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“This place means freedom to me”: needs-based engagement with marginalised migrant Muslim women in London

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Abstract

This paper draws on a case study of a community-based organisation working with marginalised Muslim women in London from refugee and migrant backgrounds. The organisation delivers a model of practice that involves ESOL classes, practical/informative workshops, and social integration in a women-only community space rather than these elements being accessed separately in often formal spaces. The article draws on data collected as part of the first year of an evaluation of a three-year funded project to engage the women. The data includes registration information about the participant group, a bespoke workshop evaluation form completed by the women each month, and interviews with beneficiaries, volunteers and staff. Our research finds that an integrated, bottom-up approach is successful in engaging isolated women and impacts on their lives through increased wellbeing, knowledge and skills, empowerment, and freedom. Whilst asset-focused interventions have become dominant in community development, there is a danger that a deliberate focus away from the needs of vulnerable groups may cement rather than tackle inequalities, and collude with a political and neoliberal agenda that promotes individualism and austerity. We argue it is necessary to develop interventions that respond to the needs of marginalised groups before building on people’s strengths to address them. Our case study offers evidence for this.

Key words: refugees; migrants; women; Muslim; isolation; integration; needs.

Introduction

This article explores a community-based, bottom-up approach to engaging marginalised migrant Muslim women. The impact of this approach on the women’s lives includes improvement to their wellbeing, confidence, knowledge, and skills. The women are more empowered, independent and the project facilitates their positive integration with each other as well as wider systems and services. The organisation offers accessible English language education, social integration and practical workshops in the community rather than formal education institutions. The case study has significance in understanding the importance of grassroots needs-based initiatives for engaging marginalised communities. On first glance, it could be argued the project represents the form of practice championed by the UK Government since 2010 under ‘Big Society’ and localism agendas. However, cuts to funding for community services under the austerity era and flawed notions of localism, that justify state cuts whilst doing little to support grassroots initiatives, mean that small projects such as this one have decreased in recent years and a dearth of bottom-up interventions remain (Mulvey, 2009; Refugee Action, 2017).

MacLeod and Emejulu (2014) argue the turn towards interventions focusing on assets rather than needs in community development has cemented neoliberalism, austerity and inequality. Asset-focused forms of community development emerged in Western contexts during recent decades of neoliberalism as a form of community self-help, becoming popular in the UK in early twenty-first century. Whilst asset-focused interventions are championed as supporting a focus on skills rather than deficits (IDeA, 2010), our research demonstrates the value of also recognising needs of a community, and building on people's strengths to address them. We argue focusing solely on assets would not be as successful in responding to the explicit needs of marginalised and excluded groups. We are not suggesting that such needs-based interventions need to persistently engage in formal needs assessments, as grassroots bottom-up interventions begin with an understanding of and engagement with the community being served.

Context

This paper focuses on a small London-based organisation, established in 2001 through its founder organising events and trips for migrants from Afghanistan. The organisation has expanded into a charity that helps refugees and migrants tackle isolating factors which come with migration. The founder, a refugee from Afghanistan, arrived in the UK with his family in 1999. The charity works primarily with migrants from Afghanistan and Central Asia, providing services that include English classes, employment workshops, a women's support group, Saturday school and homework club, youth and family support services, drop-in and telephone advice, volunteer placements, and cultural and social events. This case study focuses on the charity's women's project and was funded by The Pilgrim Trust as part of their three-year funding for the charity's work with marginalised Muslim women. The women's project took place in South-east London and West London in 2017.

In referring to marginalised migrant Muslim women in this paper, we are denoting those Muslim women who have arrived in the UK as migrants or refugees (noting these definitions have changed over time) from countries where illiberal cultural practices are strongly entrenched. Some of these women are new to the UK. Others have been in the UK for several years but remained isolated. A large proportion of women accessing the project are from Afghanistan, reflecting the origins of the charity. Migration from Afghanistan to the UK mainly occurred between 1994 and 2004 (Change Institute, 2009: 25); many were refugees fleeing the Taliban. From 2016, migrants from Afghanistan can no longer claim refugee status due to changes in legislation, despite ongoing tensions in the country (European Union External Action, 2017). The majority of migrants from Afghanistan settled in London, and West London in particular (Change Institute, 2009).

