. It’s because of her mentality, the way she was brought up. She didn’t want to work and it wasn’t in her head at all.’*

These parents had extremely limited horizons for their children, essentially seeking to reproduce the gendered trajectory of their own lives. Daughters with aspirations of their own had to



struggle with indifference and even hostility from one or both parents. Excellent results in school went unnoticed, attempts to go on to higher education were discouraged, and there was no discussion of employment in case it jeopardised their chances of marriage.

Some respondents had grown up acutely aware that their parents had very different expectations of their sons and daughters. Saira observed:

*My parents treated the boys and girls differently. It is still happening. The education was the same but that was because of the state and the government. If it was up to them, the girls would have stayed at home and the boys would go to school...My education had no value and it still doesn't. We never got any praise for what we achieved. I don't think my brothers left school with any GCSEs, the girls did better but it gets pushed aside. It doesn't matter...My mum, she knows what her sons are doing, but if you ask her what her older daughter does or where she works, she won't know. She doesn't value women's education or women's work...*

Tahera had one of the most difficult childhoods of the women in our sample. Her father had little education, her mother even less. She grew up in a household where women played a subservient role: *'My mother never learnt English, she couldn't be bothered. She believed in being at home, serving my father and raising children. She couldn't understand why she should look for work. Back in Bangladesh where she was brought up, all women grew up and looked after the home. That was how they were back home and that was her mentality.'* There was little encouragement at home for Tahera's efforts to do well in school. When she tried to do her homework, her father would frequently turn the lights out: *'If I objected, he would say, "Don't worry, you are not going very far."'*

Nafisa's parents were also uneducated and did little to encourage their children: *'They were not supportive parents, not because they didn't want to be but because they didn't know how. They had no idea of how to encourage talent in a child. All they seemed to care about was the child benefits rolling in.'*

Even parents described as otherwise loving and supportive – and often educated – often retained traditional views about women's roles. Naseema described her parents as remarkable people. Although her mother was not educated, Naseema believed that, with the right opportunities, she could have had a PhD. Her father was strong, principled and active in the community. They were both loving parents but they both subscribed to the view that women should stay at home and men should be the breadwinners. Naseema received little encouragement with schooling and there was no question of going to university: *'According to my father, decent girls do not go into college. There was nothing I could do but lock myself in my room and not talk to him.'*

For some of the British-born respondents, the restricted vision of their future communicated at home was offset by the diversity of possibilities opened up by their experiences in school and college. This may explain why girls like Nafisa and Naseema made it to college, despite their parents' indifference. It also explains why Yasmin was willing to put up such a struggle to overcome her father's opposition to her university ambitions. She described him as authoritarian – sometimes violent – with clear views about gender roles: *'Boys should work and earn money. Girls look after the kitchen and get married and have babies.'* His wife had never learnt much English despite her 25 years in the UK and largely conformed to this model, never standing up to her husband. But his daughters had encouraging teachers at school, they had grown up in Britain, and there was a lot they wanted to do. They saw education as critical to their future: *'We were, like, education is key, Dad.'* When Yasmin fought with her father to go to university, it was her mother's support – the one time she had stood up to her husband – that helped to overcome his objections.

The childhoods reported by the women who had migrated in recent years to the UK to join husbands were very different from those who had grown up in the UK, but they were also very

different from the earlier generation of women who had migrated to the UK. Whereas the previous generation had very little education, and were often illiterate, this generation had all been to school and some had gone on to college. However, they all faced pressure to get married as soon as their parents had found someone suitable. Nilufer spoke of her father in warm terms: *'My dad was a teacher and he felt that if you were educated, you were given a certain kind of respect. And if you got into trouble or some situation, your education would help you. You will not achieve much if you don't study.'* All five sisters went into higher education. Despite this, when her parents found her a suitable husband during her first year at university, she accepted their decision because she felt they knew best, even if it meant the end of her studies.

Milya had also been encouraged by her parents in her education: *'They told us that if you study, you will get good jobs and earn good money. You can change your life.'* Milya wanted to find work in Bangladesh after completing her secondary education but her parents arranged for her to marry someone in the UK and she complied. She explained why: *'I don't think that I would have been stopped if I did want to study further but you know how we are. We don't say what we want. In our country, children respect their parents, so they don't speak against their wishes.'*

A number of the women in our sample look back with regret on their parents' failure to prepare them for a better future, and are resolved to ensure that the same thing does not happen to their own daughters:

*At that time, my parents were not thinking about what their daughter should choose for her GCSE or what she was going to be when she grows up. In a way, they should have said something like "You should do this" and "This leads to a good job." You could do this in life. Nobody really said that.*

(Monwara)

*I wouldn't want my daughters to have an arranged marriage. You cannot predict the future and what your children will be like. They don't agree with me now, so they may think differently then. When I got married, I didn't speak up. I was forced into marriage, and in a way, I came here blind. My daughter is from here and she will have her eyes wide open. I am straightforward and I think you have to go with the children of today. They will think and do things differently from us. I will not force her.*

(Kaniz)

## 5.2 Restricting women's labour market decisions

Life choices around education, how far women wanted to go and the support or resistance they encountered, was one critical stage in determining their subsequent life trajectories. A second critical stage in their life course related to decisions about employment and marriage. As the first generation of women in their families to seek paid work, the women in our sample did not have role models of successful working women from the community to inspire them, nor did they have networks of working friends embodying the knowledge about how labour markets work that characterise groups where women's work is taken for granted. They had to find their own way into the labour market, often failing in the face of the resistance they encountered.

Tahera was brought up in the UK. Her parents married her off as soon as she turned 16 because (as she heard later) they did not want the expense of looking after her. There had never been any question of her looking for work: *'I was thinking of going to university but I couldn't because they fixed my marriage. I wasn't allowed to work because my husband would look after me and buy my clothes. My parents believed that their responsibility for me was finished once they married me off.'* Her in-laws did not allow her to work after marriage: *'They had the same mentality as my parents... Women stay at home and have loads of*

children. *Your future, your ambition is looking after your children and getting married. In our culture, a man needs to maintain the house and the wife. It doesn't happen that way because once you are married, they don't care about their wife or their home. They care about everyone back home and they build palaces back home, nothing here.*' She had her children and settled into what she thought was going to be the rest of her life. But when she found out that her husband had gone to Bangladesh to marry a second time, she decided that she had had enough and divorced him.

Naseema's father had forbidden her to work, but she had been able to take advantage of her father's ignorance about the newly introduced Youth Training Scheme to try and break into the labour market: *'I said to my dad that "It is the law, dad", and you have to let me go or you will be breaking the law. I wanted my rights and it became, like, I was over-riding him. It was a battle of wits and principles. I was all about my feminist rights and he was all about his fatherly duties.'* In the end, her father decided that since she was so keen to work, she might as well work with people he knew – first, a barrister, and then a local councillor. She later found out that one reason that he had allowed her to work was that he was planning her marriage to someone from Bangladesh, and she needed to be employed for this to happen.

Other British-Bangladeshi women had a much easier time taking up paid work during and after they had finished education. They reported various forms of casual employment in their past. It was only when their parents began to think about their marriage that restrictions came into play. And once they got married, many found themselves having to deal with husbands and in-laws who had very different views about appropriate roles for women. As newly-married daughters-in-law, they occupied a subservient position within the family hierarchy, deferring to the wishes of their husbands and in-laws. As a result, for many respondents, the ability to exercise strategic life choices in their married lives depended crucially on the attitudes of their husbands and in-laws.

This is well illustrated by the case of Yasmin. As already noted, she had managed to overcome her father's resistance to university. She also managed to gain his consent to her employment and found a well-paid job in a high-profile company in the City. But by the time she reached the age of 20, her family began to put pressure on her to marry, saying that she had 'passed her sell-by date'. She resisted for awhile, as she felt that she was just getting started: *'I knew it was a corporate company but I felt so alive and proud. I was making money and I had independence. It was an incredible job that I had earned for myself. In six months I was promoted. It was a different world for me. It was the City, and the functions and the people were amazing, and I was at a level where I could have gone a lot higher.'*

But the pressure proved too much: *'I didn't want to be selfish and it was being drummed into me that I was being selfish.'* She was made to give up her job because it would be up to her in-laws to decide if she could continue to work. Her parents-in-law turned out to be far stricter than her own parents, dictating what she could wear and where she could go.<sup>5</sup> Although her husband was supportive of the idea of her working, her in-laws were not only vehemently opposed to it but sought to devalue her previous achievements. Despite the fact that she was earning twice the salary of her brothers, they would tell others that she had simply been passing time working in a local store till she got married: *'This was in 1997 when girls didn't work after marriage. I must say that it has changed now and everyone who has worked and got a degree is played up and advertised properly. I was sad, but I knew that I had done the work for myself and I shouldn't really care.'*

Shaheeda did not face any opposition when she expressed her desire to work, but once she found a job at the local post office, made new friends, cut her hair and became more outgoing, her family decided that employment was proving a 'bad' influence and that they needed to marry

her off as soon as possible: *'It was just the Asian thing to do I suppose. As soon as the girl reaches a certain age, it's time to get her married.'* However, when she found that they were planning to marry her off to 'some villager from Bangladesh', she rebelled. Instead, she married a Bangladeshi man she had met through work. Moving in with his family, she found them to be far more traditional than her own. The stress of adjustment led to severe depression and she gave up work during her first pregnancy. She was absent from the labour market for the next 12 years and is only now considering the possibility of going back to work.

According to the British-born women in our sample, it is the Bangladeshi women who arrive to marry or join husbands who face the most restrictions on their ability to work. Their subordinate status as newly arrived daughters-in-law was exacerbated by the fact that they had left their own family networks behind and were strangers to the UK context. Yasmin, who grew up in the UK, was horrified to find that her brother, who had married a woman from Bangladesh, seemed bent on reproducing the traditional model of marriage that had characterised their parents, refusing to let his wife go out and learn English and find a job: *'I fought with my mum and dad about it but they said that she is from back home and she will become... It was along the lines of "She will learn the laws and leave my brother." It was an absurd idea to have. Them and their bloody old-fashioned ways.'*

Parveen, who was also brought up in the UK, made similar observations:

*In our Bangladeshi community, there are two different types of women. There are those who went through school here, went to college here and found work here. Then you've got another type where the women have just come from Bangladesh after they have gotten married... These women come in as someone's daughter-in-law and they are no longer with their families who are tens of thousands of miles away. Language is a barrier, but the elders are also a barrier because of cultural needs. Especially one you get from back home, she is someone to come and work for you and not to get a job. Both my sister-in-laws are from Bangladesh. They got married very young and they came here when they were in their teens. They both have children and they don't work –full-time mums. They look at me and think that we have a freer lifestyle. It's different for them. My brothers are more traditionalist and they felt that they are the men and they are responsible for the family...*

These comments appear to suggest that wives from Bangladesh were expected, and perhaps selected, to be far more compliant with restrictive versions of cultural norms than those who had grown up in the UK. However, according to Yasmin, it was not only the restrictions imposed by husbands and in-laws that explained why so many of the women migrating to the UK stayed at home. She also blamed some of the women themselves for their lack of initiative, their unwillingness to come to English classes and learn to fend for themselves:

*Despite the fact that they did not speak English properly, and that there were a lot of ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] classes available, there are a lot of silly women who didn't take the opportunity, and even some of my sisters-in-law who had the time didn't go to the classes. I want to tell them to stop coming to me to fill in the forms, you can do them yourself. I don't know why but it was silliness. It would have been better for them, but now we have a Star Plus (Hindi TV channel) culture. There are ladies who want to stay at home and just watch Star Plus. They are soap operas and they are ridiculous because they are Hindi family-based soap operas and they are not relatable at all. Completely different religion and culture and the women are totally obsessed, absolutely mesmerised. As soon as the children go to school, they watch hours of it until the children come back.*

The eight women in our sample who had never worked were all recent migrants. It is also likely that these recent migrants make up a considerable proportion of the women who are classified as 'off the map' and 'hard to reach' in the policy documents of Tower Hamlets (Tower Hamlets, 2011). Certainly, three of the women who agreed to talk to the research team as long as they

were not recorded had all arrived in the UK as adults to join UK-born husbands, and seemed to fit into this category. Their reluctance to be taped was the fear that their voice would be recognised and be used against them by ‘people’, either to send them to work or in some other way. None of the three have worked.

Laili has spent the nine years of her married life in the UK looking after her three children and husband as well as her in-laws, who often visited. She comes from a poor family in Bangladesh and has not learnt any English. Although she would like to have learnt, she is unable to do so without her husband’s co-operation: *‘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.’* She takes her children to school but she doesn’t take part in the school activities because her husband doesn’t want her picking up gossip and becoming one of those women *‘who back chat and things’*.

Kobita arrived in the UK in 1992 when she was just 16. She had only completed primary school in Bangladesh. She lives with her husband, her five children and her mother-in-law. Her husband explicitly forbade her to look for a job, so she has never tried. However, she used to work as a babysitter on an informal basis for other women in her building and earned a bit of money from that. Her husband no longer works because he has diabetes and cholesterol. They get disability benefit and her time is taken up with looking after him, her children and her mother-in-law.

Sonia is somewhat different from the other two, although she too has never worked. She is 25 years old and came to the UK ten years ago. She lives with her husband and two children. She had finished college in Bangladesh and already knew some English when she arrived. She had hoped to become a school teacher when she was growing up and would still like to find a job as a teaching assistant. However, her husband feels he earns enough money in the restaurant and her in-laws, who live nearby, feel that she might become too ‘modern’ if she worked.

Not all the women who migrated as adults to the UK fell into the category of the ‘Star Plus’ culture described by Yasmin, women whose lives revolved around TV soaps, or had been confined to their homes by husbands and in-laws. There were, as we discuss in Section 5.5, a number in our sample who showed considerable initiative, often with the support of their husbands, in learning English and taking up various training opportunities.

### **5.3 Unpaid care work**

We have focused so far on the restrictions imposed on women’s life choices by those with authority over them as part of the explanation for their absence from –or limited presence in – the labour market. For the majority of women, however, this absence is also the result of what can be described as their own life choices – albeit choices that are deeply embedded in community norms. Both men and women within the community have grown up with an idealised model of family life in which men take on primary breadwinning responsibility while women care for the family and look after the house. This model is strongly underpinned by a discourse of duties and responsibilities that cuts across generations and frequently extends to the wider family network.

The women’s accounts of their lives contained frequent references to husbands, fathers and brothers bearing financial responsibility not only for their own wives and children but for other members of the family circle. Some of this assistance takes the form of remittances home, but much of it supports members of the extended family within the UK itself. In a number of cases, a single male breadwinner was supporting a large network of relatives – a responsibility that took

its toll. The high ratio of dependants to earners may be one reason why so many Bangladeshi families find it difficult to earn their way out of poverty.

Another reason is likely to be the high levels of economic inactivity among women in these families. The other side of the coin to men's breadwinning responsibility is women's responsibility for unpaid care work within the family. This emerged as the single most important factor constraining their ability to take up paid work and restricting the range of options available to them if they did. Some women gave up work when they got married, others when they had their first child. Part-time work did not seem to present itself as an option while the children were below school-going age, but was discussed as a possibility once the children were at school.

In addition, the pressure to have children as early as possible after marriage and the higher-than-average rates of fertility that prevailed in the community means that caring for young children takes women out of the market for an extended period of time. In our sample, married women in their twenties had an average of 0.57 children, women in their thirties had 2.2 children, while women in their forties and over had 2.8. While women in their twenties were most likely to have children under the age of five, at least 8 of the 19 women in their thirties also had young children.

Women's care-giving responsibilities were not limited to their children. An unusually large number of women in our sample – 8 out of the 35 – were also primary carers for other family members: disabled, depressed and elderly husbands, ageing parents-in-law, and ill mothers.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, women are combining care for their own children and other family members, leading to complete exhaustion, leaving little time or energy to take up paid work or even the training that would enable them to do so.

It is not clear if Yasmin's experience represents a typical or an extreme case, but it exemplifies the toll that the model of extended responsibility takes on both husband and wife. She and her husband lived with his parents for many years after their marriage, and she described how her husband had been 'battered down' by having to look after his parents and siblings, getting his sisters married and keeping an eye on things. As already noted, Yasmin had been forced to give up a well-paid job by her in-laws after she got married. She became the main carer for her disabled father-in-law. He wanted to have a grandchild before he died, putting pressure on her to have children early in her marriage. So she had a baby – *'Fortunately it was a boy'* – but this added to her care-giving responsibilities: *'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.'*

Her father-in-law died a few years ago but now she has a second child, who is five years old. Her mother-in-law also needs care but is more active. The children are both in school now and the family has recently moved into private rented accommodation. Yasmin divides her time between managing her own house and that of her mother-in-law, who lives in a council flat nearby. Her husband had turned 40 and wants them to focus on their children. Things have improved, but they have sacrificed a great deal:

*We look back and we think that if we had both done what we wanted to do then, we could have done something and we could have bought our own house by now. Schools could have been a lot better for our kids and we would have had a better lifestyle. The plan was that, but the recession and the family dynamics were too much. Even today, he pays half of the other house. Financially, we can't do anything.*

Zohra married a man from Bangladesh who then joined her in her mother's house in the UK. Her husband only worked for two years after his arrival in the UK and then gave up work, after being diagnosed with depression. She had been working in a day nursery when she got married

and had continued even after her first baby because her mother, who lived with them, looked after the baby and did the cooking. However, she found managing her responsibilities more difficult after the birth of her second child, and handed in her resignation. She now has five children, the youngest of whom is ten months. She has no thoughts of going back to work at present. She believes that her qualifications are now out of date and that jobs are harder to find. She lives with her husband and children in a council flat and calls herself a 'full-time mummy': *'I don't think about working. I don't think I can manage working and maintaining the family and together, cooking, looking after the children, it's going to be too much for me. I sometimes feel tired, even now.'*

Nasreen had done various jobs before she got married: in childcare, a chemist's, and as a teaching assistant. She was able to continue working after marriage until her mother, who lived nearby and looked after her young son, fell ill. She did not like the idea of leaving her young child with a childminder and gave up work for an extended period. She did begin work for a few months when her son started school, but her mother fell ill and she gave up work to look after her full-time. Although she is receiving Carer's Allowance, she thinks a job would help her family more. But she does not see herself as going back to work as she feels her qualifications are no longer sufficient. In any case, it is clear that she is suffering from extreme exhaustion, and the prospect of any kind of a job seems remote:

*I'm a full-time carer for my mum and now I'm ill too, so I can't do that much. I still go every two or three days and do the housekeeping and shopping for her. I have to take her to the hospital and doctors all the time. My sister's got a baby now and works, and my brother won't help out. My husband works outside and I don't think he will come in the evening and help me. Therefore, I am unable to look for a job because of everything. I just don't have that concentration or the brain. What else can you do? Where can you get work that you can do from home? Before, there used to be people who bring work to your home, but now they don't do that anymore. I could do some administration work but my brain is slow, even doing housework. There are no jobs... I don't want to work. I can't do it. I want to sit at home and get bored. I am not well and my mother is not well. I am going back and forth and there is too much housework. I don't like it at all... If I had the time, I would do some training. Maybe do a part-time job. Now, I don't have time and I'm always ill... I don't have a future but my children are my future. I think I can work, but I'm not physically fit. I am anaemic, I have gastric problems, I have fits, I don't have strength. I also have memory problems and I can't concentrate on things at all.*

Zarina's marriage was organised while she was in Bangladesh around ten years ago. When she arrived in the UK, she found that her husband was disabled and could not work. They lived with his family and she looked after her husband, children and in-laws. The question of employment had never arisen for her. *'There was so much housework and my in-laws to look after too. How could I leave the house being the daughter-in-law? Who would do the work, the cooking and cleaning? My father-in-law told me to go to English classes but I didn't feel comfortable. It seemed weird that my in-laws would be at home and I would be out and about working, doing courses and things. My husband has so many needs and I have to do all of that. Changing him and bathing is always done by me. After that, all the cooking and things. That is how I pass my time. In the evening I have some time to sit and watch TV with the family. Sometimes Star Plus. The children come home and then there is cooking, cleaning, homework...'*

While she has been doing voluntary work for the past two years, she has no intention of looking for work:

*For us Asian people, we have a lot of work at home. We have to look after the house and the children and that takes a lot of our time. If women want to work, they should do it for a couple of hours. If they do it full-time, who will look after their house? When they come home, will they tidy the house, cook the food or look after their children? She will not be able to sit and do the homework with her children.*

Milya's children are now going to school and she has begun attending various classes to get the qualifications to work. Her husband picks up the children on the days she has classes. While she is interested in finding work, she faces a number of constraints. First, she cannot start working straightaway because she is looking after her mother-in-law:

*She has been here for five years and had to have everything done for her. She is quite old and senile. There is no help available for her and no one to look after her. In Bengali culture, the daughter-in-law looks after everyone, it is her responsibility. I do it because it is my obligation. You get a lot of reward for it in the afterlife. This is my job so I do it.*

Second, when she does start to work, she will have to find work that fits around her children's school timetable:

*The children have a bigger need for their parents, bigger than my need to work. I would like to work in the daytime and be home in time for them, be back before they come home. They are more important. There are so many parents who go to work and their children are on the streets and they have no idea where they are. Even if I earn less, I need my children to be in school.*

Kaniz came to the UK around six years ago. She has the lowest levels of education in our sample and came because her brothers arranged her marriage to a much older man whose first wife had died. Her passport says that she is 38 years old but she thinks that she is actually younger. Her husband is a pensioner, 'at least 80' she thinks, but is not sure. She worked in a clothing factory for a while near Brick Lane but had to leave it when her husband fell ill. She has two young children and is also her husband's primary carer: 'I make his bed, feed him his medicines, things I have to do for him.' He has no objections to her taking up part-time work as long as it is near the house and she can continue looking after him, but she is not sure how to go about finding it.

