

Age UK London – London Minority Ethnic Elders
A Study of The Muslim Women's Elderly Wellbeing project (Muslim Cultural Heritage Cultural Centre)

Project Location – Golborne area, North Kensington (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea)

The membership is approximately 200 women, and the London Minority Ethnic Elders (LMEE) project is able to reach around 30 women from this group on a regular basis.

The home Countries of the women include Morocco, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, England, Gambia, Ghana and Somalia.

Membership location - The majority of members are from Morocco and live in the Golborne area, which is largely a Moroccan community.

The age of the women worked with in the project is Over 55 and up to 80 years

Issues and challenges faced by this group of women

Translation: The majority of members are not fluent in English language, so they depend on other people (i.e. relatives and friends) to interpret and translate from English to Arabic or other mother tongue when, for example, they are accessing services. This causes a lot of problems for members because translation services are not guaranteed for them by service providers and they do not always have relatives and friends around them to help. The language problem is compounded by the fact that many of them have not had much formal education, and they arrived in this country when they were already adults. Many have found it difficult learning another language, a situation which seems to be getting worse as they are growing older.

There is a feeling among members that people do not like them because of their culture and religion. They argued 'since we dress differently, speak different languages and have different beliefs, we look different, and are treated differently. When we go to doctor's surgeries, reception staff are not keen to engage with us. Comments by members include '*they think we are ignorant and do not want to talk to us*'. '*They do not like us*'.

Loneliness and social isolation: There is general concern that loneliness and social isolation are major problems for members of the Elders Wellbeing project. Members look forward to going to the Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre because they've become part of a social network under the project. Loneliness is a common issue for older people, however, there is a prevailing notion that minority ethnic communities have strong family bonds and social networks, which help reduce loneliness and isolation. However, they argued that there are many adult children who 'do not have time for the elderly', and dismissed the idea of minority ethnic communities looking after their older people as a myth, which did not reflect the reality of many people.

Case – An older Moroccan woman has serious respiratory problems, but she wants to be cared for at home by her children. However, her children have no time for her, leaving her She demanded to be cared for at home because it is a requirement of Islam, which unfortunately her children are unwilling to comply with. There are cases where some of the members do not have any relationships because they are migrants, so they do not have the social support they had when they were living in their home countries, with family, relatives and their communities around them.

The language problem is generally a barrier to social participation, so this exacerbates the problem of isolation and social exclusion for many of the Muslim women.

Lack of Awareness and Support: While language is a major barrier to communicating the needs of local communities and individuals, there is a general lack of awareness about health, housing, social care and advice services and channels for reporting problems and getting support. Also, there is a prevailing notion of neglect by officials, such as housing officers, and adult social care professionals. Where minority ethnic people are in conflict with each other, officials are sometimes seen as not keen to intervene, provide assistance or support them to

resolve the issue, and people from these communities, who are in distress often do not know where to turn. The Muslim Heritage Centre Elderly Women's Wellbeing project successfully signposts them to services for advice and further support, however, they are not always successful in getting the required support.

Case-A 60+ year old woman who cares for her sick husband, lives in council housing, with severe dampness and water running down a wall in one of the rooms. Due to the state of the house, they have been forced to use only one room in the house. Age UK Kensington and Chelsea were contacted for help, and they succeeded in getting Housing Services at the local council involved, however, she has still not had much support from the local authority.

Perceptions: There is a high incidence of poverty in the Golborne area of Kensington and Chelsea. It has been identified as the joint poorest ward in London with Northumberland Park (Haringey).¹ The largest ethnic community actively participating in the Elders Wellbeing project are Moroccan women from the Golborne area, so the incidence of poverty is very high among participants. There is a perception among the older women that because they live in poverty and deprivation, and they are from a different ethnic and cultural background, people in the wider community do not see or treat them as equals. Some members reported that they have, for example, been verbally attacked randomly for wearing the hijab or dressed in a manner that reflects their culture and religion. However, they feel that because of their culture and religion no one listens to them or comes to their assistance when they are really in need.

