

What Barriers to Employment do Somali Women in Camden face?

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Chapter 1:

(i) Introduction

This research focuses on the barriers Somali women in Camden face to access the labour market. Somali migrants are the largest refugee community in the London Borough of Camden, yet there has been very limited research carried out to assess the community social, economic and educational needs and attempt to meaningfully address them. This research project has been carried out with the support of the African Educational Trust and the Evelyn Oldfield Unit. It is hoped that the finding of this research will inform the planning of a new project at The Shadow Women's Centre, an organisation where I have volunteered as a community worker since 2009. The Shadow Women's Centre is a Camden based organisation for women from the Horn of Africa working in areas such as health, employment and education. Unfortunately the organisation has not managed to secure any funding this year.

The main objective of the research is to identify the barriers to employment faced by Somali migrants, eligible for work and resident in Camden. I will then attempt to provide an answer to the following questions:

- What are the barriers faced by Somali women to access employment?
- What support is available to Somali women to access the labour market?
- Are training and employment support currently available to Somali migrants in Camden sufficient and appropriate to meet the specific needs of this community? .

(ii) Literature review

In 2008, Jeremy Sare published a very alarming analysis of the issues faced by Somali communities in England on the Guardian reporting on high unemployment and the lowest educational attainment among ethnic minority groups¹.

Somali population has remained largely invisible and their needs have been neglected by local and national policy-makers. I hope this report will be an important step forward because it casts light on these hidden experiences and reveals some of the extreme problems and urgent needs of Somali people across England.

Despite the limited amount of published research on the Somali community, it is generally agreed that unemployment is a very common experience for Somali migrants. Among the available studies, the one carried out by London Guildhall University, “Needs Assessment of Somali Young People Living in Camden” in 2001 identifies high levels of unemployment and patterns of long-term unemployment across the Somali population. The study goes on to present the following issues:

- High levels of dependence on state welfare and support
- An over-representation of Somalis in manual forms of work and an under-representation in managerial employment; and
- A very limited presence and impact on the local economy as the Somali population lacks any extensive economic footprint in terms of business owned and the size of business establishment owned.

In another study carried out by the Metropolitan University about the Somali Children’s Educational Progress and Life Experiences in the UK unemployment and extreme poverty emerge as major social welfare issues. According to the study, the rate of male unemployment is put as high as 70%. Overcrowding is also another

¹ Sare, J, Adrift in the UK, The Guardian, 5 June 2008
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jun/05/immigration.immigrationpolicy>

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major concern potentially effecting children's school progress as it can be quite difficult to study in a severely overcrowded house.

Whenever addressing the needs of Somali communities in England, it is not possible to ignore the wider issues of the devastation many of them would have fled in Somalia. It is through their experiences in their home country that we need to understand the barriers, practical and indeed psychological, exist that prevent Somali women from becoming active citizens.

The reasons for the lack of culture and social participation of Somalis in 21st century Britain is, at least in part, subliminal. When any group emigrates in adversity, it holds on to cheering images of the old country. However, such is the extreme physical and structural devastation of Somalia that the memories and longing are for a place which, effectively, no longer exists. This underlying psychological sense of loss, compounded by the traumatic experiences of war, has resulted in a collective withdrawal from active society².

² ibid

(iii) Methodology

The research is based on the analysis of questionnaires distributed to Somali women, phone interviews with charity workers employed at community organisations based in Camden and a focus group with a small number of Somali women. In the questionnaires, respondents were asked to tick boxes describing their circumstances/ opinions. The questionnaires were distributed to women living in the borough of Camden. I decided to use questionnaires as this is an easy way for people to understand what is asked of them and what the options are. I was pleased with the use of the questionnaire as a research tool because it would then be easy to replicate the study to obtain feedback from a larger pool of respondents. I hope that in the future, with more money and support from fellow researchers, this study can be expanded to provide more comprehensive results and possibly identify a system to support Somali women to overcome barriers to employment on a national level rather than locally within the borough of Camden.

Another important objective of my study was to identify the support already available to Somali women in Camden through local charities and statutory organisations. Local organisations were contacted via phone and asked whether they work with Somali women, they provide any specific employment support, their perceptions of the barriers to employment they face and they most effective way to help them overcome such barriers. I found running telephone interviews rather difficult as it was very difficult to get through to the right person and often they would decline to take the time to answer my questions.