#### **5.4 Community norms**

It was evident from women's narratives that influence of the wider community is a factor in explaining their life choices. This influence did not necessarily take the form of direct proscriptions on women's labour market activity, but operated more indirectly, by shaping the contours of what was considered acceptable behaviour for women and what was regarded as out-of-bounds.

The closeness of extended family networks, the growth of a local economy geared to community needs, and the prominence of its members in local politics mean that the 'community' is the taken-for-granted backdrop against which its members conduct their everyday lives. There are positive aspects to the strength and cohesiveness of the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets. Women spoke of being able to turn to their neighbours for help when they need it, they look after each other's children, rely on each other for advice on how to deal with the system, and the community is an important part of their social life.

But there are also drawbacks. Everyone knows what everyone else is doing and the views about appropriate norms and behaviour that underpin much community opinion exercised a considerable influence on its members' life choices. For women, it is particularly constraining. One of the divorced women in our sample told us that she had moved out of Tower Hamlets to a neighbouring borough when she decided to go to evening classes after she had finished work: 'If I was seen returning home at 9, people would have talked about me and said I was bad, that I was with men and ask where I was coming from so late at night.'



Firoza spoke of how the importance given by the community to getting girls married off at an early age exercised constant pressure on parents:

*Marriage, there is always pressure. Not direct pressure, but my mum went a bit dangerous the other day because she went and talked to this gossipy woman from the area who then tried to lecture me. You know, like your mum is getting old and all that. I think in our culture, there is always going to be people who talk like that. Families have to take that on board a lot.*

Afreena was convinced that her mother's ability to learn English, pass her driving test and get a job as an interpreter a year after her father, a man with very traditional views, had died reflected the fact that they lived outside London and outside the radius of the Bangladeshi community. Having moved into Tower Hamlets some years ago, she values the closeness of community life but also spoke of the extent to which community norms influence women's work choices:

*I think that one of the problems is how someone would feel comfortable working when they were mums? There's a majority of Bangladeshi women who don't work. If you do work, then you are seen as extra modern or you are neglecting your family. How is your husband supposed to get fed and all that?*

According to Parveen, some of the pressure on younger women to conform comes from older women in the community.

*I think that in our community, the Bangladeshi community, the main thing that holds women back is women themselves, not just in work but in life generally. The older generation of women could think that it was really hard for us, let's try and make it better for the next generation. Instead, the women feel that we had to go through this, it was really hard for us so you can go through it as well. There's that lack of progression. There is a lot of jealousy, so there is a lot of holding back.*

Naseema was more inclined to attribute the constraints on women's labour force participation to male attitudes within the community:

*I think that men have a problem around domestic chores. They don't like the fact that the women's time is diverted from them and the house. And if the women are working, then their attention is diverted, they are becoming more educated and they are becoming stronger. The men will have no power over them and that is what they fear. They want to keep women in their place so the women are at their beck and call and they have more power and more control...*

A major pressure on women to comply with their husbands' restrictions on their labour market options was fear of marital breakdown and the social ostracism experienced as a result. One of the women in our sample who worked in a community project to help women into work said that she had come across a number of Bangladeshi women who would have liked to have worked, but...

*...there is something there and I can sense their silence. There is a fear there but I don't want to get into this... The fear of what they are going to have to say to their husbands or their mothers-in-law. They fear it will be the end of their marriage. The mother-in-law will say to the son that he has lost everything because his wife was now bigger than him. He has lost control. What the mother-in-law says is very important because they will have to live with her.*

Tahera gave us a vivid account of how taking up work exposed women to the risk of community censure and possible divorce:

*You can't divorce in Bengali culture because it's like a dark cloud on a family. Number one, if a woman wants to work, then her husband might say yes. You never know because not all men are the same. But then the family will try and intervene and they will say "Control your woman because everyone will start saying things." They'll say things like "Aren't you a man?" The family has a conflict and then what the mother-in-law does is because she can't control the one that has gone to work, she plans something and puts it in her son's head. Things like she has seen his wife with other men and talking to strangers, and at that instant he will change his attitude. When the wife comes home, she will not know what's going on, but over time, he will then say to her that he doesn't want her because she is having an affair. I've heard lots of stories. Women have to be very careful because there is family watching everywhere. You can't avoid it, and these Bengali men are kind of stupid in their head as well. They are supposed to know their wife but when they see her confidence and her happiness, then they remember what their mum said, that she is with somebody. Instead of thinking positive, they think the negative. There is nothing to do.*

### **5.5 Language, qualifications and self-confidence**

Along with the constraints posed by family and community, women who might otherwise have taken up jobs face a number of additional barriers to the labour market. Most prominent among our sample were a lack of relevant skills and qualifications, poor command of English (particularly among those who have recently come from Bangladesh), and unfamiliarity with how to go about getting work. The women in our sample who mentioned language problems as a barrier to work were all recent migrants. Seven of them had attended ESOL classes, some in order to be able to get around on their own, others as preparation for finding work.

While some of these women were supported by their families, others had struggled or were struggling on their own to find out where to go for language classes. Hafiza has been in the UK for just three years and has one young son. She does not have any friends in the UK that she can talk to. If she were to look for work, she would not know how to go about it. Her husband has said that the only ESOL classes around are too far away and she is not sure her mother-in-law will look after her child if she does manage to attend any. However, she would like to work and has little sympathy with women who refuse to learn English: *What the council should do is tie them all up together and send them back to Bangladesh...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 that, I want to look after myself.'*

Firoza, who is British-born and has worked for some time in a job placement centre, believes that learning to speak English is only one of the obstacles faced by women who have not been brought up in the UK. There are also issues of self-confidence and familiarity with the local culture of work:

*A lot of them see an image and they don't know how to get there. They see confident women and their own background is home and family, so they can't relate. They get worried and feel they are blocked and lose self-confidence. If it is a woman who can't speak, there is a language barrier, then they have to go to language classes. Learn how it is and apply themselves more. There was this one 16-year-old, she had learnt English but she can't use it at home and she is scared she will lose what she has learnt... You can't give women false hope. We had one woman who was OK with speaking English but her dress and her mindset were very "cultural". She wanted to work in an office as a receptionist but you know that is not possible. She probably could do it but she needed to see that you couldn't smell of curry and come into work. That is not going to do anything for her. She had to learn the basics and personally I would put her on training to learn what work culture is.*

Kaniz has the lowest level of education in our sample. She has been the primary carer for her elderly husband since she got married six years ago, but has also been going to ESOL classes.

Her work options are restricted by her care responsibilities and fear of losing benefits, but as her children are now at school, she would like to work for a couple of hours a day. She has started sewing items of clothing for mothers she met at her children's school, but does not know how to turn it into a viable business:

*I would like to turn it into a business but I will need some help because I don't know how to do that. I would like to learn to stitch properly and measure materials. I am sure there is more to it than that...It would make things more professional... I don't know what the council can do to help me. I don't know how to get help and information.*

Problems of self-confidence and knowledge are not confined to women who have recently come into the UK. Although Nafisa had been brought up in Tower Hamlets, her interactions with anyone outside the Bangladeshi community had been severely restricted by her parents. She lacked self-confidence:

*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.*

Shaheeda, whose in-laws had been very restrictive about the possibility of work, had spent 12 years at home looking after her children. As she put it: *'It was a whole different world and you don't realise that there is another world out there.'* She is back on the job market and having difficulty finding work. But she at least had prior work experience, unlike Azra who, after 14 years bringing up her children, is looking for work for the first time in her life. She had no idea about how to go about getting a job:

*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 say: "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.'*

## **5.6 The issue of benefits**

National data show that benefits form a larger proportion of the income coming into Bangladeshi (and Pakistani) households than that of other ethnic minorities. The issue of benefits also featured as a factor shaping labour market behaviour in the accounts of some of the women we interviewed, although many were reluctant to discuss their finances in any detail. A number of distinct strands can be distinguished in the way that benefits were talked about in these interviews. First, it was clear that a number of households had no option but to rely on benefits because of disability, health, unemployment, or the need to care for young children. Such households would slide into destitution if benefits were cut.

Second, there were a group of women who were well acquainted with the benefit system and made careful calculations about how to balance the income they could get from a job and the benefits they were likely to lose. Tuli, for example, wanted a job that would allow her to pay her rent, council tax and bills, and save towards a deposit on a house. She knows that with a part-

time job, she would get some help with housing benefit. On the other hand, a well-paid full-time job would allow her to afford her rent without having to rely on benefits. She has therefore opted to look for a full-time job, but in the meanwhile, she is working for cash in hand, doing catering within the community.

There was a third group of women who appeared to be unaware of how benefits worked. Most of this group were recent arrivals in the UK – but not all. Jahanara was an example of one of the recent arrivals who was under the impression that even a part-time job would jeopardise her family's access to housing benefits and *'Then how would we all survive? There is no way. Housing benefit helps us a lot.'* Zarinahad come to the UK more than ten years ago and has been looking after her disabled husband ever since. They share a house with her in-laws. No one in the household appears to be in work and it is likely that they all rely on benefits. Her brother-in-law controls the household finances and pays the bills. She has no idea what 'her' benefits are and why she gets them, but just spends the allowance she is given.

Shamima, on the other hand, was an example of someone who had grown up in the UK with no idea of how the system worked. She had been bringing up her children on her own on income support since 2002. She has recently been assisted into work by a job placement scheme. She was enlightening about the level of ignorance surrounding benefits and the widespread view that people were worse off if they worked:

*I wasn't really aware of how much better off I would be being off benefits. I didn't understand that. I thought I was better off not working – there is word going round: "You know what, don't go to work." And people actually believe that! I myself even believed that. Because when something's been passed down from generation to generation, you believe it. The most common one is "I will have to pay full rent." Terrifying. They will look at my income and say I have to pay full rent and full council tax. I myself was fearful of that. But then when I got in there and I asked for help and advice, I understood the benefit a bit more. I had to go out there and look and look [for information], it wasn't easily available or accessible, I went to housing benefit, job centre. It puts people off. Now I know that's not the case, you may be paying this and that, but there is help out there – and it depends on your wages. You actually are better off working. That's a fact. I see that. Financially, I am better off. The future is looking brighter.*

Finally, it was the view of some of our respondents that benefits acted as a disincentive to work and that many families they knew appeared to have settled into reliance on benefits as a way of life. Banu spoke of her own aversion to such attitudes:

*When both my husband and I are capable of working and we both have work, we find no need to put pressure on the benefit system. We see it as a form of stealing. We are told in Islam that if you can work, you must work. You shouldn't be sitting at home and thinking, "Well, I am getting paid and don't have to go anywhere and I don't have to pay anyone to take care of my children, it is my payment, my cheque for being at home." I don't believe in that. I think there is something seriously and deeply wrong with that...*

Saira was equally scathing about the dependency mentality that benefits had created in some people:

*I personally think that the government does too much for those people who are not working. It does not really teach them to appreciate anything. It is like free money. The people that are working know what it feels like to earn money and they get no help in terms of childcare. I like a system where they tell you that after your children reach a certain age, you should go out and get a job. Then the children are in school. The council can set up daycare centres and things like after-school clubs, up to five, and provide*

*food. Parents can pay towards costs but it has to be cheap daycare. Even schools can provide that. That bit of help will help both ways: it will expand kids' knowledge and it will help parents.*

### **5.7 The availability of work**

The fact that so many women's work aspirations were clustered around a limited range of jobs, usually selected for their compatibility with childcare responsibilities, meant that there were simply not enough of these jobs to go around. Matters are not helped by the recession and the cutting back of so many jobs in both the public and private sectors. Firdausi has just finished college and is looking for work. But she is not hopeful now that so many unemployed young people are fighting for the same jobs. She does not think she can afford to be too choosy, but is scathing about the help she has received from the Job Centre:

*The Job Centre is an organisation that is supposed to look for jobs. I understand that, especially in Tower Hamlets, there are a high number of unemployed people and the list is growing every day. But when I went there, I just signed and that was it... I used to sit there and say, "Look, is there anything you can do, any jobs that you know of that I can apply for." They don't want to help or give it away. You're like a number to them so you've come for your interview or sign and then off you go. You need to push them and so every Tuesday when I went to sign I would ask them if there was anything or if they can help or if they knew of any jobs. I used to question them. Not my sister, she would sign and off she goes. I questioned them and that is how I got this job. They were like, actually, Poplar Harca are doing this scheme and I grabbed it. I just think that they don't want to help willingly. I remember asking my advisor, "Can I have your job?" He goes, "Listen love, we are having cuts and there is going to be a good hundred of us that will be without a job." So with all the cuts and people becoming redundant, the service is going to be more limiting. I have no idea how they are going to solve the high increases of unemployment. I don't think there is help out there because they themselves are losing their jobs. They can't also help everyone else.*

Tuli had worked part-time in a major store while she was at university in order to support herself. After university, she applied for various full-time jobs but failed to get any because she was told she lacked experience. Finally, she did voluntary work for two years and managed to turn it into a full-time job. The organisation has just lost its funding and she is back looking for work '*...on the net, in newspapers, but I don't know. I am applying and everything but nothing comes through. I'm looking for community work or council work or administrative work. Maybe a human resource officer. It may be because of the way things are, but it's really hard to get jobs. The government is cutting people's jobs.*'

Saira has opted to go to university as a way of postponing having to get married: '*It's a sly way out because it buys you some time. College doesn't do it, but university does.*' Her parents are on income support and unlikely to offer her much help, so she has been looking for work since college started:

*I've been to interviews, I have tried literally everything but zilch. I need the extra income to pay for things since my parents are no help. Looking on the internet, asking friends and families... Employment Solutions were useless because I would have an hour's appointment and all that time would be spent chatting on anything but getting a job. When you try and focus on the subject, they would do it again. They get too comfortable. I asked to change my advisor but they didn't get back to me. I have had some interviews but it is hard to even get to that stage. I once did 65 applications in one night, I was so desperate. There were no replies whatever.*

### **5.8 Cultural barriers in the labour market**

The failure to find work reflected other factors as well. A number of the women who had actively engaged in the search for jobs attributed their failure to find work to discrimination,

although they believed that the prejudices they encountered reflected their perceived Islamic identity rather than racial difference. Parveen worked in a private sector company and said:

*...there are not many girls in the company that wear hijabs and there are 10,000 employees. I've had a lot of people come up to me and say, "I don't mean to be racist, but..." and that is a racist statement. You could be offended but you realise that it is ignorance, so definitely all that is there.*

She believed that the public sector made greater allowances for religious and cultural diversity.

Nasreen believed that visible signs of a Muslim identity often led to discrimination at work for both men and women:

*At work, a lot of women are discriminated against because they are observing hijab and the way they dress. The fact that they are Asians and the stereotypes about Muslim women are also there as well. For men as well, if they have their beards. If they have the beard, then they are judged straight away.*

Saira, who had been looking without success for work, also felt that such prejudice was more apparent in certain jobs:

*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. Because you have an identity and you are a Muslim. Especially Selfridges. I feel like they rejected me because of my headscarf, but obviously there is not much I can do. 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.*

However, she wonders if the way she speaks might also be a problem: *I mean, because we have been born and brought up in East London, our accents might be a bit off-putting. The way you speak can be a liability because it sounds a bit Cockney.'*

A somewhat different interpretation was given by a senior official in the council job training programme, who suggested that many Bangladeshis ruled themselves out of certain kinds of jobs. For instance, she suggested they do not like to work in the City because of cultural differences: *'It is a very drinking, entertaining, networking kind of place, where you have to wine and dine clients.'* Most Bangladeshis do not drink, working late hours can be difficult, and regular praying may not always be possible. The council is much more accommodating – it has prayer rooms, but the perception is that City firms do not. She noted that Sikhs, who do not have the same constraints, and do drink alcohol, seem to be entering the City more easily.

She also added that council jobs represented a 'comfort zone' for the Bangladeshi community and explained why so many of its members gravitated towards this sector: *'They know people working at the council... so they want to go there.'* She remembered discussions with young Bengalis on the East London Business Alliance, who had all chosen placements with the council, rather than Canary Wharf or the City.

However, it should be emphasised that not all Bangladeshis are equally well connected with the council. One respondent told us: *'Don't get me started on the local authority. I can't stand them because Tower Hamlets Council, I've applied for several jobs there and it is all nepotism. It's who you know, not what you know, and I don't like that.'*

## **6. Factors facilitating labour force participation among Bangladeshi women**

Many of the women in our sample – with the exception of most of those who arrived as adults from Bangladesh – have had some work experience. Some are currently at work while others, including a number of the recent migrants, are actively seeking work. The factors that facilitate women’s access to paid work often appear to be the other side of the coin to the obstacles. In particular, while restrictive social relations within family and community constitute a major barrier to women’s pathway in to paid work, women fortunate enough to have supportive social relationships were among those that were able to find their way into the labour market. Many of these supportive relations are within the family but in some cases, the support has come from outside the family, sometimes from one-off encounters.

