

**APPG Inquiry into Ethnic Minority Female
Unemployment**

Tower Hamlets Council

What are the reasons behind the high levels of unemployment of Bangladeshi and Somali women?

AND

How effective are current policies in addressing unemployment levels of Bangladeshi and Somali women? Is further intervention needed, and if so, what should this look like?

1.0 UNEMPLOYMENT ANALYSIS

- 1.1 The analysis is drawn from the Tower Hamlets Local Economic Assessment (2010), Tower Hamlets Employment Strategy (2011), Women and Worklessness in Tower Hamlets Report by Mayhew and Harper (2011), Women and Worklessness Factsheet (2011), Life Choices and Life Chances by Kabeer and Ainsworth (2011) and The Single Equality Framework 2010/11.
- 1.2 Tower Hamlets already has large numbers of people that are not in work and have not been in work for prolonged periods of time. Bangladeshi and Somali women are twice as likely to live in households that are on benefits (Mayhew & Harper, 2011).
- 1.3 In June 2012, the claimant count (JSA) found 3,805 women claiming benefits and Bangladeshi women accounted for 40 per cent of the total number of JSA claimants in the borough. Within the Bangladeshi female claimant count it found 25-49 year olds to have the highest rate, at 48 per cent (NOMIS, June 2012).
- 1.4 The same claimant count found 280 Black African women (Somali women fall under this ethnicity) claiming benefits, with 25-49 year olds having the highest rate at 68 per cent of the total number of JSA claimants in the borough. Unfortunately the ONS does not hold separate data for Somali women (NOMIS, June 2012).
- 1.5 The Annual Population Survey has found that 74 per cent of Pakistani/Bangladeshi females aged 16-64 were economically inactive (people who are neither in employment nor unemployed). The survey also found that over 48 per cent of Black or Black British females were economically inactive (NOMIS, March 2012)

2.0 Background of Bangladeshi and Somali Women in Tower Hamlets

- 2.1 The first real wave of Bangladeshis began in the 1960's and the majority of these migrants were male. Once it was clear that these migrants had no intention of returning to Bangladesh, the second wave of migration followed in the 1970s and 1980s and they were joined by their wives and children (Women and Worklessness Factsheet, 2011)
- 2.2 Low levels of education, low or no skills and some of the lowest rates of female labour force participation in Bangladesh are just some of the reasons why Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets face difficulty in entering the labour market (Kabbeer& Ainsworth, 2011).

2.3 The Somali population in the UK mainly started in the 1990s due to the civil war. Kabeer found that the difference between the Somali community and the Bangladeshi community was that Somali women, both here and Somalia have grown up to experience both economic activity as well as having responsibility for domestic duties. The main reasons why there is a huge absence of Somali women in the workforce is that during the civil war in Somalia, women experienced constant interruptions in their education and work and also when getting to the UK they encountered huge problems of getting legal migrant status (Women and Worklessness Factsheet, 2011).

3.0 BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

3.1 English proficiency and training

3.2 Approximately 7,000 Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets do not have English as a first language nor any educational qualifications, which significantly increases the probability of their being economically inactive (Mayhew & Harper, 2011).

3.3 The civil war had disrupted some Somali women back in Somalia and this meant that many had low levels of education, including their mother tongue language. This has resulted in Somali women finding it harder and taking longer to learn English (Women and Worklessness Factsheet, 2011).

3.4 Almost all women who arrived as adults accessed some form of ESOL training but some had failed to be proficient in the English language despite having studied it for a number of years (Kabeer and Ainsworth, 2011).

3.5 Organisations providing ESOL are normally funded on a short term basis e.g. yearly. This kind of funding forces organisations to stop and start which does not provide continuity for the organisations or for the women.

3.6 Women looking for work for the first time or after extended periods of absence from employment often lacked relevant skills and qualifications.

4.0 Employment

4.1.1 According to the Women and Worklessness Report (2011) it has found that out of 21,000 Bangladeshi women approximately 75.3% live in households on benefits (Benefit status was measured according to whether an individual lives in a household receiving Council Tax Benefit, a means tested benefit that provides financial help with the local authority Community Charge). It also shows that out of 1,000 Somali women 74.2% live on household benefits (Mayhew & Harper, 2011).

4.1.2 The Women and Worklessness Report (2011) show that females in 16-34 age range account for 60% of female adults, of which 39.5% live in households on benefits. Table 3 (aged 35-59) shows a similar picture but with a slightly higher percentage of 44.3% (Mayhew & Harper, 2011).

4.2 There is a mismatch between the residents' skills and the requirements of business in the borough. This is due to the fact that Tower Hamlets has transformed into a city-type knowledge based economy. Higher skill levels are required for entry level positions. A wider labour market is accessed to gain entry level work and travel arrangements therefore affect ability to work locally.

That distance and time factor affects people's willingness to take some positions. (Tower Hamlets Employment Strategy, 2011).

- 4.3 Due to family and childcare/elderly responsibility many Bangladeshi and Somali women prefer to work part-time and in the care sector jobs that they believe provided maximum flexibility for them e.g. term-time or working during school hours only. Creation of jobs in those sectors that offer living wage and flexible hours is essential in reaching some of these women (Women and Worklessness Factsheet, 2011).
- 4.4 When Tower Hamlets residents were asked about the type of barriers they face when accessing employment, many Somali and Bangladeshi Women attributed their failure to find work to discrimination including their perceived Islamic identity. In 2005 Equality and Human Rights Commission found that 1 in 5 Bangladeshi women under 35 experienced negative comments about wearing religious dress (Kabeer& Ainsworth, 2011).