Finally I also used a focus group as a research method to identify respondents' perceptions and opinions as this would not be possible through a questionnaire. I think the questionnaire would have been more successful if fewer questions were asked and respondents were allowed to speak more freely.

(iv) Ethical Considerations

Employment is a very complex issue and the barriers that prevent Somali women from finding work can be highly sensitive and ones women do not want to openly disclose. It was very important to me that all respondents understood that they could freely choose to take part in the research and leave at any point should they have wished to. I recruited participants for the project by presenting my proposal and explaining that any feedback would have been collected anonymously and used to inform the funding of this paper and possibly a proposal for funding to overcome to improve access to employment for Somali women.

Chapter 2: Research findings & Discussions

The findings of my study are based on the analysis of 10 questionnaires completed by Somali women recruited as respondents at the Shadow Women's Centre. The finding of my research can be regarded to be very much in line with those highlighted in the studies presented in the literary review above. My research aimed to illustrate the employment reality for a small group of Somali women living in Camden and, crucially identify their perceived barriers to finding a job. I believe this is the best approach to then identify a support system to increase Somali women's confidence and help them overcome the barriers stopping them from obtaining suitable employment.

The questionnaire confirmed that unemployment is high amongst Somali women, with 7 out of 10 being currently unemployed (with five being unemployed for the past 3 to 5 years and four being unemployed for the past year). 7 respondents also agree that unemployment is an issue for Somali women with many commenting that "Somali women don't have any experience and confidence", there is a "lack of interest towards improving life conditions, disrespect and loss of trust". The results of the questionnaire clearly identify lack of qualifications as a barrier to employment with 10 respondents out of 10 selecting this as one of the reasons why they are unemployed. For 7 respondents English, or lack of, is another major barrier preventing them from accessing employment. For 6 respondents having children and no access to childcare was stopping them from looking for a job.

I also ran a focus group to gain a better understanding of the individual experience of Somali women in Camden. The focus group involved 6 Somali women known to me through my work at the Shadow Women's Centre.

The women at the focus group all agreed that lack of skills and limited English are major barriers causing profound social and economic exclusion. Some of the women

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commented that they do access the Job centre to receive support. However their feedback on the quality of the support available from the Jobcentre was not encouraging commenting that all they do is “we just go there every week”.

A brainstorming exercise on perceived barriers to employment suggested that the following are causing a large proportion of Somali women in Camden to face long-term unemployment:

Language problem and low literacy levels, no skills or training, no experience of writing CVs, lack of support in accessing the labour market, volunteering and/or work placement, no support network, poor understanding of the system and employment process, poor education, family obligations, low self-esteem.

In the next stage of my research I then focused on identifying what support is available in Camden for Somali women wishing to find employment. I completed an online research to identify local community organisations and charities. I was able to identify 25 organisations but only 13 answered when I called. For the remaining 12 organisations, I found that the numbers were not working or there was no answer. I fear this may mean that organisations may have closed, possibly as a result of cuts to funding, depriving very vulnerable members of the community of very important support network.

Among the 13 organisations contacted only 3 target Somali people exclusively, whereas an additional 7 run projects also involving Somali people. The organisations' staff I talked to confirmed that there is a large demand for the services they provide to support Somali women into employment with the Greater London Somali Community Youth Centre (GLSCYA) and the Somali Community Development Trust reporting they work with 250 and 350 clients respectively. It was interesting to find out how each organisation takes a very different approach to support their clients into employment. The Greater London Somali Community Youth Centre (GLSCYA) provides volunteering and training support to Somali communities in addition to career advice and support with tasks such as writing their

CVs. Among the organisations working exclusively with Somali communities, The Somali Community Development Trust supports their clients by helping them access volunteer opportunities and ESOL classes, providing welfare advice and advice on interviewing skills. However the workers at the Somali Community Development Trust are not Somali speakers so I am concerned that their services may not be easily accessible to a large part of the Somali community who still struggle with their English. This fear is also based on feedback collected at the focus group when women commented that more support should be available through culturally sensitive environment. The focus group's participants acknowledged that Somali women often arrive in the UK with low education and poor or no literacy skills. Such barriers are too difficult to overcome especially as many women arrive having experienced trauma and remain isolated and vulnerable. The focus groups' participants agree that it is then almost obvious that many women would then choose to remain at home, even in spite of financial constraints or when women may become single parents.

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