### 6.1 Supportive social relationships

Parveen was one of the few women in our sample who had remained in work despite having a young child. She spoke of the various sources of support in her life that had allowed her to go into higher education and then onto secure employment. While her mother had adhered to very traditional values about women’s roles, her father had been a source of great support. He regretted his own lack of education and instilled respect for education in all his children: *I think there is a fine line between being a pushy parent and being encouraging. He never pressurised us but he did encourage us by asking about homework and taking an interest. He was always encouraging, never pushy.*

She did well in school and went on to university, where she made a network of close friends who had subsequently made a variety of different life choices, a factor that supported her in trying to carve out her own pathway through life:

*I have to say that my closest friends I’ve grown up with have gone through studies and are working and are successful career women as well as family women. They may have chosen different paths. Some of them have completed studies, had a career and then got married, whereas others have gotten married then completed their studies and are now working. I would say successful women. Other friends have not really reached their full potential but they are all working or looking for work, but my close friends are all successful women.*

Finally, she was fortunate in having a supportive husband who always encouraged her by saying, *‘You are doing great, but you can do better. Nothing is beyond me, he will say. His attitude is very important to me. I know lots of relationships where there is a tug of war and sometimes financially it’s like, “This is mine and this is yours”.’*

Firdausi is one of the young women who grew up taking the idea of working for granted. She spoke of a traditional mother but an extremely loving and supportive father, who would hold his children’s hands when he took them to school to make sure they didn’t get run over (*‘even up to the year six, which was embarrassing’*). He also instructed their mother to do the same when it was her turn and to make sure they waved when they reached the school gates. He had wanted education for himself but had been sent by his own father to work in a restaurant from an early age. His response to this deprivation was to strongly encourage his sisters, whom he had supported when their father died, and his four children, to apply themselves to their studies and to go on to university. He supported Firdausi when she found a job in Clapham and would ring her every morning to make sure she had arrived safely at work. She called him *‘the girl in the family’* for the concern he showed about her safety and welfare, but it was clear that she loved him deeply. She gave him her earnings if he ever needed it and he in turn called her *‘his boy’*: *‘Technically, the boy works, and like most families, my dad gave his wages to his dad. They all depend on their*

*sons to provide for them, but look how it is now. It's sort of turned around. Girls are working and they are providing more than some sons.'*

The other major sources of inspiration for Firdausi were her aunts:

*My role models are my aunts and I've watched them go through school and work in Boots and watched them working. Because they were very young when my grandparents split up, my dad brought them up...My grandmother was all alone and my dad had to look after everyone, and all his sisters went to college, and they all worked so they could be something. I wanted to be exactly like them because on their own they managed to have so much. My aunts are like my best friends.*

Firdausi sees a different future for herself to that of her mother. Like all the Bangladeshi women in our sample, she sees marriage as inevitable and is happy to have an arranged marriage, but plans to have a small family and to continue to work, even if only part-time:

*When you are used to being out all day and having your own money, then you can't be cooped up in the house all day like my mum. In the past 20 years, things have changed. We have been given more opportunities, we have more choices now. My sister wants to stay at home and look after her kids. There is nothing wrong with that, but I want more. We have been given more choices and we should make use of them.*

Tuli cited both her parents as major positive influences in her life. They encouraged her to take school seriously, and while they did succumb to community pressure and try to marry her off after A-levels, she was able to win them round to her desire to go to university. She graduated a few years ago, to the joy of her parents:

*My dad, oh my God, he was crying and everything, because he had been telling me off for getting old and needing to get married, that there was no point in studying. But then he came to the ceremony, he saw so many people older than me, and he understood. He was so happy and he was crying. I was the first person in my generation to graduate. My mum was also crying.*

She is now working four days in a supermarket, one day in a clinic and one day in the council. Only the supermarket job is permanent, and she is looking for a more permanent full-time job.

In Afreena's case, it was the example of a strong and supportive mother that made her into an independent-minded young woman determined to stand on her own two feet before she considered marriage. Both her parents were educated, but her father had strict ideas about how wives should behave and kept strict control over her mother's movements. After he died, her mother transformed herself; within a year, she had learnt how to pay the household bills, taken English classes, passed her driving test and got a job as an interpreter in the local council. She believed that education was the key to everything and strongly encouraged her children, both sons and daughters, to go to university. Her daughters all went on to work.

Afreena worked right through university to support herself and then found work in line with her qualifications. Her mother was determined to ensure that her daughters married educated and enlightened men and that they should have a say in the matter. For Afreena, there was no question that she should not work as long as she was able to, values that she attributed to her mother's influence:

*My mum is like, "Why shouldn't you work? Why should you be at home and be lazy?" Because my mum manages to work as well as look after her husband and sons. She manages to do everything. I don't believe in wasting time. Not that looking after your children is a waste of time... Definitely, parents should invest their time in the first few years of the child's life, they should be there for the child,*



*but you need to let go. I've been married for four years now. I've worked throughout. My work is very important to me.*

Sufia is in her early thirties, university educated, single out of choice, and working in a private company. She is grateful to her parents for the support they have given her. Her father, in particular, was her role model:

*I do believe that if it wasn't for my mum and dad, I wouldn't have been like this at all. I am who I am to this day because of them. I really appreciate them and I appreciate them struggling and showing us. It's made me a better person, I think, by seeing that side of things. But he was remarkable. I take things for granted now because we were brought up over here. To see that was like settling in China for them and not knowing anything and trying to get your family over here and do your research; I wouldn't know where to start.*

She tried to follow the path he had laid out for her. He helped her open her own bank account when she was 12 years old so that she would learn to start saving, and sought to instill respect for education and the value of hard work in his children:

*He was very spiritual and religious, but not in the way Islam is today. It was about being good, having a good heart and doing the right thing—that was my dad's focus. He embedded that in me at a really young age and he used to sit with me and read stories even when I was at nursery... Working hard and being good were the main core of everything, and not forgetting who you are. Identity was really important to my dad, he really embedded that. You had to know who you are otherwise you wouldn't know where you were going. It's the different aspects of being a Bengali, being religious, knowing where your parents, grandparents come from, because otherwise you're just seen as a lost person. I think he always said, "Wherever you go, you have to know where you are from. Otherwise you are not going to succeed," somewhere along the line you've got to know that.*

On his advice, she had bought her own flat at the age of 27:

*The year that he died he said, "Sufia, I may not be around all the time, and as a female you can't rely on a man to take care of you. So I think you have to have your own property, since you're saying you don't want to get married, invest in something." I think I just listened to him and I did it. I'm glad that I did it. I rented it out for seven years after my father passed away.*

Some of the women who lacked support at home were fortunate to find it elsewhere. Many were sustained by the friendships they made, whether at school or later – friendships that provided them with the support they needed when they faced a crisis, as well as the motivation to take greater control of their own lives. Tahera's parents had brought her up to believe that a woman's only destiny was to get married, have children and look after her husband, but the marriage they arranged for her was an unhappy one. Her husband brainwashed her into thinking that she was worthless. She had stayed at home during her years of marriage, becoming obese and depressed. She finally divorced him when she found out that he had a second wife in Bangladesh, and now found herself on her own with three children to support. She was fortunate in having become friends with a spirited bunch of girls while she was still at school:

*They were the independent type. They didn't listen to their parents and they would stay out late. When I spoke to them, they would say, "Why bother going home?" If they went home, then their mum would be screaming at them to go and cook and things and that they would be getting married soon. That's what pisses them off. Then when they go home, they get a bashing from their mum.*

This group of friends had stayed in touch with Tahera during her marriage and had helped her to question whether her parents had acted in her own best interests in marrying her off so early. They rallied around after her divorce and helped to pull her out of her depression:

*My friend... said I should take things step by step. She knew I was going through a depression and I didn't know where to go... The other day she called me up and told me not to sit there like a plum and join her in her classes. She was in a similar situation, so I thought I will tag along. I thought, things will get better, and they did eventually. I have a good understanding of the world now. I can now talk back to my parents sometimes.*

She completed her foundation degree and is now pursuing a degree in community sector management.

Naseema had loving but traditional parents who married her off to a man that she discovered to be dishonest. In her case, it appeared to have been her experiences in school and her discovery of her spiritual side that gave her strength to deal with her problems. She had become interested in spiritual issues from an early age and her time in school strengthened her self-confidence: *'The teachers were brilliant. The girls were refreshing and the confidence of them brought on lots of open discussion... Their innocence was uplifting. I used to remember I loved to be in class. You had opinions and views from all different angles.'* When she decided to divorce her husband, she became very withdrawn. What lifted her out of her depression was reading books on Islam:

*(The books) said you have a free will to decide your life and only God will judge you... Nobody has the right to look down on another human being. I may be divorced, but someone else may be smoking or on drugs or an alcoholic. You are not perfect, and unless someone is perfect, they have no right to judge. Only my God is allowed to do that.*

Her spirituality brought her strength and she emerged from her seclusion as a committed feminist and community activist.

Joygun turned to her friends for advice and support because she did not feel she could get it from her parents, but she remains grateful to her parents for 'ramming home' to her the value of education:

*If I needed someone to talk to it would be myself or my friends. It was never my family. I think that's why I'm very independent, I don't rely on anyone. It did come from my parents, because even though I wasn't outwardly trying to please them, I think in my head I was... My whole life was just education, education, education, and they kept telling me how important it was, the way out of poverty, the way out of whatever position you are in at the moment... That's one thing that I'm very happy with, I'm very pleased that my parents did that. That's something I'll pass onto my children. One thing that's changed for me with education is that it does bring you out of a certain situation, in terms of career prospects and getting a job. Education provides a far better benefit, it's not just a means to an end. It provides that wider knowledge about society, about subjects, that home schooling can never provide you with. I'm able to have open or intelligent discussions on topics that I wouldn't have been able to do if I hadn't gone through those processes as a child. So if I have children, I'll probably be the same as my parents in terms of making sure they understand the importance of it. But I think I'll explain a bit wider, the benefits of education, not just if you get a good degree, you'll get a good job. You feel better about yourself if you are able to engage in discussions. It makes you into the person that you are. Educating yourself broadens your mind, broadens your horizons, makes your understanding a lot wider than it would usually be.*

Other women spoke of almost accidental encounters that had helped them to decide to go on to get a proper qualification or to find a job. In Saira's case, it was a teacher in her college who had given her the motivation to get her life on track. She had become a bit of a rebel by the time she reached college, *'bunking lessons, thinking, who is going to find out? It got a bit out of hand because I was messing up badly and it didn't look like I would get into university. But one of my teachers sat me down and said, "This is not on. You've got to do something about this." That is when I started to work and hand in my course work more regularly...My big sister also sat me down and said that "This is how it is, and you must learn to prioritise things."* Later, it was her circle of friends who helped her in her pursuit of work.

Nafisa had been encouraged to think about going back to work by friends who were themselves working and by some of the mothers she had met at her daughter's school:

*Recently, my friends have been motivating me. A couple of mums I met when taking my daughters to school have also been motivating me to do something. For a while I thought I was past my sell-by date and I was too old to be thinking about work. Then I meet these people who are like, they are 35, and they have never worked, and they are on the same level as me, completing Level 2. And then I think, I am only 27 and they are 35, and they are starting to look for work. Why should I feel like this? When I hang out with them, they boost me and motivate me.*

It was a youth worker who discovered Firoza's interest in psychology and directed her to a community project that gave her experience in counselling, encouraged her to go back to college and helped her to discover what she wanted to do. Two of the women in our sample who had little previous work experience – one because she was relatively new to the country, and the other because she had been bringing up two children on her own – told us that it was the manager of a local food co-operative where she shopped who invited them to come and work as volunteers. And, as we note below, it was the support that a number of women received in job placement and training schemes that facilitated their entry into work.

## **6.2 Bridges into paid work: training and volunteering**

Courses of various kinds were an obvious way in which many women prepared themselves for work. For recent migrants, the priority was to learn English. For a number of them, this was a precursor to their search for jobs. Nilufer had reached university level in Bangladesh before she came to the UK a year ago. She has attended ESOL classes and learnt enough English to get around. Her husband has encouraged her to get a job, but she does not think her English is strong enough to work in an office or to travel too far for work. She does, however, have some ideas about the kind of work she might be able to do, given her limited English:

*There are people who are disabled and things, so I don't mind a job looking after them. Also, if I could work in a school, that would be good. But I can't speak English, so I don't know if I would be able to get those jobs. Even in shops and supermarkets, you don't need to speak too much, just work. I don't mind those jobs at all. In factories, where you do packing and things, I could do that if someone showed me how. You don't really need experience.*

Her problem is that she does not know how to go about getting any of these jobs: *'I don't know what a CV is and I have no one to ask. My husband is always at work. He doesn't have time to take me around. I could ask my sister, but she has to look after her in-laws.'*

Milya is going to ESOL classes because she says that she would like to find work now that her children are at school. She would like to look after children or older people, but needs part-time work given that her children are still young and her mother-in-law is senile. She also faces the problem of not knowing how to go about finding work:

*I know you have to do voluntary work. Even jobseekers [staff] tell you to go voluntary, but if you have no qualifications, you can't get work anywhere. Jobseekers tell me that they will help me to get a job when I have finished studying. I will ask my friends and teachers to help me find a job. I don't know anyone, so I have to go to those I am familiar with.*

Around 13 women in our sample had attended, or were currently attending, training courses. While GNVQs (General National Vocational Qualification) in health and childcare were the most frequently mentioned, one woman had registered to train as a gym instructor, while others were trying to build up their IT and business skills. For some of the women, it was as much a matter of building up their self-confidence and social skills as acquiring technical qualifications. Monawara found out about a BME Health guide course from one of the mothers in her son's school. It was just one day a week and close to her children's school, so she could walk over easily:

*I was really happy doing that. Finally, I had gotten on to a course and I was doing something for myself. I thought, from here onwards, I was going to do a lot more training and get myself a job. Before, I hadn't done anything else so it gave me a lot of confidence. Go up to people and speak in public. I didn't have a problem with that before, but being at home and being with the kids, you lose a lot of your vocabulary. When I was doing the course, a lot of stuff was coming back. All the people I met on the course were fun and I loved everyone. There were housewives like me, there were a few from uni, a few that had worked before. In the beginning, when I heard about it, I thought what is this, it's going to be all Smoothie-making and all that, it isn't for me. After I had gone, I was happy I had.*

Munni, who had been working with a parent support programme, had strong ideas about the role of training courses in creating bridges to the labour market for women like Monawara who had given up work once they had children:

*One of the barriers I see is that we need to get these women to come and take part in these courses. For me, it was easy to get them because I am Bangladeshi and I attracted the Bangladeshi women. Some of them said to me in the first year that I ran this programme that they would like to be like me. One of them said "I am touched by the fact that you are a working mum, you are married, you are studying, you are working, you are managing your house and you cook at home. How do you manage?" I said that I plan mentally and I'm easily adaptable as well. It was really nice and she wrote me a note for me to put towards my organisation. Two of them said to me that I was their role model. They are now at home, but they had really good jobs after leaving college. After marriage they didn't work, so they didn't know how to get back to it. I said that the more you delay it, the longer it takes. You lose the motivation and your self-esteem level drops too. But you know what, they came in to the course, and my colleague and I empowered them. Some of them did courses and some of them did volunteering. Some may have gone back into their home, but many of them said, "We want to do what you are doing Munni. We want to be like you. How do I get your job, because I want to do what you do." People need to be motivated, whether they are male or female. Not a bribe, but they need an incentive. So they can feel that they need to go so they can get something in return. In our course, they get qualified and they get a certificate that shows that they can work with children and they understand their teenage children. It helps them in their family life as well, the strengthening family course also help to strengthen their relationships with their partner and their family. They take that with them, but also a certificate. They also get free breakfast or lunch. You need to give incentives for people to get them out.*

Voluntary work had also played a similar bridging role in the lives of a number of women. For those who were still engaged in full-time care responsibilities at home, it allowed them the opportunity to get out of the house and mix with other people. For others, it provided much-

needed work experience before they could find a full-time job. A fortunate few had managed to transform their voluntary status into paid employment by proving their competence in the workplace.

Naseema believes that her voluntary work is providing her with the various skills she needs to find a job: *'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.'* Tahera had gone back to college after her divorce to get qualifications in community work. She cannot go into full-time employment now as one of her sons is ill, but she has become actively involved with voluntary work with the local Community Trust and with Asian women learning ESOL. She sees this as preparation for getting a full-time job: *'I am continuously doing voluntary work, I'm building my skills.'* She is not worried about getting a job in the future as her face is now well known in the community.

Yasmin also sees voluntary work as a bridge back into the labour market after many years absence while she looked after her children and her ailing father-in-law. He has now died and she has finally moved out with her family into their own home. She cannot do full-time work as she is still caring for her mother-in-law, and she also feels her skills have suffered during her time at home. Voluntary work offered her the chance to upgrade her skills before she looks for full-time work:

*It's a fantastic idea to volunteer before work. Before I found the centre, I was like, I need to look for a job, but where do I start? What do I do? I can fill in application forms for other people and they get interviews and jobs and things, but I can't do the same thing for me. I had no idea what to write and I thought I had no skills. I did attend a couple of different courses and that let me get into volunteering and there was a 'parents going back into work' course that I did in my son's school that helped a lot. It's these little things that helped me shape my CV. I made myself a new CV after 13 years, can you imagine?*

Azra had very little work experience both before and during her marriage. After her divorce, she raised her three children on her own with income support. Her youngest has now turned 16 and she is under pressure to get back into work. She has not worked in a long time, but she had done a course the previous summer which taught her how to write a CV, how to be more confident, what work involves, and how to speak to people. She is now doing voluntary work with a local food co-op, selling fruit and vegetables. She believes that the experience is equipping her to work in a supermarket:

*At first I was a little bit scared when I started...I didn't know what I had to do. Now, I like it. I like the open space and the centre. I like it when people come up and I say hello to them, and seeing all the nice things that are brought to the centre each week. The co-op is all about selling stuff and now I think I can work in Waitrose and Sainsbury's. They are similar things...I can use the till and things if someone shows me a couple of times.*

A number of the women in our sample who had arrived relatively recently from Bangladesh had begun volunteering. Zarina, for instance, who looked after her handicapped husband and three young children, had begun volunteering at a local food co-op at the suggestion of the manager. She had been reluctant at first and said that she might come if she had the time. But once she started, she really enjoyed it: *'For as long as I can, I will be doing my voluntary work so that I will have the experience when the time comes and I look for a job. I will come here and ask for help.'*

### **6.3 Childcare support**

We have seen that many of the women who had been working dropped out in order to become full-time mothers. Very few had jobs that offered maternity leave, but even those that did found it impossible to continue after the second child. At the same time, most were strongly against the possibility of using childminders in order to continue working or to return to the labour force. Many related lurid stories of what had happened when mothers had entrusted their children to the care of strangers. In addition, childminding was not seen as a cost-effective option, since paying for a childminder would offset whatever money they were likely to earn. The availability of satisfactory childcare options is therefore a major factor in enabling women to take up some form of paid work.