Almost half of Muslims living in England reside in the 10% most deprived local authorities, and Muslims are more likely to live in poverty than any other religious group (Ali, 2015:46). Poverty and disadvantage are factors for migrants

and refugees in particular (Mulvey, 2009). Alongside this, Muslim communities and individuals face increasing prejudice in society and institutions, and this prejudice is often gendered (Casey, 2016). This reflects global discourses about women and Islam, with prejudice increasing since 9/11 and with the growth of far-right populism in Western countries (Thompson and Pihlaja, 2018). As well as prejudice from within institutions, marginalised Muslim women may also face cultural resistance from their husbands or families to becoming integrated (Ali, 2015).

Whilst not specific to migrants, Ali's (2015) analysis of census data found Muslim women in the UK are less likely to be in employment than women from any other faith group. For Muslim women who are married, this difference is even starker. A significantly higher proportion of Muslim women are looking after home and family as their main occupation (17.8%) in comparison with women from the general population (5.7%) as well as those from other religious groups (e.g. Hindu 8.5% and Sikh 6.4%) (ibid.). Ali outlines this 'may be due to the younger age distribution of the Muslim community resulting in higher fertility rates as well as the increased likelihood for Muslim households to be those with dependent children' (2015:63). Ali recognises that, whilst for many married Muslim women 'family responsibilities take priority', those who seek work don't get the support they need from existing employability programmes and experience issues such as a lack of flexible working and childcare options, as well as discrimination (ibid.:63). Ali argues tailored services are needed to meet their needs.

From a Foucauldian perspective, marginalised migrant Muslim women are a group with little power in influencing discourses about them, because of a lack of knowledge and status in the societal hierarchy (Foucault, 1970). In this paper, we argue there is a deficit of knowledge capital among migrant women who lack language proficiency and understanding of UK systems and that isolation cements this knowledge deficit. As such, they may feel powerless in their interactions with society because of a lack of information and resources to engage successfully. Powerful global discourses about Islam exacerbate the powerlessness of marginalised Muslim groups in particular (Coppock and McGovern, 2014). Muslim women in the UK face multiple intersections in their identities leading to multiple oppressions; ethnic, cultured, religious and gendered (Thompson and Pihlaja, 2018). For migrant Muslim women from conservative backgrounds, these intersectional oppressions are more pronounced, and their marginalisation reinforced by both cultural practices and societal prejudice.

Isolation vs. integration

Shaping positive identities and facilitating integration are key government priorities for marginalised and migrant groups (Home Office, 2015). However, evidence suggests that developing a positive sense of identity and engaging with communities and society is particularly challenging for marginalised Muslim

women. Hall (1995:8) argued that identities 'actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognitions which others give us'. This creates a conflict between internal identification and external grouping, particularly when negative labels are present, such as those associated with migrants and Muslims, in the current global context of political populism. Rostami-Povey (2007:241) found that women from Afghanistan displaced to the US and UK were 'constantly engaged in mediating between Western values and their Afghan/Muslim cultural identities'. Similarly, Mandaville (2009) argues that Muslims in Europe with transnational identities are viewed with suspicion. This clash of identities affects not just migrant groups but Muslim groups more broadly. It is well documented that both migrant and British-born Muslims perceive a tension between their identities where they feel that society wants them to choose between being Muslim or British (Casey, 2016).

Policy approaches to integration reinforce this identity clash (Haverig, 2013; Kortmann, 2015). Haverig (2013) argues that since 2001, policies have been driven by a fear of migrant Muslim communities. These policies tend to focus either on multi-culturalism and creating cohesion through celebrating diversity, or on acculturation and requiring migrants to assimilate to their host culture (Haverig, 2013; Kortmann, 2015). Based on research with Muslim migrants in the Netherlands and Germany, Kortmann (2015) challenges this binary and argues that integration policies need to allow both for migrants to retain their religious, ethnic and cultural identities as well as to make some adaptation and be included in the host culture. UK integration policy has shifted sharply towards the acculturation form of integration since 2010, with its focus on conformity to 'British values' (Home Office, 2015).

Research suggests migrant Muslim women in Britain face isolating factors in their lives. For Muslim migrants, the Casey report (2016) found a number of issues reinforce social and economic isolation. She identified tensions between Muslim communities and wider society finding almost half of UK Muslims faced prejudice and over half of the wider public believed there is a clash between British values and Islam. Whilst Casey found, overall, that Muslims feel positive about being British, some women were held back by illiberal views and practices stemming from gendered-cultural traditions. Whilst this moral judgement needs some unpacking, it is reinforced by other research.

