

REACHING OUT

Tackling disengagement among Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in Britain

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SUMMARY

There is widespread acceptance that the social and economic disengagement of women from Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities remains a challenge (Ali 2015; Social Mobility Commission 2017; Women and Equalities Committee 2016). The government has recognised the need to tackle disengagement as a key priority (Casey 2017, Integrated Communities Strategy 2018).

Yet recent years have not seen significant improvements, with some indicators suggesting that disengagement could be intensifying (Murray 2017). Advances in rates of economic participation, in particular, have stalled, even though qualification and educational attainment have improved considerably in the past decade (Malik 2018; Muslim Council of Britain 2015; Cheung 2014).

“Some of the barriers include confidence, even simple things like how to read price tags they feel isolated and are scared.”

“Most of these women want to work and be financially independent. They know that if they have marriage breakdowns that means they will be left with nothing...”

The factors driving persistent disengagement arise from the complex interplay between structural factors, persistent (and potentially worsening) discrimination, and cultural conservatism. A large proportion of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are currently being let down by mainstream services, including employment support, subsidised childcare and mental health support. Our research finds that distrust, detachment from the community and a lack of personalisation increasingly hamper the ability of mainstream services to promote greater engagement.

In contrast, the community-based interventions profiled as part of this research and presented in this report demonstrate that these approaches can be highly effective. They tend to enjoy higher levels of trust, are based within the community, and have a greater ability to provide personalised support.

“Some in-laws and families argue that it is not a good thing for women to go out and work, no women are allowed to work, and it makes us financial disabled. When we are able to leave we are able to take some control back for our lives and find work.”

“It is really hard for these women to get work experience and employers won’t accept these women.”

However, our research suggests that community-based organisations are struggling. Despite their track record in reaching the most disengaged women and the fact that many local services rely on their services, currently many community groups find themselves locked out of funding. Most are too small or informal to access public sector contracts. As a result, groups remain dependent on a shrinking pool of local authority grants.

Ensuring that community-based support remains viable will be critical to tackling disengagement among Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. In this report, we set out an initial road map for how to increase levels of cooperation between public sector agencies and community groups on the ground.

“Rather than women having to go and drop their kids to other places and then come, they can just come and bring their kids with them and feel more welcome.”

“[Unlike mainstream services], community groups which are led by BAME communities are culturally more aware and more sensitive than a white-led government with white-led employment services.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

We call on service providers to take the following actions.

- 1. Blur the distinction between statutory and community-based provision** by adopting hybrid approaches – where the services offered by statutory providers are managed in partnership with community-based organisations.
- 2. Develop better and more nuanced evaluation methods focused on social outcomes** moving away from numerical evaluations to a wider set of indicators, including improvements in confidence rates, social participation and improved trust in wider services.
- 3. Ensure groups that support disengaged women from the Bangladeshi and Pakistani community are accessing funding for civil society and social investment.**
- 4. Support platforms that can enable the exchange of good practice among community-based organisations working with disengaged Pakistani and Bangladeshi women.**

The progressive policy think tank

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