It is around childcare that family and community can play a part in facilitating the realisation of women's work aspirations. Most of the women who relied on others for help with childcare spoke of close family members – mothers, mothers-in-law, siblings – and sometimes neighbours. Tahera has been able to attend courses and do voluntary work because her eldest son helped out with the younger children. Earlier, she had an informal arrangement with her next door neighbour:

*I used to pay her a little bit or I would buy her something at the end of the week. For an Asian woman, receiving five or ten pounds is a lot for them because they are not allowed to go out. She had similar aged children like mine and they all got on very well.*

Munni, one of the few women in our sample with a fairly uninterrupted work history, has also relied on informal arrangements for her four children. Previously, she had left her children with a friend of her mother who lived in the same block and had a large number of children of her own:

*I would definitely go to someone I know. I want my kids to learn and be nurtured and not just left somewhere. I am fussy about who the childminder is. It's not just about paying them, but I want them to enjoy looking after my kids.*

When they moved, she changed her working hours so that she started work later than her husband and finished later. She could therefore drop the children off at school while her husband picked them up. She valued this arrangement not only because it allowed her to continue work but also because it involved her husband with his children much more: *'You can see the difference in the kids. They love spending time with their dad. Mum does a lot but dad plays with them, so they are very attached. So the kids are getting the best of both worlds.'*

Lina has a full-time job with the council but can work flexible hours and her mother helps out with childcare. She is now unemployed but trying to re-train as an interpreter. Her husband, who is a minicab driver, picks the children up from school. In addition, she is helped by her older daughter: *'She's quite a mother figure and they obey her well.'*

A number of women opted for more formal childcare arrangements. Parveen continued working four days a week after her marriage, took a year out for maternity leave and then returned to work, leaving her child with her mother-in-law. However, she and her husband are now preparing to move some distance away from her in-laws and she is planning to leave her son in a nursery for two days a week. She prefers this to a childminder because *'He will be in an environment with other children and more than one carer. It's more official. I will pay for the childcare, but some of it will be paid using childcare vouchers from work.'*

Nasreen gave up work to bring up her three children full-time. After ten years' absence from the labour market, she decided to try and find her way back once she was able to leave her youngest

child in the nursery. She is fortunate in having a supportive husband and neighbours, but the existence of various community facilities also helped:

*The pay is alright and the timing is alright I suppose. I start at 9 and I finish at 3.30. My husband picks them up and drops them off, either at breakfast club and after-school clubs. My neighbours are very friendly and they help me by dropping them off and picking them up as well. In the holidays, I am off when they are home, so the timing is good I think.*

Banu works part-time and leaves her child in the nursery on the days she works: 'My mum says what is the benefit in your working when you have to pay so much to the nursery?' But she enjoys her work and is determined to stay in it. In general, as Afreena pointed out, women seem better disposed towards nurseries than childminders: 'They get used to a routine and they get along with other children. They are more prepared for school. I think nursery is a safe environment and they are learning. And there's lots of people around and your child is socialised.'

#### **6.4 The motivation to work**

While most of the women in our sample, including those not currently in work, expressed the desire to work, it was the strength of their motivation for wanting to work that distinguished those for whom the desire to work was an abstract possibility and those who were serious about their labour market intentions. The need to earn money was a major, and understandable, motivating factor, but it was frequently intertwined with other more intangible considerations, including what women wanted from their own lives and what they wanted for their children.

Women who had arrived relatively recently from Bangladesh were the most vague about why they wanted to work, how they would go about finding a job, or when they would start to work. It may be that they were least knowledgeable about what was on offer. A number of them spoke in terms of wanting to get out of the house, getting some fresh air or exercise, or wanting someone to talk to. Nilufer would like to find a job to have some money to spend on herself instead of relying on her husband for everything. She is also lonely:

*I watch TV at home but I don't like being on my own. There is a market next to my house so I go there and look at what they do. I go for a walk, I go shopping. I think if you work, you have your own independence. I will earn and pay for my own things.*

Fahmida had wanted to be a teacher when she was in Bangladesh and is now trying to learn English in the hope of finding a job. Her husband supports the idea and she herself is highly motivated –both to get out of the house and to have some money of her own:

*I want to learn English properly and I want to work because it is so boring sitting at home all day. I feel restless. I keep having to cook and clean the house, do the hoovering and things every day. I have to cook everyday too because I am at home. My husband wants me to go out and get a job so I can keep my mind fresh... If I knew English, I would be working now. I would also like to earn a lot of money because I really like shopping. I know women who earn their money and spend it are happier. My husband gives me money but I feel I am taking liberties and must stay within a limit. I don't like to pressurise him. I don't ask for money. I wait till he gives it.*

Azra, who was brought up in the UK, has been bringing up two children on her own since her divorce. Her health is not very good and she is anxious about whether she can work, but she says she is keen on getting out of the house:

*I don't want to work in the house. I get tired in my house. If I go in the office, a big open space, I want to work there. I would like to wear my headscarf. I think my salwar kameez [loose tunic and*

trousers worn in South Asia] *is fine. I would want to wear that to work because I am comfortable in that but I don't mind wearing trousers or something like that. I would like a job where you can wear whatever you want. I think it's just clothes, so does it matter? I feel comfortable in it. I would like to work in an office because I like an office environment. It's clear and it's got big space. I don't like small spaces, they scare me.*

Some of the other women in our sample clearly had no choice but to work because their earnings were crucial for their households. Munni has been working since she left college and is currently working full-time as a school home support worker. Her husband has a part-time job in a hotel. She considers herself the main breadwinner in the family, not only because she earns more than him but because he was sending part of his income to support his family in Bangladesh so that the family depended on her income. However, she also has a strong commitment to work:

*My own personal value and belief is that you work to earn your keep. I really believe that if Allah has given you hands and legs and the physical and mental ability, even if your academic ability is not as high as others, you use what you have got and don't waste it. It is my personal belief that you are here and lucky to be alive, so use it. As long as it is halal, do it. I love my work and I love helping others. I've always been in a situation where I've been communicating with others and helping people. And you are earning, you are using your time usefully and you are motivating your children to earn money and to work hard for it.*

In Lina's case, the primary breadwinning role had been forced on her by her husband's failure to find regular employment. She too had no choice but to work:

*Obviously, I was the breadwinner. My earnings had to cover everything...My husband never took responsibility. I would never put my daughter in that position, ever. At the moment, when you start working, the men start relying on you...I had wanted a husband to look after me because I was looking after my family...but it was the other way round.*

Her contract was terminated following funding cuts a few months before the interview but she is determined to find other work because she is worried about her children's education:

*I want all three to go on to higher education. What I was not able to achieve, I want them to achieve...Only thing that worries me is the student fees. That is what is killing me inside. By the time they finish their degrees, they will be 50 grand in debt. They haven't earned a pound yet. I feel I need to get a job to help them out.*

Parveen's motivations for working have changed over time. Before she got married, it was job satisfaction that mattered: *'I would always say to myself that the day I wake up and I don't want to go to work, then I will quit. I've always lived by that, so that's why I left the chauffeuring job when I did.'* Once she got married, it allowed her a daily means of getting out of the house and escaping the domestic routine. But then it became increasingly necessary as she realised that her husband was the primary breadwinner for the large extended family with whom they lived:

*That's how it works and when we move, he will continue to support his family, and I expect him to, but not to the same extent. Apart from the fact that I was living under his roof, my husband didn't financially support me. If I asked him for money, he wouldn't say no, but I was still supporting myself.*

While she finds juggling her various responsibilities difficult, her job has now become even more essential because her husband has lost his:



*My timetable is mum for an hour in the morning, then I'm an employee and then I'm a daughter-in-law. I'm not even a wife. Most of the time I'm not even a mum, but I know that it's only temporary. When I have my own place, I can spend more time with him and cook when I want. It will be on my own terms and I can prioritise my time... I could have taken the stance of being a full-time mum but I didn't. I didn't want to go to work but I'm glad I did, because I'm now in a position to support my whole family after my husband lost his job. If I didn't, then we would be in a lot of trouble right now.*

Then there were those for whom the decision to work was an essential aspect of their life choices. Tuli, who is young, still single and doing a number of part-time jobs, has been searching without success for a full-time job. She is clear about her motivations:

*My family is the most important thing, but work is work. Without money, you can't do anything. I would like to get married, get a house and get a good job. My first priority is to get a good job because I don't really like working all over the place. I want children, but it all depends on the situation. I would like my children to study and get educated, because without it you won't get a good job, especially in this country. If you study, you can go wherever you want. It makes you understand everything.*

Afreena has worked since she left university and continued after she got married. She believes that her mother has instilled a strong work ethic in her children. Her father died when they were quite young leaving their mother, who had no previous work experience, to bring them up on her own. She had initially received widow benefits, but 'Ever since eight, I have seen my mum working and she had not claimed benefits ever. Even when she didn't have a job, she didn't claim benefits because she thinks it makes you lazy. And because of that, she encouraged me to get work. When I was a student, I had to do part-time work, and that helped with my expenses.'

Tahera had been forbidden to work, first by her parents and then by her husband. It was only after her divorce that she could think about getting a job. She is putting herself through college to get proper qualifications and is looking forward to finding a job:

*After ten years of marriage, I was doing something and it felt as if I was free. It felt so different and so nice. When I was married, it was something constantly pulling you down and hammering you constantly. I want to work in the community. My children are grown up and there is nothing to do at home. Money motivates me, I now want money. That is why women look for work. They go out to socialise because they can't get that at home... For women to earn respect, they have to show independence...*

For Shamima, work had come as a form of liberation. After eight years bringing up her children as a full-time mum, her confidence levels had plummeted:

*I just didn't see anything or anyone, I was just at home, looking after them basically. You could say that I kind of didn't know who I was, apart from just being a mum. All the other skills that I have now weren't that obvious then. I did work previously, but then, when I had my children, that changed. I did try to apply a bit but I didn't have any drive. Definitely a loss of confidence and believing in myself. I didn't do anything for myself.*

When her youngest child went to school, she decided to be 'selfish' and think about herself for a change. She went on a placement programme, found herself a full-time job, and spoke about the difference it had made:

*My life now is totally different. I am myself, totally me. Reformed, and this programme gives you the chance to believe in yourself. When they believed in me and accepted me to do the placement, I started believing in myself. Being given the opportunity made me realise what I am worth and see the skills that*

*I have that I didn't know I have – but I have them, and I'm putting them to good use... Organising, which comes from being a mum, day-to-day things. I was quite a shy person before, I didn't really talk much – but now I can talk in front of any kind of people. I think when you stay home, that's just all you know – cooking and cleaning – and you don't believe in yourself. The motivation goes. It isn't there. I don't know why. And I do feel sorry for these women out there, because I myself was in the same situation. But my advice to them would be, there is help out there, you just need to take that step.*

Banu went through a council-run graduate programme before finding work in child services. As noted earlier, she left her child in the nursery on the days she worked, despite her mother's objections that most of her earnings went on paying for the nursery. She explained why:

*I find that my work empowers me. It gives me a life outside the four walls of my house. Much as I love my home, I have a life, I have colleagues. My husband and I spend time with each other but we also have separate friends. I just feel I would be so removed and disengaged from what is going on in the world if I didn't come to work. I actually see it as a break from home.*

Others were strongly motivated by the idea of contributing to the community, of dealing with the challenges of helping its more vulnerable members. Firoza, who had experience of both paid and voluntary work, is currently unemployed and examining her options. She explained what she was looking for:

*I am not one for pay but I want a challenge. My main focus has been advice and guidance and support work. I have always had an interest in young people... Supporting them and helping them to shape their future. Advice and guidance will help me to get into work that I have already done – something like prison work, people with ASBOs [Anti-Social Behaviour Orders] and things. Try and give them a bit more about what reality is like. I am now looking into volunteering and stuff, like homeless shelters and places where I can get a mentoring qualification. I want to start something different and new. Ultimately, I want to work in schools as careers guidance for young people. This is the area I can fall back on. Right now, I want to work in a place that gets my adrenaline going, so somewhere like a prison or drugs and alcohol. I am that kind of person, that if it's quite different, I want to do it.*

Ruby came here as a young woman to get married, but her husband left and took their children with him. Her experience left her with the determination to help other women in the community, particularly those struggling on their own:

*I just learnt from my life and wanted to do something for women divorcing, those that came here from there. I helped quite a lot of people outside of my jobs. My job now is on housing and benefits, so people want advice on these issues. Even now, for domestic violence, I help those who want advice. Working with vulnerable people and people with learning difficulties, I thought counselling would be helpful. When I moved to this job, I was very happy as I found a new way to help. I had the desire to help vulnerable people, most people do, but they cannot find the way to go about it. To progress, it takes a long time. But my job gave me a really good opportunity to help vulnerable people, especially the severely disabled people. When they feel open enough to trust someone, I become the main person for these people, they become dependent on me. They begin to trust me and I feel satisfied when they put their trust in me. That's why I like this job. I'm sure other people feel the same. That's why I am doing this job working with adults.*

Sufia was also highly motivated by her experience of voluntary work in a local trust and wants to find a job that allows her to do the same sort of thing:

*...the trust is going through a hard time at the moment, I like the values behind it. The fact that it helps people that wouldn't otherwise be able to go overseas because they don't have the means or the*

*capital to do that. They are helping young people to go overseas. If you don't have the money, we will help you. I like that ethic behind it. Back to where I'd like to work, broadly speaking, in a charity where a specific group of people, I don't know whether it's young women or men, old men or disabled people, but just helping a specific cause. I don't want loads of money, I just want to be in a job where I feel satisfied. I can actually go home and say I've helped a specific person.*

Naseema's feminism and political commitment has made her an active figure within the community. She became involved as a women's officer with a political party, has campaigned for women's rights, stood for local elections, worked on various women's projects, has begun to work on a music project, and hopes to start up her own media company. She is working part-time at present because her mother is old and needs looking after. Although it is fairly recently that she decided that she was a feminist, it is clear that she has had a strong social conscience from a young age, perhaps because of her father's active role in the community. She wants to challenge the barriers that prevent women in the Bangladeshi community from participating in the world beyond the home. She has been divorced for a while and has no intention of remarrying as this will get in the way of her mission:

*The only way women can be empowered to go into work is for them to come out of the house and start going to a community centre which has access to the outside world. It can guide them and give them direction. That is their first stepping stone into mental well-being, into socialising and into better health. Educational encouragement is also important and also a room for them to learn and adapt to the way of the world.*

## **7. Culture, history and the shaping of life chances in the Somali community**

We now turn to the Somali component of our research. Although Somali sailors have been settling in the UK since the early part of last century, the majority of Somalis living in the UK today arrived after the escalation of civil conflict in Somalia in the late 1980s. They are currently one of the largest refugee communities in the UK. Additionally, in recent years, an unknown number of Somali refugees have migrated to the UK as secondary migrants from other European countries and settled in towns with already established populations (ICAR, 2007).

The earlier wave of migration, some of it into the East End of London, was mainly of migrants from Somaliland, and from educated, middle-class and sometimes English-speaking backgrounds. More recent arrivals are mostly (though not always) from the south and are more likely to speak Somali only. Clan allegiance is still strong, with different clans tending to settle in different parts of London. It has been suggested that this has led to 'clan particularism' as opposed to a national identity, which may have hampered efforts to develop a unified voice in the UK (Griffiths, 2002).

Somali culture, like Bangladeshi culture, is traditionally patriarchal and pro-natalist. All children are considered blessings, but boys are more valued than girls; the birth of a boy child is traditionally celebrated with the slaughter of two animals while a girl baby warrants just one. Women and girls are traditionally assigned an inferior status to men. Family roles are well defined, with fathers responsible for financial security and mothers responsible for domestic work and raising children (Harding *et al*, 2007). These responsibilities are often undertaken collectively, with resources being pooled; children are regarded as the responsibility of the whole community. Men take dominant roles in society, religion and politics, while women's sphere of

influence is within the home, except for during wartime, when women often play the role of peace envoys and messengers between clans (Gardner and Bushra, 2004).

However, there are many differences in how women's subordinate position plays out in the Somali community compared with the Bangladeshi community. Despite the patriarchal structure of society and the primacy of women's domestic roles, Somali women are free to trade and many have small businesses. As one scholar notes: 'Somali women, whether nomadic or urban, have never been submissive' (Hassan *et al*, 1995, quoted in Gardner and Bushra, 2004:9) and within most groups women play a significant role in the economy. Women are traditionally allowed to work outside – especially when it is in the family's interests, as with nomadic or agro-pastoralist groups. They have always sought some degree of economic independence, whether through their own labour or saving some of the household budget. Pastoral women cannot own livestock but have full control over the production and trade of livestock products like milk. In Somaliland, pastoralist women have important roles in animal husbandry – the mainstay of the national economy – and employ considerable skill and technological knowledge in the construction and maintenance of the pastoral home (Gardner and Bushra, 2004).

The protracted civil war led to both setbacks and gains for women. Women have borne the brunt of the stress on marriage and family and are increasingly having to combine breadwinning responsibilities with caring for the family and managing the household. These new roles have added to women's work burdens. The rising incidence of female-headed households has led to changes in herd management practices and to women's greater involvement in livestock trade and, partly because it can be safer for women to travel, they are carving out economic niches. However, despite the increased respect women have acquired as a result of their increasing economic responsibility, '*most men and women believe women are fundamentally inferior to men*' (Gardner and Bushra, 2004:18).

In this report, we will be drawing on interviews with 29 women.<sup>7</sup> Most of these women migrated to the UK after being displaced by the wars in the late 1980s and early 1990s, usually via other countries, commonly Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates, and a number have experience of other welfare systems, notably in Holland (Van Liempt, 2011). All of them have been in the UK for at least eight years and the majority have lived here for more than ten. Twenty grew up in Somalia or Somaliland and came to the UK as adults, most often as refugees, and nine are young women who grew up in the UK (and sometimes lived in Europe for a period).

Fourteen of the women in our sample are working, three in combination with their studies. Three are students. All the students are women who have largely grown up in the UK. Of those who are not working, four have never worked but would like to work, seven are not working but have worked in the past, and only one woman said that she had never worked in the UK and had no desire for a job. It is important to note that most of the women currently in work have experienced long periods of unemployment and overcome considerable obstacles before successfully finding work. Even now, many can only find temporary or part-time work which does not cover their financial needs or enable them to save for their future. They therefore continue to look for additional hours or full-time/better-paid work. Conversely, some of those who are currently not working have been moving in and out of low-paid temporary work for years.

The Somali women interviewed are therefore variously positioned in relation to the labour market – some fully engaged, some on a part-time basis, and many hovering on the fringes in and out of temporary or part-time, low-paid work. The majority of women would be counted as 'economically active' but frequently unemployed. The research question in the case of the Somali

women in our sample is therefore somewhat different from that posed in relation to the Bangladeshi women. Here, we are interested in knowing why, despite an apparently strong commitment to economic activity, so many Somali women in Tower Hamlets have been classified as 'workless'. We begin our analysis in this case with a focus on factors which are likely to promote women's labour force participation before we go on to consider factors that inhibit it. And once again, we start with the early years of women's lives and their likely influence on their life chances as adults before we go on to consider their current situation.

## 8. Factors promoting labour force participation among Somali women

### 8.1 Becoming a woman in Somaliland/Somalia

The women who had migrated to the UK in recent years came from varied backgrounds. Many came from nomadic rural families. Other families had more settled enterprises, shops and businesses. A few came from affluent families, with fathers who had influential positions in government or the military. Many respondents' parents, especially their mothers, had no or very little education. In most cases, fathers had been absent while the children were growing up, some working in the Gulf and sending money home to their families, while others were unwell or had passed away.

Women's accounts of growing up in Somalia or Somaliland suggest that while economic activity was a routine aspect of the lives of many, gender frequently determined access to education. Many of the women were not encouraged to go to school, and were sometimes actively blocked from doing so – either being taken out of school to be married or because of domestic responsibilities at home and the belief that girls do not need to be educated. Nuura's mother, for instance, '*didn't see the point in educating girls*'. While Nuura's brothers went to school, she stayed at home:

*When I was younger, I loved going to school and used to cry after other little girls going off to school, but my mother would not let me go. She was a little old fashioned and she didn't very much like me being out and about. I used to do most of the household chores, from cooking, cleaning, washing clothes and doing up the beds.*

As the eldest daughter and therefore the '*girl of the house*', Jamilla was expected to assist her mother running the household:

*Mother used to tell me; "Get that! Cook! Sweep! Wash! Do it!" And in the time we were refugees, it used to be rough. I used to be the person who got the water from the well for the children, washed clothes, made lunch. Although I was not old, I was caretaker for the entire family, responsible for the whole family... I used to take care of the children with mum.*

However, there were others among the recent migrants who had managed to complete their secondary school, in a few cases going on to a degree. All of these women had at least one parent who supported the idea of education for their daughters. Ubah, for example, grew up in the city of Burao, where she went to school. Neither of her parents had gone to school. Despite being the only girl in the house and therefore responsible for helping her mother with domestic chores, both her parents encouraged her to work hard at school and also to learn other skills which would enable her to be self-sufficient.