Research commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government found several barriers to accessing services for women from Afghanistan including a lack of English language proficiency, resistance from their families and negative responses and attitudes from services themselves (Change Institute, 2009). The research suggests public authorities exacerbate the problem by failing to effectively address the challenges women face and that 'misplaced political correctness or cultural relativism' means some decisions made are even harmful (Change Institute, 2009:34). High levels of poor mental health as well as particular challenges in escaping domestic violence were

reported among women by the research, as well as ineffective services to respond to these issues, with many mental health problems being missed by statutory health providers for example. The women are described as having a 'relative invisibility' when it comes to statutory services (ibid.:34). Similarly, Mirza (2010) has argued that young Muslim women may be let down by services where professionals' attempts to appear tolerant lead to them not follow up on issues of concern, such as around forced marriage, circumcision and other abuses.

Casey (2016) is clear in her recommendations that increasing scrutiny of Muslim communities will not encourage integration. Arguably, there is a need for community initiatives that understand the views and practices of these communities to provide non-threatening services that provide appropriate education and challenge where necessary. Casey's recommendations identify English language proficiency as a key enabler of integration. Paradoxically, for marginalised Muslim women, a lack of English often prevents integration, but their isolation prevents them overcoming the language barrier. Experiences of prejudice are widely reported by even non-migrant Muslims accessing mainstream education (Thompson and Pihlaja, 2018). This reinforces the need for the most marginalised groups to be able to access targeted services that meet their needs and deal with the challenges they face.

Migrant Muslim women face barriers when attempting to access a range of services. A report exploring the experience of migrants from Afghanistan in West London found that, of council services, most women were only aware of housing and their overall impression was negative (Social Policy Research Centre, 2014). Experiences included having no one get back to them after making a query, and rude and intolerant responses. There were experiences of cultural insensitivity; for example, arriving at a leisure centre's women-only swimming session to find a male lifeguard on duty (ibid.). The report found women engage more positively with services where long-term contact can be made with specific people rather than one-off fragmented interactions with different people and providers. In academic research with migrant women in the UK from Africa and Asia, Guista and Kambhampati (2006) found that close proximity to their ethnic communities and contact with their host communities contributed to feeling settled, as well as being impacted by their experiences of services like housing and immigration. This has implications for the need for culturally-appropriate provision for migrant women. Mainstream services are not effectively meeting the needs of marginalised Muslim women and this increases their isolation rather than facilitating integration.

Possible community development responses

The problems marginalised groups face accessing services, overcoming isolation, and becoming integrated in their communities and society raise questions as to how community development might respond and facilitate positive spaces for reducing isolation. Key debates in community development over recent decades

have centred on the tensions between top-down and bottom-up practice, and between a focus on the assets or needs of communities (McKnight and Kretzmann, 2012). Mainstream and statutory services have most often imposed a top-down response to a top-down assessment of needs that can increase stigmatisation and fail to adequately address needs of particular communities. Such top-down interventions are rightly criticised (IDeA, 2010). One example of this is the UK's Prevent duty which has been criticised for scrutinising Muslim communities disproportionately and framing them as dangerous (Abbas and Awan, 2015; Coppock and McGovern, 2014). The deficit-discourse that informs such interventions increases the stigma and marginalisation of particular groups. Former Prime Minister David Cameron, for example, suggested that migrant Muslim women who don't integrate are vulnerable to extremism and he challenged them to learn English within 2.5 years of arrival in the UK or face deportation (Governance Now, 2016). The focus on top-down hard outcomes, such as language learning, as key identifiers of integration is problematised by Anjum et al (2016).

Asset-based community development (ABCD) has been championed in community development over recent decades as the solution to problematic practice and policy-making (McKnight and Kretzmann, 2012). ABCD is based on the premise that by focusing on 'capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential in a community', practitioners and services are able to see beyond 'problems that need fixing' whereas a focus on deficits 'designs services to fill the gaps and fix the problems... As a result, a community can feel disempowered and dependent; people can become passive recipients of services rather than active agents in their own and their families' lives' (ibid.:7). ABCD removes the power dynamic of institutions and services defining people by their problems and, instead, enables them to be empowered in shaping their own solutions and services. Whilst ABCD has a clear role to play in reducing top-down stigmatising of communities, it has been argued it may overlook or even cement inequalities (MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014; Missingham, 2017). The focus on assets over needs may mean needs of marginalised groups are ignored. As such, MacLeod and Emejulu (2014) critique ABCD as colluding with neoliberalism; justifying privatisation, individualism and austerity. In the recent UK political context, which has centred on localism and on rolling back the state, we have seen significant cuts to statutory funding for ESOL classes and yet a lack of English language proficiency has been clearly identified by Government-commissioned research as a key isolating factor for marginalised migrant groups (Change Institute, 2009; Refugee Action, 2017). There is therefore an argument for a focus on needs and on tackling these in positive ways in work with the most marginalised and excluded communities.