5.0 Care responsibility

- 5.1 The main factors of Bangladeshi women exiting the labour market were due to marriage and motherhood, usually for extended periods of time. For some women they were not able to take on employment at all due to having children and even when children they had to look after their elderly members. Care responsibilities were sometimes so significant as to cause exhaustion and leaving little time for work or training for work. 3.7% of the population in TH (mainly women) provide more than 20 hours of unpaid care per week. Furthermore, high child care and travelling costs prevent women from working (Kabeer and Ainsworth, 2011).

6.0 Health

- 6.1 Around half of the Somali migrant respondents suffer from physical health problems, including injuries from war (Kabeer& Ainsworth, 2011).
- 6.2 Many Somali women also spoke of mental health issues. Research by the Centre for Psychiatry found 14% of a sample of 143 Somali refugees was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Information Centre for Asylum and Refugees (Women and Worklessness Factsheet, 2011).

7.0 Access and information of opportunities

- 7.1 Some highlighted the lack of clear guidance and information about the benefit system, in particular how working affects benefits. Some feared that even working for a few hours would jeopardise housing or other benefits (Women and Worklessness Factsheet, 2011).

8.0 Current policies addressing unemployment levels:

- 8.1 In Tower Hamlets, forty nine per cent of working age women are economically inactive making it the second highest in the UK. Women compared to men are twice as likely to be workless and seventy five per cent of working age

Bangladeshi women are economically inactive (Tower Hamlets Single Equality Framework, 2010).

- 8.2 In 2007 the Equal Opportunities Commission identified employment as "an area of deep seated gender inequality and discrimination" for black and minority ethnic women. They discovered that Muslim women are likely to be economically inactive and experience multiple barriers to accessing paid employment (Tower Hamlets Single Equality Framework, 2010).
- 8.3 The London Poverty report found that the two groups with the lowest levels of worklessness in London were women from Bengali and Somali backgrounds.
- 8.4 Skillsmatch is the Tower Hamlets Council appointed access to employment provision. The service has been running for 14 years and to date has supported over 2,500 clients into employment. In 2011/12 the ethnicity breakdown of users showed 50 per cent were Asian or Asian British-Bangladeshi followed by 18 per cent who were from White British background (Tower Hamlets Employment Strategy, 2011).
- 8.5 Tower Hamlets Council has targeted specific groups with low rates of economic activity and/or high rates of unemployment. A two-year Women and Worklessness programme has been set up to tackle the high economic activity rates amongst women, particularly Bangladeshi women (Tower Hamlets Employment Strategy, 2011).
- 8.6 In recognition of the need to develop a better understanding of the particular barriers to women in this borough, London Borough of Tower Hamlets commissioned a small pilot project as part of the Women and Worklessness Programme in January 2012 to help develop identify the barriers and approaches of what works in supporting women from Bengali and Somali communities into sustainable employment. The findings from this project will inform future commissioning and will be shared with key stakeholders.
- 8.7 The pilot project seeks to reflect this by commissioning the project to work within a range of age groups. Recommendations have been made at the initial stage such as:
 - Young people to be encouraged to think about careers more broadly than the stereo-typical jobs categorised as for men or for women in the community.
 - Positive experiences in training and voluntary work provided some women with the technical qualifications as well as the basic skills for the world of work.
 - Identifying the best possible tools to improve parental engagement about education and careers.
 - Explore how to improve voluntary and civic participation options for people interested in employment as a bridging/skills development tool.
 - Recognition of and practical support for women's care responsibilities is critical not only for childcare but also support for elderly care (Women and Worklessness Factsheet, 2011).
- 8.8 In order to overcome the problems of integration amongst those ethnic groups distanced from the labour market (includes Bangladeshi and Somali women),

efforts have been made to provide opportunities to engage by maximising Olympic Volunteering opportunities for Tower Hamlets residents as this forms part of the preparation for work.

8.9 According to the Single Equality Framework 2010/11 “The challenge now is to deepen our understanding of the drivers of economic inactivity for this group and assess the learning from these various programmes to inform future planning and strategy. In the context of reductions in public sector funding there is likely to be fewer resources available for targeted additional projects to supplement mainstream employment services. We need to therefore put in place measures to ensure that our core employment interventions and those of our partners enable us to not only increase overall employment but promote equality for those most excluded from the labour market.”

9.0 Much work needs to be done to ensure that we remove the barriers to work Bangladeshi and Somali women face in Tower Hamlets. These efforts need to be made before we look at initiatives to up-skill these residents to compete in the labour market. There needs to be more awareness and recognition (nationally, not just at borough level) of the barriers faced by BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) women. We need to be careful that cuts in funding and provision do not have an impact on females and their aspirations.

Further investment is needed so that we have tailored provision (like the Women and Worklessness Programme) to ensure that support can alleviate and better understand some of the barriers identified. Emphasis should be given to those women who have a desire to work. English proficiency seems to be the biggest barrier for both ethnic groups and it is important that further investment is made to ensure that provision for learning English is available and accessible. Informal learning should be encouraged through discussion groups and social events in order to build confidence and provide English speaking opportunities. Volunteering or work experience can help bridge the gap to gaining experience for those who have no exposure to the working environment, Although Tower Hamlets Council run specific programmes to address the unemployment issues faced by Bangladeshi and Somali women, they are, however, limited in scale due to limitations of funding and budget restrictions. It is essential that we have long-term investment for organizations delivering this support as some of the women in the report are the furthest removed from the labour market. Any discontinuation or breaks (due to lack of resources or funding) will jeopardize the progress made through engagement.