*I liked [school], but I remember that since I was the only girl, family members would ask my mum why I was at school. "She is your only daughter." My mum would reply that she could not read and didn't want me to end up like that, calling on people to read letters for her. She would reply that even if I didn't do anything for her, at least I would be able to read my own letters.*

She described how her father encouraged her to learn some of the administrative skills necessary for his business:

*My dad used to send me on errands like paying the tax for the house – he very much mentally prepared me for work... He liked my help, and when you are little and are asked to do this and that, you gain responsibility and learn an important part of work. The administrative things for the house – getting letters signed, taxes and getting items for the shop, we were asked to do these. We would be shown where to get things in the market and then given money to purchase items when requested. This instils a feeling that you can do something and become confident and self-sufficient.*

Amaani described how her parents were mocked for educating her:

*Although I was the only girl in the house... my mother placed a lot of emphasis on education. I wasn't brought up the way that other Somali girls would have been raised. Somali girls would be told when they are young to help within the house and not to go to school, but I received whatever the boys did. People used to joke about that.*

Her mother – who had educated herself through evening classes as an adult – worked hard to inspire all the children in their extended family to study. Her father, too, encouraged her to become a doctor:

*My father used to tell me that he didn't have a choice when he was growing up to decide on his education. It was during the colonial period and there was no freedom to choose what he wanted to study... He used to say, "You are in your country...you are free and can study whatever you like."*

The outbreak of conflict meant a severe disruption to the educational prospects of those who were going to school. As a result, many of our sample who had grown up in Somalia arrived in the UK with only low levels of education: five had no education and another five had only primary education. However, while it abruptly halted their education, conflict often led to an escalation of women's economic contributions.

Ubah, for instance, was able to use the education, skills and work experience that her parents had encouraged to support her family when her father was killed and her brothers were 'lost' in the fighting:

*Everyone had to find a means of survival and people started little business as means to create a livelihood. I did too and went to Ethiopia where I bought produce and brought them back to the villages where people lived... I returned feeling an expert on a number of things. The people I worked with during this period... would say to me when we returned to Burao, "We thought you were an old lady, but you are a young girl."*

Sagal, who grew up in rural Somaliland, was not interested in going to school nor was she encouraged to go. Instead, she helped with the domestic chores as well as looking after the family shop and livestock. It was not until conflicts forced her family to move from the village to Burao city that she, with the encouragement of a friend, decided to learn English and go to school. By lying about her education she managed to get onto a Red Crescent training course and began volunteering at the hospital. She soon became a known and competent midwife.

Thena ‘*second war took place and people fled to different parts, we fled to another village. The school was dismantled and so were the hospital staff and after that I never went back to any of it.*’

The migration trajectories of these women began with the outbreak of war. They were forced to repeatedly flee from fighting both within the country, moving between rural and urban areas, and eventually outside it. There was no typical migration route to the UK as with the Bangladeshi women in our sample. Some came from refugee camps in Ethiopia, some obtained UK visas in the Emirates, and others migrated to other European countries, including Sweden, Denmark and most commonly Holland, where they spent several years before moving to the UK.

A number of women came on their own. Hudaan, for instance, had fled to Kenya with her family when war broke out. Her older siblings married and migrated to other European countries and Canada. She herself borrowed money from her sister to pay a man to help her get to the UK:

*As soon as I landed at Heathrow airport, the guy disappeared and I was left alone in the middle of the airport. I knew a bit of English because I used to go to private schools in both Somalia and Kenya. So I went to the immigration with my broken English and I just told them of my situation and that I wanted to seek asylum. There was no one in the country for me, so I knew from the word go that I had no one to depend on.*

Sagal, who had been training as a midwife in Burao, left Somaliland on her own, initially joining her sister in the Emirates. After a period of illness and menial jobs in Dubai, she saw an opportunity to move to the UK:

*At the time, the British government were handing out visas to Somalis so I got a visa that way. In the Emirates, travelling documentations are given to men and it's under their name that their women, or the women they are responsible for, get a visa. So I paid this guy and used his visa because I knew I wouldn't get refugee status in the UK as I was from the north of Somalia, which was peaceful at the time. I came to the UK in early 2001. When I got here, I got rid of the visa and gave myself in as a refugee.*

Along with these enterprising young women who made their way into the UK on their own, there were others who came with their families. When fighting started in their area, Alaaso and her family fled across the border to Ethiopia, where they expected to wait for a short while until the troubles stopped. When they realised this was not going to happen, they decided to go to the UK, where they had relatives.

Iman had been taken out of school at the age of 15 and married off to a man much older than her, who was very authoritarian in his ways. When the war came, she and her husband fled to the rural areas and eventually walked, with her newborn, to the rural areas of Ethiopia:

*It was a very hard life, without a house, without water, without somewhere to sleep, nothing to eat, I was a mum to a newborn when we fled, I was a mum to an eight-day-old baby and I didn't know how to carry the child.*

After some years, during which time she suffered several breakdowns, she ran away from her husband and returned to join her family. She set up her own livestock business, which she continued to run, even after moving to the UK. After one year, however, she was forced to meet her husband in Ethiopia and travel with him to the UK. She was pregnant with her third child.

## 8.2 Growing up in the UK

The experiences of the nine women in our sample who were born or had grown up in the UK were very different from those who had arrived in recent years, but they did share one experience: the absence of fathers, who were either working very long hours or working abroad, or because they were ill, or had passed away. The aspirations and attitudes to work of these women have therefore been shaped by the example and experiences of mothers who coped with life in the UK without the support of husbands.

Myriam is the eldest of 11 siblings. Her mother was not educated, but she was determined that her daughters would take their education seriously. Although their father lives with the family, he works very long hours, so her mother plays the dominant role in running the house and managing the children: *'She sort of plays a two in one role.'* She has been a source of support and inspiration to Myriam:

*My mother, she wasn't able to get an education because her mother didn't think she needed it... So that is why she is really determined to make sure we stay in education and do well...because she sees the benefits more clearly...I have to say, even though my mum is not an educated person, to me she is educated with regard to the decisions she made for us and how she is about our future and education. In that sense, she is an educated person because she is able to make wise decisions based on her own experiences and the environment. To me, that is a form of education, and I don't really think that you need a certificate or a degree to prove that you are an educated person. For example, my mum plays an important role in our schooling; she goes that extra mile to make sure we get extra supplementary classes apart from what we are getting from school. She pays for a tutor to come to the house.*

Basr, who lived in Holland until the age of ten before moving to the UK, was largely brought up by her mother, an entrepreneurial woman who has opened up her own cafe and clothing shop, and trades goods from the Middle East to make a little money. Her parents separated shortly after arriving in the UK, and, though her mother remarried, Basr's stepfather works in Emirates. Her mother therefore ran the household alone. She encouraged her four children to work hard and supported their education: *'In our house, when one of us had exams or deadlines, they were exempt from household chores, cook or clean...As a result, my sister finished university while I and my younger sister are still at university. She does medicine and I do pharmaceutical science.'*

Of course, not all mothers encouraged their daughters in this way. As a good *'Somali girl'*, Arwala's family were concerned she should stay home and not mix with boys, even in school. Arwala's mother did not think that education was very important for girls: *'Even though you are doing all this,'* she would say, *'you will still be changing diapers [nappies]'*. She was also told by female relatives that she need not pursue her studies too far as she was destined for marriage and children.

Amal dropped out of school to help her mother who was trying to cope with caring for a sick husband as well as eight younger children:

*I didn't have much of a childhood to be quite frank and I can't think of any memories other than helping with housework or looking after my father. I stopped going to school actually when I was in year nine and although my mother always stressed that we stay in education, I didn't see the benefits of it because we had so much else going on at home that I was preoccupied with... To be fair to her, she did always ask me to go to school but I didn't want to... with everything going on with my father's health and bringing so many children. The reason I didn't want to be at school wasn't just because my father was ill and I was worried, when I was at school. I was aware that my mother was cooking, cleaning and looking after my dad continuously throughout the day and she still did that even when we got home. Even though me and my brother, who was a year younger than me, helped out, she would go to sleep really late from doing chores and things and then wake up early in the morning to get everyone ready for*



*school. We didn't have anyone to help us, so we always used to come back home to an exhausted mother. Being the oldest, it was something I noticed and which bothered me.*

However, her mother's constant encouragement motivated her to return to college and retake her GCSEs. She followed on with a two-year health and safety course and is now a trained nurse.

Fawzia also did not receive much support for her education. She had been sent from Somalia at the age of eight to live with her aunt in London. Her aunt made it clear from the beginning that their role in the UK was to help their families back home: *'The sole reason why I brought you here is so that you can benefit your own families. So take care of your opportunities.'* Her aunt herself worked in two cleaning jobs and expected her niece to be equally hard-working:

*My aunt would tell me to do something, anything. Clean the streets, be whatever you want to be. If you can't get the job you want, you have to do another job because there are people who depend on you. It is not just about you.*

Fawzia was volunteering with the Somali community by the age of 14 and was in employment by the time she had received her National Insurance number at 15.

### **8.3 The motivation to work**

It is apparent from the narratives of the Somali women in our sample, whether they grew up in Somalia/Somaliland or in the UK, that most of them had grown up with the idea that women participated in economic activity without this in any way negating the primacy of their domestic duties. Many of those who grew up in the UK had been brought up by working mothers, often managing on their own, and took it for granted that they too would work. Most of those who migrated to the UK as adults had already had considerable experience fending for themselves and for their families, and generally came with the intention of working or studying.

The reasons that women wanted to work varied. For a number of respondents, a primary motivation for working is to send remittances back to family in Somalia. For many, it is part of a sense of collective family responsibility and they do it voluntarily. Others appear to have little choice in the matter. As we noted, Fawzia's aunt made it clear to her from a very young age that she was in England to help out their family in Somaliland – most of whom Fawzia had never met. Her entire life appears to have been shaped by this role. She herself was motivated by this sense of obligation: *'I wanted to study and get somewhere and try and do something bigger for my family and for the Somali people in general.'* But the burden has become overwhelming:

*All the money we got, she was always sending money back home. Somebody would be ill... somebody was fleeing back. [My aunt] was the central contact which everyone called and she would filter that information on to us. So and so called and needs help...*

Fawzia now works as a project manager in a hospital. She would like to start saving, but because she is working full-time, she is expected to contribute more and more to the family.

*There was a time I contributed \$250 a month and that was enough... I thought people would become less dependent with Somaliland stabilising, but that hasn't been the case. There are always severe droughts, shortage of food and water. There is always someone getting married, someone getting a baby. There is always something happening. So we end up paying a lot more money.*

The enormity and seemingly endlessness of the task is taking its toll:

*I wake up every morning at 7am. I go to work. I work until 7pm. By the time I come home, I am so exhausted I go to sleep. Then at the end of the month I have no savings. Everything goes to rent, bills, tax, and the rest is sent to Somalia. It is crazy. I work everyday, all year round. I don't take any holidays. I have no luxuries and have no expensive habits. I don't buy expensive shoes or dresses. I haven't got a car. I haven't learned how to drive. Nothing for myself. I still haven't got a single saving.*

While Fawzia's story sounds extreme, others also talked of the burden and guilt of trying to meet needs back home. As Deka says: *'If I can afford it, I do help them, it is mandatory – they are my people and dying. Nothing is enough for them, but when they make it mandatory, they make it sound that you have something, then you have to give.'*

Other women worked to put their children through education or to save for their old age, given that their access to benefits and pensions is precarious.

*I want to start saving for their future because the system is always changing and I don't want them to end up with nothing when they get older. Right now, we have enough to live on, but I am not able to save anything for their future... I have seen from a lot of my friends who have older children how the communication can be broken and how they struggle to keep up with their children. I don't want that to happen to me and my children. (Idil, currently not working)*

There were also more intangible goals behind the desire to work. One was to be freed from a life on benefits and from the hassles and humiliations of signing on. Nuura, who is working as a part-time cleaner, said:

*I prefer working instead of taking income to be honest, because I really don't like people dictating to me what I can and can't do. I don't even like the way they speak to you when you go to them, they are very rude and I always used to feel belittled when I went there... I love working and am thankful to God that he gave me even that two and a half hours per day.*

Sharifa, who was looking for work, valued the feeling of earning her own way:

*You feel (compelled) when you receive benefits and the benefits you get really isn't sufficient, it isn't sufficient. Secondly, irrespective of whether it is sufficient or not, if you can – even if it is cleaning – it is better that you eat from your own labour and that you are free. Working, if you compare something that someone has given you and something you have worked for, what is sweeter and more tasty is that which you have worked for yourself.*

Sara described living on benefits as 'horrible':

*It is just enough to keep you alive, but you don't have freedom. You can only live on what you have worked yourself... When you are living on your own income... your children, when they are at school, they can say "My parents working this field." It is something which can motivate them and encourage you. You are someone who has made something with their own hands. You are not just a person sitting at home. Even for your health, work is good psychologically and physically.*

Hudaan wanted to work because she had been inspired by the example of Somali women she had encountered during her stay in Kenya, all of whom were working as teachers or nurses and often studying at the same time: *'They used to pay for their education themselves and they all had career goals that they were working towards. Of course, I really admired them and they used to say to me with the opportunity I would get in Britain, I would be able to achieve more than what they had managed. When I came to the UK, I brought all their dreams with me and I wanted to study and establish a career. But time was not kind to me in fulfilling those ambitions.'*

And for a number of women, the ethos of work had been instilled by their families:

*My father told me that everything you want to achieve here is possible. Money may be holding you back, but your efforts can't hold you back, so get up every morning and knock on every door. I went to schools, colleges, I looked for work... My aunt told me once something I will never forget. She said, the sun shouldn't rise before you do; if it does, you have missed that day. So you have to get up at the morning prayer and I still carry this with me. I still wake up at 7 and I am ready to go out. (Amaani)*

The motivation to work was backed up in many cases by a very proactive approach to the search for jobs. As Ubah said:

*I think finding work has a lot to do with luck, but looking for work, actively searching is important. As far as I can remember, I have been working, whether it was the house or the shop, so it was part of my life and that, I feel that has a lot to do with my upbringing, when I was taught from a young age to work and I was asked to do chores inside and outside the house.*

This proactive attitude was evident in the willingness of women arriving in the UK to take up whatever jobs they could find, regardless of their own skills and qualifications. Some expected to do menial jobs, others were prepared to do them until they found something better.<sup>8</sup> Faduma, for instance, had completed a three-year health and social care course in Holland, but she took a cleaning job as soon as she arrived in the UK, which she did for six months until she found a job with Tower Hamlets Council assisting autistic children. Ubah had migrated to the UK ten years ago and found temporary work as a cook within two months of her arrival. Shortly afterwards, she applied for a job at Tower Hamlets Council, which eventually led to her being employed as an administrator.

Many of the young women who had been brought up in the UK had seen their mothers draw on trading skills they had learnt back home. Fathia's mother, for instance, never worked officially, but did sell goods from home to other Somali women. Basr's mother set up her own cafe and clothing shop, and engages in small-scale trading, buying and selling products that she brings over from the Middle East. Amal's mother has just put her youngest into nursery and plans to enrol for a child nursing course at college in order to begin her own childminding business.

Other respondents had themselves been engaged in small-scale trading, catering and private tutoring. Community workers at OSCA (Ocean Somali Community Association) related accounts of Somali women they knew who were involved with petty trade using contacts in Shanghai and the Gulf region, and numerous attempts at establishing small businesses. What these women lack, however, is the know-how necessary to formalise their businesses and expand their profits.

#### **8.4 Supportive social relationships**

Other factors which facilitated women's ability to take up paid work related to the quality of their personal relationships. We have seen how a number of women spoke of the support and encouragement provided by one or more parents. The attitudes of partners could also make a difference. Alaaso explained that her successful study and work career is partly because of her exceptionally supportive husband:

*My husband encouraged me to study. At the beginning, he told me that he didn't like a girl who sits around the house. "I want you to study while I am working." We didn't take benefits because he was working. That is when I started studying... He supported me throughout, from when I was at university to now. I didn't have any problems. I think because of that, a lot became easy for me. Many*

*paths opened up to me and I got an opportunity to do different courses... He wouldn't mind what time I came home. We would both cook. So there was no point in me staying at home waiting for him. He would come home before me and dinner would be ready. Those kinds of things allowed me to do better.*

In other cases, it was to friends that women turned for support and encouragement. A number of women mentioned the students they had met in college as important influences in spurring them on to work or make other significant changes to their life. Iman believes that the experience of going out to college to learn English helped her find the strength to leave an abusive marriage: *'When I entered the college, I met people and learned different faces. I discovered that I could live in this country. Like that, I overcame (my problems).*' Most low-paid work was found through friends and acquaintances:

*What assisted me in finding the job were the people I used to talk to. Even the one that I have now, I found it advertised in a paper and I told a girl at college that I would never get it. She said, try it, they are looking for people. I filled in the form, she looked over it with me and I sent it off. I was called for an interview and I was first told I was unsuccessful, but they told me they would add me to a list if they needed me in the future. I then got it... That girl helped me a lot. She told me they were looking for someone, how to apply. She was Indian and studying with me in college on a computing course at the college. (Amaani)*

*I began looking for work through Somali women I had gotten to know from the area and they were helpful in that if anything came up within their workplaces, they would let me know and I would apply. They all did the same sort of cleaning jobs in offices and some in schools. So I used to rely on them, initially not just to help me find work but also help me to apply for it. Looking back, their English wasn't that great either but at least it was better than mine, or so I used to think. I still work as a cleaner but it is part-time as I have not been able to find full-time work yet. (Leyla)*

## **8.5 Institutional support**

Institutional support can also make a difference to women searching for jobs, although very few appeared to receive it. One woman was helped by a Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) advisor who suggested that she take up volunteering outside her community as a route through which she could enter the labour market – not only would it give her work experience, but it would also build her confidence and help her learn to speak and interact in the workplace. Her voluntary experience in a nursing home did help her to find a job she liked. As Amaani notes:

*Volunteering does help with finding a job because you learn to work with people. At meetings, you may be quiet for the first couple of days, but you learn how to work, engage, manage, and how to prioritise your work. You learn how to integrate. You can volunteer within the Somali community, the language will not be a problem for you, but you can learn a lot of things. If you volunteer outside the Somali community, you can gain a lot more experience and your ears get used to the language.*

Two of the women in our sample had been housed in hostels run by charities during their first years in the country. In both cases, this seems to have eased the isolation experienced upon arrival, and helped them make friends and build their confidence.

