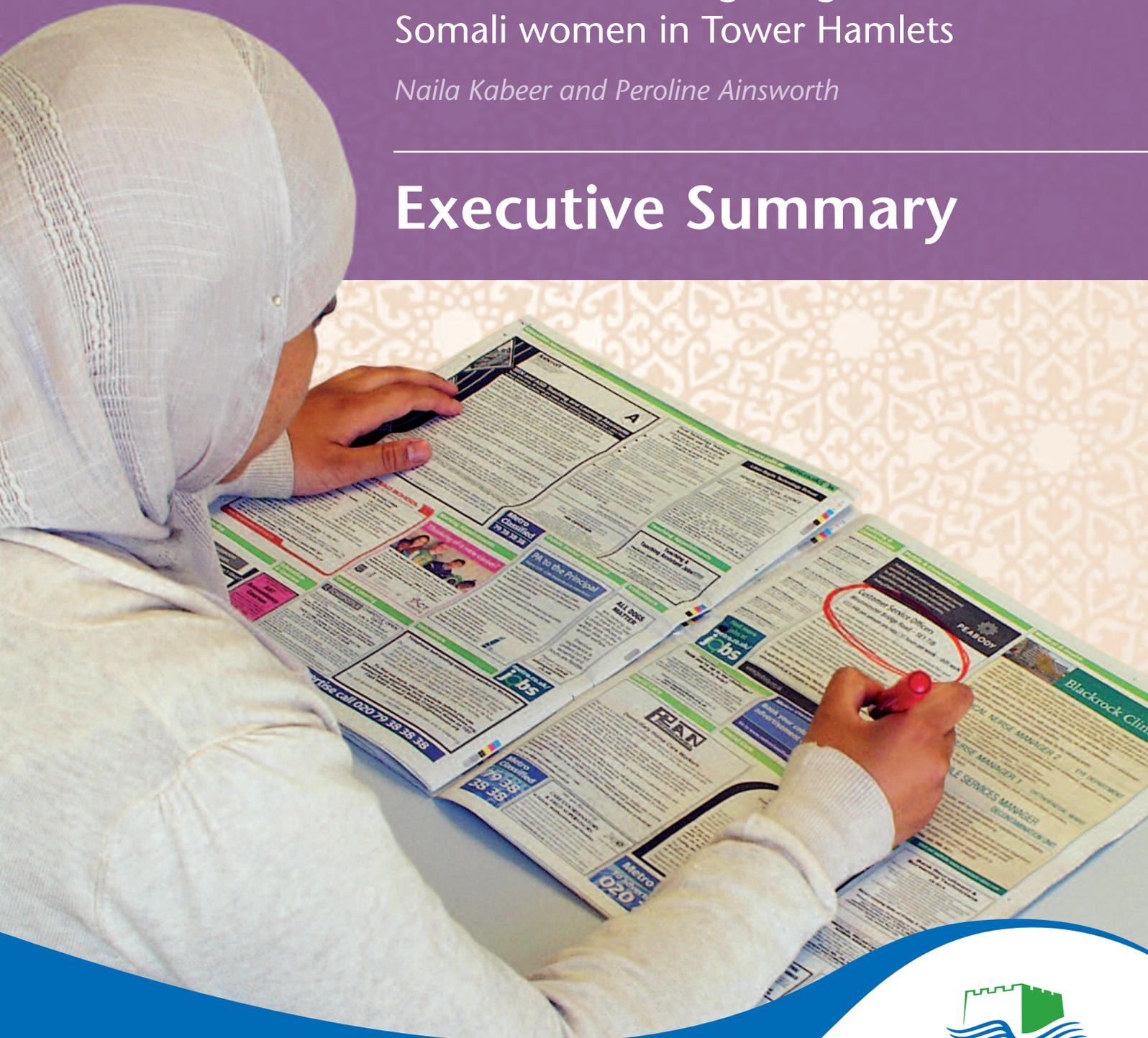


# Life chances, life choices

Exploring patterns of work and  
worklessness among Bangladeshi and  
Somali women in Tower Hamlets

*Naila Kabeer and Peroline Ainsworth*

## Executive Summary



*Naila Kabeer, Professor, Development Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, London*

*Peroline Ainsworth, Independent Researcher*

---

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*We would like to thank the research team Ayan Mahamoud Mahamed, Julie Begum, Nura Ahmed, Quman Akli, Shirina Begum Ali and Yasmeen Uddin for their hard work conducting and translating interviews. Thanks to John Eversley for his advice and information and to the staff and directors at Ocean Somali Community Association (OSCA), Somali Integration Team (SIT), Tower Hamlets Council and Tower Hamlets NHS for their insights and cooperation helping us identify and approach respondents. We are also grateful for the support given to the study from the team at the Scrutiny and Equalities Division, Tower Hamlets Council. Finally, a huge thank you to all the people who were willing to be interviewed for this research and in particular to the women of Tower Hamlets who shared their lives and thoughts with us.*

# 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, and provides 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 community in Bangladesh, 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 under-estimated the extent to which the 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 has 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 wining 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 of all, 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 pro-active approach to the labour market**, accepting whatever jobs they found, however menial and whatever their qualifications.

Secondly, **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. And thirdly, a few women spoke of receiving **enabling institutional support** in the form of advice from Job Seekers 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 of all, **the disruptions associated with war and enforced flight interrupted their education and their ability to accumulate skills and qualifications.** Secondly, **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 Bangladeshi, 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 Bangladeshis and Somalis 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 enterprise loan schemes 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 monopolise 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 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 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: an example might be linking up Somali and other entrepreneurs to people in the private sector with skills in web design, marketing, accounting and so on. One community based organisation 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 we 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 these communities 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.

Published by Tower Hamlets Council's Communications Unit • TD13311 • July 2011