This is not to argue against asset-based work with groups that have the social and knowledge capital to utilise this approach; there are many positive examples of this. In Canadian research, Eidoo (2016) found that young Muslim women were developing their own community-based and after-school spaces in which they took refuge from Islamophobia and racism, as well as from cultural patriarchal

restrictions, and were developing their own forms of learning, community and citizenship. However, this relies on the women having a certain level of knowledge capital and resources, and may not work for new migrants or those most marginalised. Marginalised groups need local services that resist neoliberal ideas of 'self-help' (Berner and Philips, 2005; MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014; Missingham, 2017). This means not solely viewing people through a lens of deficit, as well as being able to frame services around their unique challenges and their strengths to overcome them.

Missingham (2017) argues that if ABCD is brought together with a critical pedagogy in community development then the problematic collusion with neoliberal discourse can be avoided. Nel (2018) compared the use of needs-based and asset-based approaches with community groups in South Africa. She found that needs-based approaches had a greater effectiveness in the short-term whereas ABCD had greater sustainability. Based on research with Mexican immigrants in the US, Hebert-Beirne et al (2018) argue for a community-driven (bottom-up) approach that identifies and responds to both needs and assets. In the case of migrants and refugees in the UK, they may lack information or resources rather than skills or capacity. Therefore, increasing their social and knowledge capital (through teaching English for example) may be a route to being less dependent and more empowered. For grassroots, progressive community work this needs to involve a bottom-up rather than top-down assessment of needs and to resist the fear and division created by top-down deficit-focused interventions (Missingham, 2017). A needs-sensitive, bottom-up model may be effective in facilitating integration, not in top-down politically charged notions of integration, but a more holistic approach focused on the direct needs and wellbeing of the community. Bottom-up interventions remove the power dynamic of top-down responses for a relatively powerless group, and allow for a needs-based approach shaped around their particular intersections and challenges.

Methodology

Whilst the project employed an external academic, much of the data was collated by practitioners. The academic researcher began by immersing herself in the project, observing sessions and meeting staff and beneficiaries, before working with them to develop and refine bespoke evaluation tools. This paper is co-written by the academic researcher and one of the practitioner-researchers. Bourdieu (1996) suggests that research may inflict 'symbolic violence' through misunderstanding or misrepresenting research participants, and therefore advocates for reflexivity in research. The practitioner-researcher being a former refugee means 'simultaneously being an onlooker in the stalls and a member of the cast' (Shaw, 1996: 10). Reflexivity in this context can be defined as the 'active acknowledgement by the researcher that their own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation' (Horsburgh, 2003:309). Both the academic and practitioner-researchers needed to 'focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity' and carefully

'self-monitor' the impact of biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on the research (Berger, 2015:2). As participants with refugee backgrounds may have experienced events and situations where their voices were not respected, it was important to avoid causing harm through doing this in research (Masten and Narayan, 2012). Lipson and Meleis (1989) note suspicion of strangers is common among people from war-torn countries. Zulfacar (1998) states they value family privacy and interfering outsiders are encountered with distrust. Insider-researchers are important in this context for understanding the participants, being able to effectively communicate the rights and limits of confidentiality, ensuring informed consent and respecting non-consent. The research obtained ethical approval via Goldsmiths, University of London.

This paper draws on data collected in the first year of a three-year evaluation of the Women's Project from January to December 2017. The Pilgrim-Trust-funded-project and thus the evaluation centres on ten workshops provided each year on issues relevant to the women's lives (e.g. health, education, rights) and to reducing their isolation and facilitating integration with their communities and society. However, the provision the research participants are engaging with is wider. The organisation provide weekly ESOL classes and topical workshops in a women-only space. Therefore, it is difficult to separate impacts for women engaging with monthly workshops when they are engaging with a more frequent range of provision.