Those women who had managed to make contact with community organisations had found help with reading letters, dealing with the welfare system and setting up their own enterprises. Staff members of these organisations told us that they were supporting several women in setting up a range of enterprises –catering, coffee shops, clothes shops, tutoring businesses, and gardening. However, they are only operating on a small scale. Here is one staff member's account of his experience with a Somali woman who wanted to set up her own business:

*The lady always wanted to do her own business – with language barriers, cultural barriers, she wasn't able to find a job elsewhere. She started by buying small stuff from big shops – facial products, beauty products, clothes, sheets, household things – and taking them to people's houses to sell. She bought them in big shops and sells them house to house on a small scale... She did that to generate small income so that she can start something bigger... She then went to other countries like Syria and Dubai, and bought materials – curtains and women's clothes – to sell. This helped her to move on to the next level, to generate more income. Last year, she approached the accountant and asked for help to set up her own shop, where she could sell products obtained from contacts in Shanghai – household things, carpets, duvets, duvet covers, small items. She had obtained the items but had no place to put them, no storage. So she wanted to open her own shop but she didn't know how to go about registering the company, setting up tax and payroll, and running a shop. I helped register her as a limited company. I organised the bank account and connected her to a bank manager, assisted with the Companies House paperwork and went over to register PAYE for the tax, staff and salary, and finally set up her rates to pay rent to the council. She hasn't yet reached the first year of accounts yet, so we do not know if she has made a profit, but she is happy running her shop, and living from it.*

## **9. Factors inhibiting labour force participation among Somali women**

Despite the fact that most of the women in our sample expressed interest in work, around half of them are not currently in work, of which three were students. And most of them, whether currently working or not, have moved in and out of casual and poorly paid activity for much of their working lives. We can divide the factors which inhibit these women's ability to take up paid work, or to take it up on a regular basis, into those which lie on the 'supply side' and relate to the constraints on women's ability to provide paid labour, and those relating to the 'demand side' and the nature of the opportunities available to them. Respondents who had migrated as adults to the UK had come as refugees and asylum seekers and encountered far greater problems with documentation than Bangladeshi women who came as wives to join husbands in the UK. They also entered a community that is less well-established than the Bangladeshi community, and hence did not always have the support they needed to settle in and progress.

### **9.1 The challenge of forced migration**

For recent migrants into the UK, it was the challenges of forced migration that presented the first set of hurdles to finding work. Several mentioned the fact that there was no help or guidance upon arrival in the UK. Amaani observed that it is very difficult when *'there isn't someone who has come before you to inform you about things... My brother was here and he informed me. My father and mother were here. My father would explain where the schools were, how to apply, how to find things, and knock on each door. If they didn't tell me about this, I wouldn't have found it.'*

Many respondents experienced their first few years in the UK as 'scary', 'baffling', 'confusing', 'strange', 'difficult', 'rough' and even 'traumatising.' As one respondent put it: *'Imagine that you are placed in China... What are you going to say to them?'*

The process of getting proper documentation –and the right to work legally and study in the UK –was time-consuming, stressful and expensive. Nine of our 20 migrant respondents mentioned it as the key barrier to the labour market. Sagal had hoped to work and study after she had settled in the country, but it was some time before she got her National Insurance number and was able to find part-time work:

*I even tried to get into Open University so I could study from home, but the problem was I still had no papers or documentation, which was required to apply. So I was constrained by my lack of documentation. Even when I was thinking about work, I avoided looking for a long time. I was afraid I would be found out and get in trouble because I didn't have the right documentation. I used to worry that I would lose the little I was getting if I got found out. I was very paranoid.*

Awa had to wait ten years for her official papers. Her experience is a graphic illustration of the nature of the system seen through the eyes of women who had been forced by war to flee their own countries and were attempting to build a new life in the UK:

*For the past ten years, I might as well have been a ghost. I came to the country at the end of 1998 and they said that the Home Office moved offices in 1999 or 2000, and as a result my documents were lost. So after looking for my file for sometime, they said that I had to re-apply for asylum and I had to start the whole process all over again. Then they said they found my application but the system has changed, so I was to be interviewed all over again. They sent me a letter saying that I had to come in for an interview again. I went to the interview because I thought it would be an easy and short interview. When I got there, they asked me over 60 questions and had me sit there for hours on end. I didn't take a lawyer with me because my English wasn't so bad, but I should have, because he would have understood the process better than myself. Anyway, shortly after that interview, they sent me a letter saying that my interview wasn't successful and that they could only give me one year's stay in the country. My lawyer said that we would apply for another one when this one expired, but he didn't, and after a year, my documents expired. All this took years, so you can imagine what I went through. Anyway, in the end, I went to our local MP and she helped me find my old application that was supposedly lost... Last year, I finally managed to get a full British passport and thank God I have put all that behind me now. Most of my stay in this country, at least ten years of it, was overshadowed by appeals and court dates in order to get papers... although I used to look, I could never find a job that would take me because I didn't have official working documents.*

It is likely that the enormous physical and emotional toll imposed by the experiences of war and forced migration has rendered many of these women very vulnerable to physical and psychological suffering. Many respondents mentioned periods of depression, breakdown, and physical health problems as a result of their experiences.

A number of respondents referred directly and indirectly to episodes in the past where they had 'fallen down', become paranoid, or very depressed and unhappy. One mother who had had a particularly distressing life both in Somalia and in the UK remembers how she had accidentally taken the wrong pram from the supermarket, and only realised when a child's blonde head popped up in the pram: *'This was because of the talking to myself, the frustration, my mind wasn't normal, I wasn't sleeping.'* Around half of the migrant respondents suffer from physical health problems. Ailments mentioned included breathing difficulties, long-term problems with legs, backache, high temperatures, and shrapnel stuck in the neck.

These problems are highlighted in other literature on more recent Somali migrants in the UK (Harris, 2004). For instance, according to research conducted for the London Borough of Camden, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problems presenting in members of the Somali community seeking healthcare. Research by the Centre for Psychiatry found that 14% of a sample of 143 Somali refugees recruited from GP registers and community sites were suffering from PTSD (ICAR Briefing, 2007). Presumably, many of the affected women are receiving disability benefit but their problems are part of the explanation for why they find it so difficult to find regular employment.

For instance, Deka, who is in her early forties, was forced to leave her job as a dinner lady because of her health problems:

*...work isn't visible 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 bones and nerves hurt. It is long term, heart failure, they have said my heart doesn't pump blood well... If in the morning I am well, I am unwell in the afternoon. My hands, physically, the nerves hurt me and I was planning on the dinner lady job I had, but it was too hard a job for me – you know, it was a job where you are using your hands and everything and my hands and heart were hurting and I didn't even know about it. That caused me pain... 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."*

## 9.2 Mothers coping on their own

Care responsibilities emerge as a major factor keeping Somali women out of the labour market. Childcare featured most prominently in their accounts – again, because of higher than average fertility. While 14 of the younger women in the Somali sample did not have any children, the rest had large families, with 11 reporting three or more children. Unlike our Bangladeshi respondents, however, there is little mention of care responsibilities for extended family members, though in a few cases, sick husbands present an additional burden. What made care responsibilities particularly difficult for the Somali respondents to manage was the fact that most of the women were coping on their own in what is, for many, still an unfamiliar context.

It was not necessarily the case that women who lived with their husbands – eight in our sample – had an easier time than the rest. While we cited the case of a woman whose husband's positive support had made her education and career possible, others had less positive accounts. Liban's husband actively resisted her efforts to find paid work:

*Yes, my plan was to work, I had two children, both very young... I tried to work, but sadly my husband did not approve... because I have young children... That was a setback, that my partner did not allow me to work.*

Iman, who migrated with her husband and young children, also found her movements restricted by her husband. He had even tried to prevent her from applying for her own legal status in the UK so that she remained dependent on him:

*After my arrival in the 1990s, life became very difficult for me. I was pregnant... I didn't have any family in the city. I wanted to see someone or go outside, or that my husband would take me around, but he used to say "Life is like that, stay in the house..." It was difficult for me. I was upset, angry, I didn't speak to anyone, I didn't leave the house. I didn't have a social life or any family in the city, not even a distant cousin, this is what happened to me. I stayed in the house.*

More often, husbands were either absent from the home or portrayed as shadowy figures, not fully engaged in family life. It was striking that a number of married women failed to mention their husbands until specifically asked. One respondent commented that 'A Somali woman is the man and the woman in her home, even if her husband is present or in the home with her.' Another commented:

*Somali women don't get help from their husbands and have to do everything themselves. Their men are often chewing khat<sup>9</sup> 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. Looking at some Somali women... a 30-year-old looks like she is 50, because she is under constant stress. She doesn't have time to study or work if she wanted to.*

The failure of men to take on responsibilities in the family and provide a male role model was linked by our respondents to misbehaviour and underachievement among Somali boys – a considerable source of stress for many mothers. It was also brought up as a general problem facing the community. One respondent explained that men have lost their status and role as breadwinner and become depressed in this country:

*When we came here, the role of the father was lost. He was no longer in charge because he came to a country where he can't lead, doesn't speak the language. He loses respect at home when he doesn't know the language and can't get work... Men are weak when problems happen to them. The mother survived because she has to keep the family together and work. He didn't recover from the shock. This is what happened.*

While a number of women pointed out that husbands were often similarly absent in Somalia, this had not been experienced as a problem to the same extent because they were usually contributing financially to the family, and because bringing up children in Somalia is a more collective responsibility – women have the support of their extended family and community. This is missing in the UK context, and acutely felt by Somali women:

*It is not good to say this, but in Somalia, women with children seem to be crippled by the burden of responsibility placed upon their shoulders. In Somalia, a woman's role consists of just one thing: becoming a housewife and looking after her children. But when you actually look at it closely... in reality, they receive help in fulfilling that role. In this country, however, not only do they have that role and are expected to act upon it, there is no help to ease them of other burdens they may have, like getting accustomed to the country and its customs and traditions.*

The combination of physically or emotionally absent fathers and a lack of extended family support has left mothers with children struggling on multiple fronts on a daily basis: raising children, supporting the family financially, and dealing with a range of other problems from bricks through windows to making doctor's appointments. Not surprisingly, many find it impossible to combine these household responsibilities with other demands on their time. Many of those who were in work have had to give up their jobs, while those who were in education have dropped out. Deka had hoped to go to university when she was younger, but had to give up the idea in the face of repeated pregnancies. She now has seven children:

*I took the access course. The exam was difficult, but I was ambitious, I was young and wanted to learn and was someone who had gone through school already. I [had to stop work because I] fell pregnant. When you don't have a father and mother or family, life in this country is difficult. There were no other pairs of hands... Then what happened was that I became ill with the pregnancy. I had a little girl who didn't have anyone to collect her from school so I abandoned the work... Then I had the boy, I returned to college in 1999 and did a carer's course. I took the degree, worked a little at a few places. Then I became a wash machine for children; I continuously had children, and in 2001, took a childcare course for six months. I completed NVQ level 2 and worked at a school at one point. This I also left because of the children.*

For others, the struggle to cope with their familial responsibilities rules out the possibility of even thinking about work. Ambro, who has five children and a husband who is sick, recounts:

*You can imagine the difficulty of taking care of such small children all at once. You don't have spare time, let alone time to work. At least until the children grow up a bit and are old enough to go to school by themselves. I tried at first to work, in the beginning, when I had just the first two, I used to try and find a job in the mornings. But the old man (her husband) used to stop me doing so, he used to tell me that "the children are too young and I can't take care of them". So I just left it. I found a job once at a*



*local school where my children used to go, as a cleaner, after searching for work for a while, and I remember they said to me “Why do you want to work, you have such small children?” In the end, they gave me a job, but my husband said no and I just left it.*

Several respondents described frustrations with communicating with teachers and struggles getting their children placed in the same school. Others are very anxious about their older children’s behaviour: one respondent noted that women feel afraid that social services might intervene if they discipline their children and often give in to the demands of their older children as a result. All of these things contribute to the exhaustion and stress some of our respondents experience and their lack of time or energy to look for work.

### **9.3 Social isolation and fractured communities**

While their domestic and care responsibilities kept a number of women out of the labour market, the perceived absence of community support contributed further to their isolation. There are a number of explanations for this perceived absence. It could reflect ‘the clan particularism’ noted earlier, reinforced by conflicts back home. It could also reflect the orientation of many Somalis towards their homeland; a number of respondents commented that people do not invest in their families and networks in the UK, but prefer to send remittances home to build houses and imagine their return. Fawzia, who migrated to the UK as a child, feels that older migrants ‘are all the time looking back to Somalia. They always say we are returning to Somaliland, Mogadishu, Puntland. They don’t feel at home here and they don’t have the resources to move back either.’ The constant worry about people in Somalia prevents them from ever settling fully in the country in which they are now:

*There is nothing the government or anybody else can do. What we can do is appreciate that they have all these other demands and responsibilities. Maybe this is what is paralysing them. This is why they don’t invest in this country, why they don’t have any savings. Maybe we need to find ways to encourage them to save and settle. They are always saying that they are returning. Before you realise it, you are 80 years old and the cold has disabled you and you are still sitting here.*

Regret about the lack of community support is accompanied in many cases by frustration that the Somali community is not better connected, and a perception that public services, housing agencies and so on are dominated by Bangladeshis, who help only their own:

*I think Bangladeshis are more accommodated than us because they are more...they are everywhere, so they get all the housing. I think also this is down to Somalis’ unwillingness to work and get into these fields, because if they did, they would be in a position to assist their own people. A Somali knows how to open community centres but they don’t know how to look and work at the jobcentres, housing and such places, where they can be of use.*

Whatever the reasons for the weakness of community networks, it did leave many of the women in our sample struggling to overcome day-to-day difficulties. One respondent described the attitudes she encountered when she had turned to extended family members for help when she arrived:

*After a few days, I wanted to go to a lawyer and apply for refugee status, but everyone I called or asked to take me would say “I don’t have time now, why didn’t you make an appointment with me earlier?” I used to think, what is wrong with these people? Why do I need to make an appointment with a relative, they are not a doctor or some office place.*

It was women with young children who were most affected by the absence of extended family and community networks of the kind reported by the Bangladeshi women. Jamilla described how

her life changed after she got married and had children. In the years following her arrival in a provincial town, she had learnt English at a small organisation set up by three English women to help immigrants and refugees, and was soon recruited to help them teach other Somalis. She established a network of friends from different backgrounds. She moved alone to London, continued her studies, and found work caring for the elderly and cleaning at a supermarket. When she fell pregnant, she had to leave her job and found herself cut off from her old life:

*My life completely changed from when I gave birth to my eldest son. He was born in June and the girl after him was born in October the next year. The boy after her was born the following year in May. The children came soon after each other and became my life. I just had the house, the shopping, the nursery. Really, I didn't have a lot of contact with other people. I didn't go into education and didn't have a lot of contacts, friends like before, the foreigners, the work – everything changed completely.*

She found herself only socialising with other Somali mothers and gradually losing her English language skills and her confidence:

*I swear it seems so far away, the way I was then. The English I had then has now left. When I now go to shops, it seems that my tongue becomes wider. When I am in the house, I speak Somali with the children most of the time. When I go outside, I meet Somali people. The writing and reading, (English) has left.*

Sufia had grown up in a small Swedish town before moving to the UK and so commented partly as an external observer. She felt that as a migrant in Sweden, you 'could become Swedish, while keeping your culture. You were more exposed to the other society.' In the UK, by contrast, many women appear to be isolated and insular within their own community, and therefore cannot imagine their way out:

*You live within your own community and the set of rules which apply in your own community, you live by them. You are not really sure about what else is out there in society... It becomes normal for you to stay at home with children. If you are only in the Somali community, you only see limited options... [In Sweden]... my parents changed.*

Her solution was articulated in terms of participation in the wider society:

*If they could come out and meet people with other ethnic, cultural or class differences and see how others are living, it will inspire them to try something else. The main problem is segregation for the women. For the men, I think it is also segregation. Maybe lack of confidence perhaps... The females, it is lack of exposure. They are stuck in their local community, friends and relatives circle, and have difficulty coming out of that circle.*

#### **9.4 Language, skills and self-confidence**

For recently arrived migrants, a major problem in accessing paid work is their poor command of English. All of our respondents said that lack of English has hindered their ability to access services, particularly talking to GPs and teachers, and also to find work. Sagal, who now works part-time as a cleaner, said: 'I knew nothing. I may as well have been dead, that's how bad my understanding of English was!' Hanan is supported by her husband, who is a butcher, and is the one woman in our sample who has never worked and does not want to work. She explained: 'I have never attempted to work even for one night, because in order to work in this country you need to be able to read, write or at least speak the language. As a result, I never attempted to work.'

Most respondents have attended some kind of English language training since arriving in the UK. However, some have been more successful than others in learning the language. One woman who has been successfully working for several years in the public sector said that

although she struggled at first to learn, she eventually ‘picked up the language’ while working. Those who have not managed to learn English are nearly all mothers, usually overwhelmed by the burdens described above. One respondent commented: ‘*I know mothers from our area who are here more than ten years and who can’t write... These people, the country has oppressed them, they have become stressed.*’ One reason why so many women have not progressed with their English even after eight or ten years in the country is their lack of contact with people outside of the Somali community who routinely speak to them in English. This, in turn, reflects their poor grasp of English. It should be noted that among those respondents who are working, some of them are working as cleaners, despite having very poor English language skills. So in some cases, lack of English has not hampered these women’s ability to find paid work and cleaning offers an option to those women.

In addition, many spoke of the lack of confidence that comes with lack of language and other skills. Nuura had not been allowed to go to school as a child by her mother, and feels that this will hold her back for the rest of her life. She is aged 41:

*When I think about it I get really upset. Can you imagine, a grown woman of my age not being able to read and write? I don’t even attempt to try and get into education now, because what would be the point at my age... There are times where I get really frustrated with my level of English... When I have appointments with the housing lot, for example... Although I am old and don’t think I can get very far with education, I can feel the importance of it in that it gives you back independence and confidence to live.*

She suggested that many women lack the confidence to go to classes:

*There are a lot of Somali women who are able to study or at least are able to do ESOL language classes while their children are at school, and I have seen a lot of those who just don’t go because they feel shy to study at their age. We Somali women are traditionally known for being shy of things we find unusual. We don’t integrate with other communities and their traditions because we find them alien... To them, it’s embarrassing to consider education because they don’t see it as something grown-ups should be doing.*

A few of the respondents who are not working have obtained qualifications – most often in childcare and health and social care. However, many who start courses have to drop out because of the stresses of coping with daily life. Jamilla found that the qualifications she gained before she had children were no longer recognised, and she does not have the energy to start again. She pointed out that when she was young, she could get work as a carer for the elderly based on references and experience; now she needs certificates that she does not have time to get. Many women have experience with, or ideas for starting, small businesses, but do not have the know-how and capital to develop them in the UK – or even to see their potential profitability. Furthermore, they feel the paperwork can be overwhelming.