Notwithstanding the negative experiences of the group and its members, they generally held the view that women are treated better in London and in the UK when compared to their home countries. They said 'Women are generally treated very well in the UK. They have rights, and their rights are respected'. They explained that as older women, it felt good seeing efforts being made to respect the rights of women and disabled people through new legislation and changing attitudes. They indicated that in their home countries, women are often not empowered to challenge men. However, in migrant communities such as the Somali community in the UK, women are beginning to raise concern about their husband's unwillingness to work and are challenging them about their attitudes.

These women are even becoming so confident, they are beginning to divorce their husbands, defying the authority of their faith and culture, which often burdens them with extreme forms of censorship. It is now not uncommon to see older Muslim women who have divorced their husbands and are not dependent on the men for sustenance.

What Challenges do we face as an organization when supporting this group of people?

While working with this group one of the major challenges that we face is the language problem, which limits the number of older people from the communities served by this project that we are able to directly engage with. Most of the members have not been able to attend meetings the LMEE has organized, placing a huge responsibility on the coordinator of the wellbeing project, who cannot be everywhere to represent them and disseminate information from these meetings.

While the project coordinator for the Elderly Wellbeing project is always willing to translate or interpret for members of the group, it is difficult for her to be available for everyone at every point in time. Consequently, the LMEE has had to co-opt the services of volunteer interpreters whenever we organize major events, to interpret from English to Arabic and Arabic to English. However, there have been difficulties getting translators/interpreters who have the jargon and technical knowhow. There was only one volunteer interpreter when we organized a meeting and needed facilitators for workshops. Also, because the interpreters were not experienced

¹ <https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Update%2001-2012%2001-2012%20Ward%20Level%20Summary%20Measures%20of%20ID%202010.pdf>

health professionals, there were moments when it was difficult to get the right interpretation for technical language or jargon.

Successes and good practice

Finding volunteer interpreters to work with us during major events has put us in a position where we are able to experience in a small way, what it is like to receive messages second-hand through an interpreter. To engage effectively with the community during events, we encourage participants to speak their language and this is interpreted to us and all the speakers from statutory bodies like the CCG (and former PCT).

The London Minority Ethnic Elders project, Age UK London liaises with local organizations and helps link them up with key local service providers. This area of work has made it possible for members of the Elders Wellbeing project to make their views known to service providers such as the CCG, and given service providers an opportunity to address concerns that they might have about local services. Since we started working with them, they have reported that one of their members has benefitted from a workshop we organized with the former PCT (now CCG). She responded to the call for cancer screening, where it was discovered that she was at a fairly early stage of breast cancer, which has now been treated.

Experience of Individual Muslim women

For the purposes of this case study, we have adopted the name Bushra to protect her identity.

Bushra is a member of the Elderly Health and Wellbeing project and resident of the borough of Kensington and Chelsea. She is 60+, single and divorced, and does not have children.

Bushra has been having a lot of difficulties with her housing and has sought help from the Wellbeing project. The main difficulty is the foul odour that flows from her neighbour's flat into her flat. She claims it is so bad that she does not want to live there anymore. The problem started when she turned down a request from her neighbours for assistance. She did not offer them what they were asking for, so she believes that they are being hostile to her as a consequence of her refusal to help them. She feels insecure because of the hostile attitude of her neighbours towards her. Bushra feels that because she is older and single, her neighbours are making life difficult for her. She has called the police on a number of occasions to deal with problems she was experiencing in the neighbourhood, however, because she has invited the police into her house in the past, her family and friends are reluctant to get involved in helping her because they do not want to have problems with her neighbours, and others have indicated that they do not want to be involved with the police. It is not clear what could cause such a bad smell, but it is also possible that what is really happening is not being expressed very well.

Bushra has turned to the Wellbeing project for support, but the wellbeing project does not offer any information and advice, so while they are willing to help, they are not able to give advice. She was assisted by Age UK Kensington and Chelsea to contact housing services, but housing services have not provided any support.

Bushra spends all day at the Mosque because she says she does not want to be in the house anymore. She says she feels insecure and unsafe in the house. She feels that because of her ethnicity, no one is taking her seriously. She has developed a bad cough and lung infection.

The London Minority Ethnic Elders project has therefore been approached to help liaise with local services for assistance. We are therefore referring the matter to Age UK Kensington and Chelsea, so that her concerns will be looked into once again.

For more information contact:
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