The data gathered includes registration forms, registers for the ten workshops, and a bespoke evaluation form that was developed, tested and refined with the women to evaluate the workshops. Fifteen interviews took place with nine beneficiaries, five volunteers and the Women's Project Coordinator. Quantitative data was drawn from registration forms and workshop evaluations. The qualitative interviews were subject to thematic analysis to identify themes and sub-themes across the women's experiences of the project. The names used in the article are pseudonyms.

Who does the project reach?

The women's project engaged 71 women from a wide range of countries of origin during 2017. 44% of the women were from Afghanistan with the other 56% from 16 other countries of origin.

[Insert Figure 1]

Figure 1 - country of origin

The background of the charity's founder and the relatability, language, and critical mass of participants from Afghanistan this brings has engaged the large proportion of women from Afghanistan whilst the project is also increasingly reaching wider groups.

The women ranged in age from 25 to 49 years. Their education level ranged from none at all to university degrees. University education was in all cases achieved in their home country. Most of the 71 women had families and many had significant caring responsibilities for their families. 81% of the women had children (19% had one child, 40% had 2-3 children, 22% had 4 or more children).

Engagement with workshops

Throughout 2017, the workshops took place in south-east and west London. The average attendance at workshops was 17 women. This includes 71 different women, most of whom attended regularly.

[Insert Figure 2]

Figure 2 - engagement with workshops

The workshops were facilitated by female speakers, most with relatable ethnic backgrounds or experiences. Translation into Farsi and Pashto was provided at workshops by volunteers. All women were asked to complete simple evaluation forms after each monthly workshop and whilst this was optional, only a small number opted out across the year, usually when they needed to leave before it was completed. Overall, across the 10 workshops: 94% of attendees reported the workshops as relevant to their lives; 88% of attendees reported increased knowledge through the workshops; 93% of attendees reported they would do something differently in their lives as a result of the workshops.

Qualitative themes

Several key themes emerged in the narratives of the women and volunteers when asked about their engagement with the project over time.

Wellbeing/happiness

The interviews with beneficiaries were overwhelmingly positive with the women reporting feeling happy and excited simply to be at the women's project.

When I come here, I get happier, meet new people. (Fawzia)

The social time is the favourite bit for me. I've made new friends, made new connections. (Laily)

One of the workshops focused on health and wellbeing. Comments on the anonymous evaluations of this workshop illustrate the impact of the women stopping to think about their own wellbeing:

I learnt how to take deep breaths to calm me down when I am stressed.

The session calmed me down. I will focus more on what makes me happy.

For these women, it was the first time they stopped to think about themselves and what they need to relax and be healthy. For many of these women, attending the women's project is the only time they take for themselves to focus on their own health, wellbeing and happiness. This came across in the beneficiary interviews both when reflecting on this workshop and the project more widely.

One of the classes was about healthy eating and fitness. I had heart surgery last year and I learned about healthy eating. I also benefited from techniques like how to relax, how to know when I'm tired... I've sometimes felt depressed because of my illness as well but when I'm here I forget all the pain and I'm happy. I don't even know how the day is passing so quickly when I'm here. All I've done for 6 years is walk to the nursery and school and back but now there is something different. (Mariam)

The women reported not having much opportunity to take time for themselves because of caring responsibilities. Childcare is provided alongside the women's project where children can get help with their homework and/or their native language. The women reported this was key to them being able to attend. While justifying time for themselves was not always easy, the women's project had become a space for focusing on their own wellbeing.

Confidence

All interviewees reported feeling more confident about their lives in England since attending the project. Whilst the women could identify things they still needed to learn, this demonstrates their perception of themselves as better able to live and function in British society. This growth in confidence is reflected in the women articulating longer-term goals around accessing services, obtaining a driving license, getting a job or supporting their children's education. The volunteers interviewed all expressed the importance of the women growing in confidence and how this supported their integration.

The biggest impact on the women is confidence, their ability to make some friends and improve their self-esteem. For example, some of the women that come are very quiet in the beginning but later on they start to talk about life... and also the way they dress and how they appear changes. (Lucy, volunteer)

This growth in confidence was seen as a crucial starting point for the women achieving wider impacts on their lives, reducing their isolation and building their courage to engage with people and other agencies.