## **9.5 The availability of work**

The Somali women in our sample were aware of the wider economic situation and brought up the difficulties of finding work in the context of the recession. Sagal, who is working part-time assisting disabled children, commented on her current financial situation and her fears for the future:

*Sometimes I am left with very little left over for personal use. It can be as little as £30, so no, I don’t have anything to save. I don’t know how to get out of it, it’s hard to find work as it is now, and at my workplace they started advertising our jobs to volunteers willing to do it for free. There are job cuts*

*anyway, and it has been difficult for me to find a permanent post, so I don't really know what to do, I am stuck at the moment.*

Finding the right access routes into work is also a challenge. Success in the job market is tied up with ability to access these routes. The perceived dominance of the more established Bangladeshi community in the public sector was felt to be affecting Somalis applying for and accessing existing formal routes to work such as council and other public sector apprenticeship, graduate and work placement programmes. While these have had excellent outcomes for Bangladeshi participants, very few Somali graduates or young jobseekers apply for, let alone attend these courses. Community workers at OSCA attributed the success of council graduate and apprenticeship programmes in attracting Bangladeshi graduates but not Somalis to a number of factors. The programme places are advertised in *East End Life* but, they suggested, adverts are small and do not run for a long time. In fact, the programmes are often learnt about through word of mouth, and the Somali community do not have people in the council and other agencies to spread the word. By the time potential Somali applicants see the adverts, they do not have enough time to apply and they do not always know how to go about applying. They suggested the success of the graduate programme had been the result of very proactive targeted outreach towards the Bangladeshi community in the early years after the programme was set up. Sustained proactive outreach within the Somali community may therefore be helpful. Several community workers pointed to the highly successful scheme training up Somali social workers, initiated in the late 1990s, as a potential model for such outreach efforts. Finally, as one Somali community organisation member commented, another reason why no Somali people came forward for these courses could be that they *'feel it is not a programme for them. Perhaps if they saw a Somali face, they would be encouraged.'*<sup>10</sup>

Other obstacles to finding routes into work raised by the women in our sample related to a lack of translators for those who cannot speak good English and, for many, a lack of knowledge about what work is available. Younger respondents invest a great deal of their time helping older family members who are unused to how things work. Myriam's mother's poor English makes it difficult for her to deal with the administration of day-to-day life. Myriam and her siblings have therefore taken on the responsibility of dealing with council tax, income support, housing and other welfare issues from a young age: *'If I or my brother see a housing or another official letter too late, major problems can arise for my mother.'* Ambro, who struggles with English, said:

*I call in advance and ask for a translator, but even though they say they will have one ready for me, there never is a translator when I go to them. I have filled out three different forms for them recently, and whenever I take a form to them, they weren't able to provide me with a translator and in the end they just sent me away. I still receive income support but I don't understand the documents we are swapping, what I am signing to or even the agreements we reach.*

A major problem, according to some of our respondents, was that many women simply did not know what was available by way of support. Arwala, who works trying to help unemployed women find employment, explained:

*The main thing facing the Somali community is lack of knowledge, because a lot of them don't know what's available for them to tap into in terms of services. Without knowledge or education, they don't realise that there are so many organisations within the borough that could help them to get into work, help them into educational training or qualifications. They really honestly don't know about it...*

Amaani echoed this concern:

*There is always information available from many places. It, however, depends on how you access it. That is the key. There is a lot of information available for people, but they don't know where. The system doesn't permit them to learn where to get it...Services are available from a lot different places, but our people find it hard to access it because they don't understand a lot about the system.*

A number of women who had migrated via Europe spoke of the benefits of a system which assigns a dedicated social worker to help newly arrived migrants or those with poor language skills to negotiate their way around the system – before they fall into debt or start encountering troubles. Khaadra migrated to Holland at the age of ten, before the war in Somalia started, and stayed for 18 years before coming to the UK to join her family after separating from her husband. In Holland, she was working as a nurse's assistant. She makes comparisons between the Dutch and the English welfare system, and points out that the support she received there motivated her to work. Her one-to-one relationship with the social worker helped a lot. Whenever there was a problem, she had one person to call and discuss options with:

*In Holland, someone who is a refugee gets a lot of care. They are given an interpreter, they make sure you understand everything, and you even have your own personal social worker who ensures that you are up to date with and understanding your situation and processes being taken at all times. There is none of that here. Even though I was working and paying my own bills and such, I still used to get that support. For example, if my children or my situation changed slightly, I would call up my social worker and discuss my situation and she would break down my options as to how best to resolve my situation, and what services were available to me. And they keep a record of your situation so when something changes they are not clueless but uptodate, and can provide you with a more efficient service.*

The accounts of other respondents' experiences in Holland support Faduma's account. Basr, who lived in Holland until she was ten years old, explained that over there her mother used to manage because she had a support system:

*There was a sort of an official person who used to help her out in managing general things... For example, she used to get help with working out the money she used to receive as benefits, doing the shopping, and stuff like that. She really did try and integrate into the society probably as a result of the person who was there. She didn't do anything out of the ordinary; she got involved by taking us to different afterschool clubs and so forth.*

Liban, who spent several years in Holland before coming to the UK, felt that there she got helpful advice and direction from her designated social worker, which enabled her to use her nurse's training productively. In the UK, by contrast, she was given accommodation and income support, but no guidance on how to find work or develop her skills. In fact, she had no contact from the welfare state at all until her child turned 12 and she was called to collect Jobseeker's Allowance. Then she suddenly faced what she experienced as a barrage of accusations, and harassment about why she was not working at that time.

However, it was also clear that some respondents managed to negotiate the system well – they were able, for instance, to continue signing on during the times when they were wrangling with the immigration system and chasing the documentation that was their lifeline. For some, the receipt of official residency documents removed one of the barriers to work. Attitudes towards those relying on benefits were mixed. As we noted, the Mayhew Harper report, *Women and Worklessness in Tower Hamlets: A Multi-Factor Risk Analysis*, found that Bangladeshi and Somali women are almost twice as likely to live in households on benefits as the rest of the population in Tower Hamlets. As with the Bangladeshi women, fear of losing housing support is clearly a barrier to seeking employment for some people. Women who wished to set up small businesses

or become self-employed were concerned that the irregularity of earnings from one month to the next would cause problems with their housing benefit.

Others spoke of not wanting to take benefits, a preference to *'eat from their own labour'*, unfavourable comments about people just *'sitting and taking benefits'*, and a perception that some people were not pushing themselves, and could be more proactive. Those with young children received benefits more easily, and this was seen by some as a disincentive to work, leave the house and mix with others. However, given what these mothers were dealing with, largely on their own, one respondent pointed out that such mothers needed more support, not less.

## 9.6 Cultural barriers in the labour market

Instances of discrimination described by respondents largely focused on experience at the doctors, where they felt they were not respected or attended to properly. However, it also related to work. Once again, it was visible signs of their Islamic identity rather than their race that seemed to underpin this behaviour. One respondent mentioned that she had heard that wearing *hijab* could be a hindrance to getting work. Younger respondents were more vocal on this issue. Fathia, for example, left her job in a hospital because she felt uncomfortable with how she was being treated by her colleagues and the patients:

*I don't really know why but I sensed a slight discrimination from their part... That is what I sensed, I mean, they didn't like me, that was certain... I didn't get on with the staff and once I started receiving comments from patients it was enough for me to give in my notice. No, I never used to get direct nasty comments or remarks from my colleagues, but it wasn't a secret that we weren't getting on, or at least I wasn't able to get on with them. Anyway, bottom line is, I didn't fit in. On one occasion, a patient was racist towards me and that was the final straw...*

Fawzia said she was aware of the potential of people not wanting to hire her because of her Islamic dress:

*They gave me the job because they looked at the CV before they saw me. They saw my skills and qualifications. The person who interviewed me happened to be a Muslim as well. Maybe if a non-Muslim interviewed me, they wouldn't have given me the job. When I got that job, it was through referrals. I used to work for this consultant and she was really good. People knew me after that. They look behind the fabric and beyond the hijab and dress... But I guarantee that if I went for an interview today, even with my qualifications and it was the first time they saw me, they would hire a blonde, really good-looking lady in trousers or mini-skirt who has the same level of qualification as me.*

Community workers interviewed confirmed that many women who are struggling to find work in the UK are looking to return to Somalia or other African countries, either to work for NGOs or to start their own business. Some respondents personally expressed that ambition. Iman, who had run a successful livestock business in Somalia when she was younger, wants to go home and start a business now that her children are all grown up – she has already started building herself a house. According to Amaani, language difficulties, cultural factors, and lack of tacit knowledge about the market are some of the reasons why many women she knows want to start up businesses back in Somalia or Somaliland:

*There is the language barrier here. It may be that certain types of trade we may not be able to do here because of our religion. I personally am going to start a business in our country. It is easy to find workers, you know the market. Here, we don't do any market research. There, you know what people need and what they are missing. Here, you are asked to make a business plan, set up an account. It just requires a lot of work, but back home, if you want to start a business, you look at it and you do it.*

## 10. Ways forward: what does the research suggest?

The point of departure for our research was the high levels of worklessness observed among women in the Bangladeshi and Somali communities of Tower Hamlets. The reason why this leads to concern is that it contributes to high levels of poverty and reliance on benefits within these communities, and it contributes to broader social and economic exclusion. We have attempted to go beyond some of the more immediate factors which give rise to this outcome, such as lack of skills and childcare responsibilities – all of which are important, but which are reflections of other, deeper structural factors. Our analysis suggests that there is considerable variation in women's willingness and ability to take up paid work within each community, so that a more nuanced approach may be necessary to create access routes to paid work. It also suggests that there may be higher levels of economic activity, particularly among Somali women, than the official statistics show, but a great deal of this activity is intermittent, casual, and likely to elude such data collecting efforts.

This section seeks to highlight practical ways in which local government interventions could address these deeper constraints at the same time as supporting women's pathways into work. It draws on suggestions made by our respondents, by some of our key informants who know the local labour market, and by our own analysis. We discuss these under three headings: expanding children's aspirations; building work-readiness in working-age women; and promoting pathways into work.

### 10.1 Expanding children's aspirations

Some of the problems which give rise to worklessness among adults in the Somali and Bangladeshi communities can be traced to their childhoods. A holistic approach to the problem of worklessness must therefore begin with measures aimed at children from the two communities. The challenge is to develop aspirations in children that go beyond the limited ones they may be receiving at home and in the community around them. The geographical concentration of these communities, particularly the Bangladeshi community, means that children grow up with a very limited knowledge of the possibilities available to them. Many of their parents were unaware of what was happening in the wider world, and their children were growing up not learning to think for themselves. How well children did at school was related in important ways to how much support they received from their parents.

**The schooling system is clearly an important site for expanding children's horizons**, but there may be a need for additional measures to realise its full potential. Support may need to be provided, for instance, for Somali children, particularly boys, to adjust to the demands of schooling; they are often a minority in their schools and systematically under-achieve. Somali community workers in Mile End pointed out that schools which employ Somali family workers are much more successful at addressing problems with the Somali pupils and their parents. Fawzia, a young Somali woman who migrated to London as a child, observed that:

*There are enormous integration problems. Enormous, enormous... Simple things can help...like having Somali school teachers. Consulting the community... Some schools in Lambeth offer GCSE in Somali where there are loads of Somali students. Make them feel a part of the community.*

With regard to Bangladeshi children, who are often the majority in their schools in Tower Hamlets, ways need to be found to promote their interaction with children from other ethnic groups on a systematic basis and to promote knowledge of the values of other cultures. One

Bangladeshi respondent told us that the fact that her mother used to leave her at Sure Start while she was still very young had initially been traumatic for her, but had taught her how to mix with children from different groups even before she went to school. London-wide school and cultural activities which help children get used to travelling out of the borough could be promoted on a more systematic basis.

**The educational curriculum could promote planning for future work and challenge gender or ethnic stereotypes.** There is a need to promote the idea among both boys and girls that working mothers and/or caring fathers can be an acceptable alternative way of organising family life. Young girls and boys need to be encouraged to think about careers beyond the limited range that characterises their communities. Extra-curricular activities can be used to promote ‘employability’ skills in children, particularly their ability to deal with challenging situations, and their interactions with others from different backgrounds. Amaani, who is very active in the community, says that promoting positive female Somali role models is their ‘*next campaign*’. Somali Integration, a community-based organisation in Tower Hamlets, runs a small project taking teenage Somali girls to visit Canary Wharf, familiarising them with different possibilities and encouraging them to aim high with their aspirations.

**More active involvement of parents with the schooling system could have positive benefits.** For many isolated mothers, this can offer the possibility of socialising and learning more about the world beyond the home. Ensuring Somali-speaking workers in schools would be of particular benefit to Somali mothers. Parent-teacher forums could be used to explore ideas about good parenting in different cultures and the need to give children a stronger sense of future possibilities. Parents too need to be persuaded to teach their children values of tolerance and respect for difference. Many mothers from the Somali community speak of their inability to communicate with their children. Such forums could be designed to help them close the communication gap. Finally, ways need to be found to involve fathers, where they are present in their children’s lives, with such efforts.

*I would suggest that women are encouraged to focus on getting work. If they are in education or have had an education before...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.”(Somali respondent)*

*If a family is brought up with a mother having freedom, then its daughters will have certain freedom too.(Bangladeshi respondent)*

## **10.2 Building work-readiness in working-age women**

A second set of measures is necessary to reach out to particular groups of women who have little or no experience of the labour market. Those who have no desire to enter the labour market are clearly not a priority. Others, however, may have simply been unable to consider the possibility of employment because of their distance from the world of work, their lack of self-confidence, and the variety of stresses and responsibilities that wear them down on a daily basis. Such women are unlikely to be transformed overnight. They will require a step-by-step approach that goes beyond merely providing supportive services towards guiding them into using these services.

For those who have arrived relatively recently in the UK, particularly Somali women who lack the strong community networks of the Bangladeshi women, **a designated support worker**



**along the lines described in the Dutch system** would help to reduce the transaction costs associated with dealing with multiple agencies. Recruitment of Somali women into the system would further cut down these transaction costs.

*...it can be made easier for them (migrant mothers). I have talked to people who have come from Europe, Canada. It is totally different... When they arrive, they are taught the language and work. The person can become self-sufficient because they have been told the path to take. Here, no one shows you the road to take and you are told to go to work. How can I go to work if you haven't taught me the language? How should she go to school, take care of the children, go to work? (Somali respondent)*

**There is need for a more systematic approach to mentoring that could respond more holistically to the problems that women are facing, particularly their sense of isolation.**

We have seen that women who had one or more supportive parents were most likely to consider education and employment as important elements in their life choices. Others were motivated by friends or through encounters with teachers, youth workers, community activists and employers. A systematic mentoring system to reach out to isolated women would help to compensate for their lack of support. The sustained emotional support offered by the work placement programme run by Tower Hamlets NHS and by the Tower Hamlets Council Professional Post-Graduate Programme seem to be key to their success.

**Finding more immediate pathways into the public domain could provide a long-term pathway into the labour market.** This will require outreach programmes that can persuade mothers to join in cultural activities or voluntary work. Community initiatives of various kinds can play an important role in this. A large number of women spoke favourably of Sure Start as an initiative that had brought them into contact with the wider community.

One community organisation working with Somali women runs an English language project which takes groups of women to explore different parts of London. Creating forums for women to come together around coffee mornings, gardening projects or cookery classes are possible options.

*When the children start going to school, that's when you tell the women "Get yourself educated, come out of your houses." It's ok to do housework but it will mean that everyone has to change. Husbands will have to change too. They will have to help and commit. The woman has to go out and mix with people. Everyone should do the housework. Before, there were interpreters everywhere, but there will be no need for them if everyone knew English. Your mind stays good and there are fewer problems at home too. (Bangladeshi respondent)*

Arranging meetings and discussions with women from the specific communities who have overcome barriers to work would help to reduce the mental distance from work and provide ideas about *how* to get into work.

*If you have a real life story of someone going out there and saying "You know what, I used to think like that. You know what, there is help out there, because I decided to go and talk to so and so, and I found out that this is how it really is – the benefits and the pay and so on." Personal experiences – if someone heard those personal experiences they will immediately think, "Oh, maybe I can do this..." You know what, it is a lonely world where they are now in many ways. They feel they have no choices, they haven't come out from their boxes yet... When they hear real stories, women have so many questions that they are afraid to ask. Most of these women have a lot of questions, they feel real uncertainty, but they are fearful to ask. You could get them to stick questions on post-it notes if they feel shy, stick it on the board and discuss each one. You have to reach out to them, go to where they are, coffee mornings, sports centres, Sure Start... You have to reach out to them. (Bangladeshi respondent)*

**Providing clear and accessible information about the benefits system might address some aspects of the benefit trap.** Fear of the loss of benefits, particularly housing benefit, is a factor that prevents many people from even looking for work. For those who do casual work, with uncertain flows of income, entitlement to housing benefit becomes very complicated, because incomes may exceed the legal minimum in some months – and fall short in others. Information about how benefits work should be provided through a variety of media, including printed leaflets, local radio, and community centres, and should be translated into the relevant languages. One of the problems mentioned by our respondents is that while a great deal of information is available, not everyone knows how to get it.

*When I started working with Reed, I had to go out there and find clients. A lot of the Somali women I worked with were single mothers. And you realise that they are very dependent on all the benefits they are getting, that they don't realise that they are better off working. But once you start to explain it to them and in their mother tongue, and you show them calculations, I find you get their attention. But you have to go out there and get them, they won't come to you. The majority of the job outcomes we were getting were with Somali women. (Somali respondent)*

*I personally think that educating them about benefits and going from door to door will get the women in, even going to the mosques, because the mosques don't play enough of a part in educating our people. Mosques, community centres and schools and anywhere that has contact with women. (Bangladeshi respondent)*

**Practical support for women's care responsibilities is critical.** As far as childcare is concerned, among both the Bangladeshi and Somali communities, there seems to be a widespread antipathy to childminders, unless they are already known to the mother. More research is needed into the possibilities for increasing the take-up of formal childcare. Developing more collective and neighbourhood-based childcare options, particularly crèches and nurseries, seems to be regarded more favourably. The possibility of developing before and after school care may be a greater priority than pre-school care. Finally, as one Somali woman pointed out, employers could be more responsive to the care demands that mothers have to deal with:

*The government helps people by providing them with somewhere to sleep and something to eat. However, there is a gap. The bridge which will allow people to cross is missing. The bridge is how they can help someone overcome the barriers around work... The support she needs is not money, but proper help, to cross the bridge. She needs help with education and the children. She needs flexible working time. Employers should be forced to give their workers flexibility and help mothers. (Somali respondent)*

**There is also an obvious need for support for elderly care.** This is particularly true for the Bangladeshi community, which has been around long enough to have a sizeable percentage of elderly members. Few of them have any pensions. They must rely entirely on the money and care provided by their families. The care work falls to their daughters and daughters-in-law, who may also be responsible for young children. Under such circumstances, as one respondent put it, even providing an hour of help with the housework would be an enormous help. There has been some take-up of meals-on-wheels. A more targeted expansion of such services to the elderly could lessen the burden on their carers. Organising outings for the elderly would help to build their links in the community and leave them less reliant on their immediate family.

*If the council or the government could help the elderly, then it would help. Those that are disabled or sick or can't do things, if there was help available for them, even if it's housework, then it wouldn't fall on me. I can't even cook for my kids on time and feed them properly. It's not done properly. I get tired*

*from running around. If the carers could be provided, then they could do the housework or shopping and I can concentrate on my family. I wouldn't have gotten ill and I wouldn't have been so depressed. I want the government to change the policy on domestic help so that people won't become depressed. Things like cooking, cleaning and shopping can be better managed. Even one hour would help. If the government wants me to work, then who will help my mum? I have to care for her because there is no one else, so how can I go to work? That's it.(Bangladeshi respondent)*

### 10.3 Promoting pathways into work

Building relevant skills and providing training is an obvious route, but once again, these may need to be adapted more closely to the needs of particular communities. Large numbers of newly arrived women in our sample attend ESOL classes. Yet the way that ESOL classes are currently structured does not appear to make them very effective. Many Bangladeshis and Somalis have been in and out of these classes and are still struggling with basic English. **One alternative could be to organise ESOL classes to promote a much broader understanding of British society and the meaning of citizenship in the UK context.** Both Bangladeshi and Somali women are coming from societies where the links between the rights and duties of citizens, and between public expenditure and taxation, are not particularly strong or well understood. The ESOL classes could benefit from the Freirean approach to popular education that has been adopted in various low-income counties in the South.

One experiment with alternative ways of learning English organised by the community based organisation Somali Integration was to take groups of Somali women to different parts of London, to the museum and other attractions, along with women who spoke English fluently – and to only allow English to be spoken during these visits. There were other examples of community workers building on ESOL classes to push women to go beyond just learning English.

*I think I have to say since being there, my ESOL women would be the biggest achievement and joy to work with, because they are thinking about ways to develop themselves even though they may come to a stop sometimes and might not know where to go. Usually, that's where I step in to help them to get to wherever they want to go. I love working with these women, but also at the same time as that, I have groups of women in their late twenties, that love to do other things that the ESOL women would never do, like say "Let's all go to the cinema" or "Let's all go to this event that is happening" and they would actually go and be vocal about it. Whereas the ESOL women would be very quiet and reserved and they would go because I would tell them to go, but not really because they wanted to go themselves.(Bangladeshi respondent)*

**Providing assistance with how to go about finding jobs would represent an invaluable service for many women, especially those who have arrived relatively recently.** Many do not have any idea about how to begin looking for work. Respondents spoke of the benefits of training in basic work skills, including writing CVs, speaking in public, interacting with others and so on.

*I help people who come to look for jobs at the job centre. I go on the internet and help them find appropriate jobs for themselves. Send emails, how to create an email account, that sort of thing. Some of them come to use the internet and they don't even have an internet account. They even forget their password and they come and ask you the next day what it was. I don't laugh at them, but I say "I want to help you but next time just print me out your email address and I'll write down your password and keep it in your tray." We know they are vulnerable, so we help them like that.(Bangladeshi respondent)*

**Other forms of training relate to enterprise development and financial management.** Such training would be of particular benefit to the Somali community, given their background in trade, but would have to be supplemented with guidance on how to register organisations, and set up pay roll, bank accounts and tax. The possibility of enterprise loan schemes might help to provide necessary start-up capital to translate ideas into reality. We cited the case of OSCA working with Somali women along these lines. They have helped a number of women to set up market stalls. Many women were keen and qualified, but not networked into resources. Two years ago, the organisation ran a project to train women to run small businesses.

*We lent them £500 which the women took to different markets in London and bought cheap products which they then sold to Somali households for a profit. Later, the organisation acted as a guarantor to the women who collected goods from a Somali shop and then sold to households in their neighbourhoods. They used their profits in a variety of ways: growing vegetables in Mile End park to sell door-to-door, attending cooking classes to sell food within the community.(OSCA staff)*

Unfortunately, the organisation does not have the capacity to reach people outside their community, as that would need special marketing skills.

For Bangladeshi women, the possibility of transforming some of their skills in cooking, sewing and caring for children into an organised home-based enterprise might provide a first step into the labour market while their children are still young.

*...Initially, that did take a bit of bullying, because I said "You have all these skills, you cook at home everyday, why waste it? Why not let other people see this?" So we were approached by an organisation called Food Cycle and they were recycling food that big supermarkets threw away, but nothing would spoil because they were all vegetables. So these would be brought into the community centre and the women would cook from them and provide a three-course meal for anyone that wanted to have one. Initially, it was like "Oh, I don't want to do this," but I said give it a couple of weeks and we'll see how it goes, and it just turned out that they really enjoyed doing it. I think it was the whole (aspect) of what was coming and having to deal with whatever ingredients they had on the day, and they could still produce this amazing meal, and whoever came along would say "Wow." That's had to come to an end unfortunately, but that was another really successful project.(Bangladeshi respondent)*

As we have noted, **voluntary work also provides an important bridge into the labour market.** It helps bring isolated mothers out of the home and for those who are ready to work, it provides practical skills or upgrades skills that have been eroded during their time away from the labour market. Voluntary placements run by Tower Hamlets NHS appear to have been very successful in building the confidence of women who have been out of work for some time.

**One of the reasons for the success of the council's graduate training programme and the Tower Hamlets NHS volunteer placement programme is that they offer a lot of emotional and practical support.** The senior staff on these programmes described themselves as mentors, playing a significant hand-holding role. While the presence of Bangladeshi staff has the advantage of attracting women from the community to the programme, having someone from outside the community was also useful because many Bangladeshi women are not happy talking to other women from their community because of their fear of gossip. As the experience related below by a woman who has successfully completed the Tower Hamlets NHS work placement scheme suggests, it is essential to take a gradual, step-by-step approach in order that women who have no work experience or have not worked for a long time do not get discouraged.

*They helped me from day to day. They did an induction for me, helped me settle down and taught me, showed me the ropes. They went easy on me, they took it step by step. They didn't push me, they didn't leave me alone, I was given support throughout my placement. If I had issues, there was someone I could go and talk to. In the early stages, you cannot be left alone – because I would have wanted to leave. What kept me going was that I knew that the support and help was there all along. And that really made me feel I could do it. I am still here today. (Bangladeshi respondent)*

According to one of the women running the work placement scheme, work placements were all about building confidence for people who are fairly work-ready – fluent in English and proactive in applying for a place. Even so, in many cases, they have to help applicants learn how to draft letters and do other basic tasks. Most work placements are within the NHS or council departments, and have not extended into the private sector.

It was reported that one practice manager at a doctor's surgery had expressed reluctance to recruit from 'the local community', preferring people from the private sector. This would automatically exclude local ethnic minorities. There are currently quite a lot of Bangladeshis working at Tower Hamlets NHS and Tower Hamlets Council, but not in the highest managerial positions, which could reflect the fact that they had not been working there long. The Professional Post-Graduate Programme is planning to focus on developing managerial capacity in young local graduate recruits in the future.

**Using these schemes to promote women's interactions with others outside the community might also help to expand their horizons.** One idea that has been tried out on the graduate training programme is to bring national and local graduate recruits together in a training session. The senior staff member running this training session observed that there was a huge contrast between local and national graduates' life experiences. Many of the former had '*privileged ground knowledge of Tower Hamlets and how people experienced the system*', while the latter were mainly middle-class achievers. While many of the national recruits onto the programme were high-fliers who had travelled the world, many local recruits – the Bangladeshi women in particular – were reluctant to travel even outside the borough. Most of the national recruits had very elevated academic credentials and were keen to attend optional seminars and discuss extra readings. This enthusiasm was picked up and emulated by the local recruits. The encounter allowed for very fruitful exchange of very different experiences in the outside world.

**More proactive outreach may be required to reach Somali women.** If the presence of Bangladeshi staff running training schemes helps them to reach out to the community, the absence of Somali staff may explain their lack of success as far as this community is concerned. There was some difference of opinion as to the reasons behind the low presence of Somalis on existing courses and training schemes within the council and, as we noted, some tension around the predominance of Bangladeshis. The Tower Hamlets NHS voluntary placement scheme has mainly involved Bangladeshis as well as white British people and Afro-Caribbeans – but few Somalis. Staff running the scheme felt some frustration as attempts to engage the Somali community had not been successful – they had, for example, organised a special event to promote the programme with Somali graduates, but none had turned up.

However, the coordinator of the council's successful Professional Post-Graduate Programme believed that Bangladeshis had taken ownership of the programme because it was now well known within the community: knowledge is spread by word of mouth because Bangladeshi people working within the council talk to young graduates – *'it is a very tightly knit community. Often, you find that the graduate will be know a member of staff.'*

Somali respondents and community workers pointed out that over the past five years, there have been very few Somalis on the graduate programme or on the apprenticeship schemes at the council. Word of mouth and passive advertising on council websites and in *East End Life* clearly does not work for communities that have not yet penetrated the system. **Somalis could be specially appointed to attract potential candidates. It could be made mandatory that one or two places on various schemes go to Somalis.**

**It may, in any case, be necessary to take a ‘knocking on doors’ approach to inform sections of each community about job and training opportunities.** Anecdotal evidence from community organisations suggests that women do take up work opportunities when they hear about them. The problem, then, is largely one of information.

*A lot of the referrals we received from the Somali community actually did turn into employment options and I feel that this is partly due to the fact that they received information about their financial opportunities, which was their biggest fear. Once that was sorted out and they saw how much more they would be getting on a weekly basis, they bought into the idea of work and were taking means to get into work.*

*Get the message out there repeatedly and in a sustained way – then encourage people to tell others. Word of mouth is important. People don’t believe you have understood their problems unless you have been there. Again, getting people who have been through these schemes to go and talk is good – though at present so few of these are Somalis that to begin with, you would have to try a different route.*

**Job creation in the care economy offers double dividends.** First, it relaxes the main constraint that keeps many women out of the labour market by supporting their care responsibilities, and second, it creates a form of employment that is particularly attractive to women in general, and women from ethnic minorities in particular. Job creation schemes would thus, on the one hand, build on the various needs and deficits identified by the research such as: collective and neighbourhood-based childcare; youth workers to provide support in schools; and care services for the elderly and disabled. Other more specific examples also emerged. One option might be to train translators in counselling support roles to fill one of the key gaps in the councils’ interaction with the Somali community. Such jobs have the appeal of not only addressing expressed needs but also resonating with the kind of work many women within the community might be interested in applying for. The idea of working to advance the welfare of their community may help to overcome some of the community-based barriers that Bangladeshi women in particular appear to experience.

**There are also a number of possibilities for engaging with the private sector.** For instance, many of the care services discussed here could be provided in partnership with private companies. There may be scope for creating more internship schemes to allow young women from the two communities to gain experience within private sector companies. A large number of Somalis in our sample found work through private employment agencies, so working with these agencies and encouraging them to recruit from within ethnic minority communities might provide a route to employment that the public sector has failed to provide. Such efforts can also take the form of social enterprises – Somali Integration is using a social enterprise approach to set up a company supplying Somali cleaning services. Another useful approach might be linking up Somali and other entrepreneurs to people in the private sector with skills in web design, marketing, accounting, and so on.

#### **10.4 Filling knowledge gaps: future research questions**

This research was carried out over a fairly short period of time, but it does provide important insights into the structural nature of worklessness among certain sections of ethnic minority communities in Tower Hamlets. There is scope for further research into the questions explored, partly to overcome some of the weaknesses of the present study and partly to track how these communities are faring at a time of major restructuring of the public sector, on which so many of them rely. Limitations of time and money meant that this study could not include some of the hardest to reach women within the community, and thereby establish the extent to which they face the same constraints as other women, only in a more acute form, or whether they face different constraints. It is clear that additional efforts would have to be made to reach these groups and that other methods may have to be used to research their lives, given the resistance of the few we met to having their interviews taped.

A more extended study would be able to include a somewhat more representative sample, with particular attention to those regarded as 'off the map'. A more extended study could also seek to build in a longitudinal component, perhaps following up some of the women covered in this study to explore how the restructuring of the benefits system and the withdrawal of various forms of support for education and skills training is affecting them.

Time constraints also made it impossible to interview men from sample households, although we had hoped to do so. However, given the important role that men play in constraining or enabling women to work, this is a serious omission. There is a need for an in-depth study into male attitudes within the two communities towards women's work, their children's future, and their own roles as fathers and breadwinners. Such research could also help to identify the kinds of constraints that men within these communities face in realising their own aspirations and the forms of support that might help them. It is also important to establish the extent to which boys are growing up with attitudes that replicate some of the more negative aspects of gender relations within their communities, and what could be done to promote more positive role models.

Finally, this research has focused largely on the labour supply dimensions of women's worklessness. Research is needed to throw light on possible demand side factors that might be contributing to this problem. In particular, more research is needed to find ways of engaging private sector organisations, particularly those who have an interest in the kinds of products that can be produced within these communities. At a time when there are major cuts in the public sector, and hence in its capacity to provide employment, it is to the private sector that women in the ethnic minorities will have to look if they are to find ways out of poverty.

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## Appendix 1

Table 1: Male work patterns by ethnicity in the UK

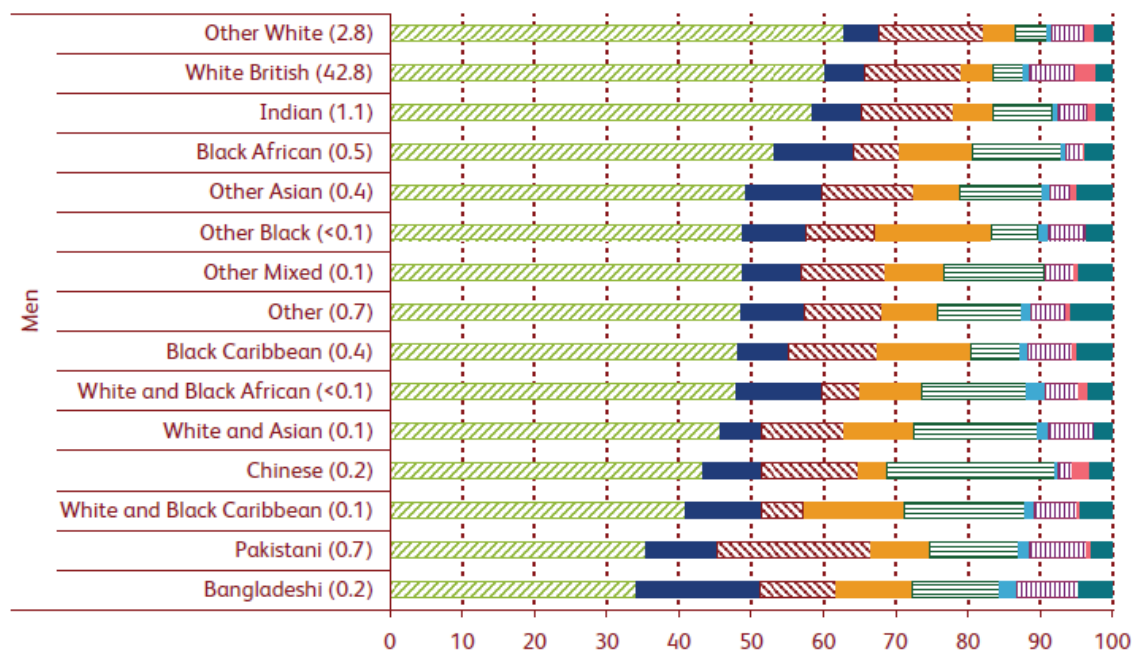
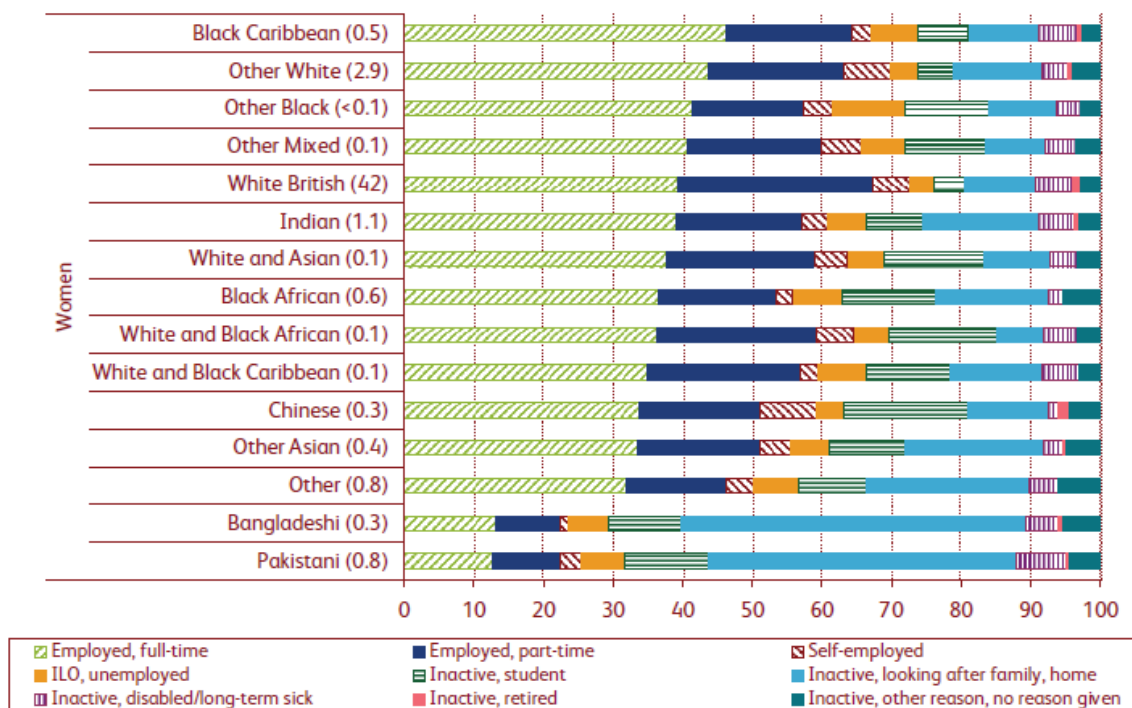


Table 2: Female work patterns by ethnicity in the UK



Source: NEP, based on LFS 2006-2008.

Source:Hills *et al.* 2010

## Appendix 2

### Basic description of Bangladeshi sample (age, marital status, years in UK, housing, and nature of relationships)

Age group	N	Marital status	N	Years in UK	N	Housing	N	Supportive relationship	N	Unsupportive relationships	N
19-29	11	Married	24	0-15	9	Social	19	Parents	11	Husband	5
30-39	20	Divorced	5	16 - 30	15	Private	11	Husband	12	In-laws	7
40+	4	Single	6	30+	11	Don't know	5	Friends	5	Parents	4

### Bangladeshi sample: basic statistics (education, work status, and barriers to work)

Education levels		Work status		Barriers to market	
Up to IA (Bangladeshi)	7	Currently working	10	Care: children	14
University (Bangladesh)	3	Inactive/ looking for work	6	Care: family	8
GCSE (British)	11	Inactive/used to work	15	Family restrictions	5
A levels (British)	5	Inactive/never worked	8	Language/ other qualifications	11
University (British)	8	Studying/looking for work	1	Health	4

### Somali sample: basic statistics (age, marital status, education, and housing)

Age group		Marital status		Education levels		Housing	
20-29	7	Married/living with husband	8	No education (migrants)	5	Social	19
30-39	15	Married/not living with husband	2	Up to secondary (migrants)	11	Private rented or owned	7
40+	7	Never married	7	University (migrants)	3	Don't know	3
		Separated	7	University (Britain/Europe)	9		
		Single	4	Don't know	1		

		Don't know	1				
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**Somali sample: basic statistics (work status and barriers to work)**

Work status		Barriers to work (those who migrated as adults)			
Currently working	14	Child care	14		
Inactive/looking for work	4	Language skills	12		
Inactive/used to work	7	Isolation	10		
Inactive/never worked	1	Lack of legal documents	9		
Studying full time	3	Poor health	9		

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<sup>2</sup>Independent Researcher

<sup>3</sup>Though it should be noted that among Somalis there are high proportions of households with three or more children.

<sup>4</sup> A study by Nandi and Platt (2010) found that Bangladeshi and Pakistani women had the lowest incomes of all ethnic groups.

<sup>5</sup> Although she noted that they did not, or could not, impose similar restrictions on their own daughters.

<sup>6</sup> The *Health Survey for England* reported on the vulnerability of certain ethnic groups, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis in particular, to long-standing illness and disabilities of various kinds and a high prevalence of psychiatric illnesses (Erenset al. 2001). According to quantitative analysis by Platt (2009), the likelihood of living in a household with a disabled member varied from a low of 14% among black Africans to a high of 37% among Bangladeshis.

<sup>7</sup> One interview could not be used because the woman was resident outside of Tower Hamlets.

<sup>8</sup> See Blochand Atfield(2002)

<sup>9</sup>The leaves of an Arabian shrub, which are chewed (or drunk as an infusion) as a stimulant. See Ahmed (2005) for more information on khat-chewing among Somali men in Tower Hamlets.

<sup>10</sup> Other informants have suggested that community-based organisations working mainly with migrant mothers are not always the best forum for promoting graduate and work placement programmes – Somali student societies may be a better route.