Knowledge and skills

The workshops provided the women with new knowledge and skills that impacted their daily lives. 88% of workshop attendees reported an increase in knowledge. This can be seen across the workshop evaluations and in interviews where women stated they would, for example, implement techniques learned

around relaxation, be able to access healthcare and other services without help, or feel better prepared for their driving theory test.

In interview, one beneficiary explained how she had learned about her local area and how to use computers for the first time through the methods used in the workshops.

I have learned about housing and my area. I have learnt about computers, it's really good! I like learning more about computers. (Mursaal)

She recognised how using computer programmes in the workshops to write a CV and prepare for a driving theory-test had led to her becoming more computer-proficient.

The women identified the English classes as having a significant impact on their lives. Whilst these were not funded by the Pilgrim Trust, they were offered on a weekly basis before the workshops and were the key reason that women became engaged with the project.

I started from zero. I felt blind and dumb, not able to speak. I felt so depressed because I was feeling if I see someone in the street, what will I say? I was scared of communication. (Razia)

It's amazing because I now have the basic sentences I need in everyday life, like booking appointments. This is an amazing class... I travel over an hour on the bus even if I'm ill. (Mariam)

It was apparent from the women's narratives that learning English increases independence and integration. It coincided with knowledge gained in workshops on issues such as health and schooling to co-achieve the impacts on their lives.

My husband doesn't have to take me shopping any more. It's simple stuff. When I want to buy onion or garlic, I know how. I live here and I didn't know basics. I want to go shopping without being scared. I want to go the doctor without anyone else there. Once I wanted to buy spinach. I went into the shop three times, I had to go home and get the empty bag. And now I'm learning... I always ask my husband to go to parents' evening at school and I'd like to go myself. When I can read school letters, I can better prepare my children, like when they need to wear a special costume. (Nargis)

Learning English was identified by the women as key to fulfilling long-term goals for independence whilst engaging with the workshops was instrumental in them identifying the goals and skills they wanted to aim for. For example, a beneficiary stated: 'When I can speak English better, I would like to volunteer and help other people. That is a goal for me'. Another said: 'I need to improve my English so I can get a job'.

Integration

A key aim of the project is to support the women's integration, and this was happening at a range of levels, from with each other, to beyond the project and in wider society. At the first level, many of the women did not have friends they socialise with outside their family so the opportunity to meet other women was a significant impact.

I am from Iran and I have met people from Algeria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. I like seeing my friends. (Mina)

We take turns to bring food and I really enjoy bringing food and sharing with others. I wait the whole week to see these women, they are like sisters. (Nargis)

Beyond this social integration, the development of confidence, knowledge and skills for living in the UK supported their wider integration, as well as the moral support of having a friendship network beyond their family. The women explained how the project's staff and volunteers have supported them with their integration and access to services beyond the project.

The staff have given me help with the citizenship test. They are very good, they help us... What you need, you can find here. If they don't have the information you need, they tell you where to go. For example, I needed a solicitor and they helped me find where I could get help. (Fawzia)

This demonstrates the importance of having a range of support in one community organisation where the staff understand the communities they are serving and have built positive relationships with them.

Freedom and Empowerment

For many of the women, accessing the women's project brought freedom from barriers that limit their full integration in their communities and society. These barriers included, among others: not knowing English; not having information about their rights, health, or where to get help and support; and not understanding the school systems their children are going through. Their narratives in the sections above show how increased knowledge, confidence and skills in these areas brings empowerment.

In addition to this, many of the women were isolated by the expectations of their families and culture about what is appropriate. The project coordinator described a process whereby 'they bring their four walls of isolation with them' when they come to the UK from less liberal countries because they don't leave the house other than for chores and don't socialise beyond their families. Arguably, this isolation is further entrenched by prejudice towards Muslim and migrant groups.

Some of the women explained how they can't go anywhere else because their husbands wouldn't let them or because of childcare responsibilities.

The best thing is I can't go anywhere else to study because I have 2 children and I can bring them here and they are well looked after. I don't get that support anywhere else. (Laily)

This place means freedom to me because my husband didn't let me go to college, but I explained there are no men here. (Mariam)

All the above themes come together to result in the women's empowerment. This ranges from the simple yet powerful examples of women going to the doctor, dentist or shops alone for the first time to those working towards ambitions such as finding work or learning to drive. Many of the examples of empowerment were facilitated through a combination of learning English and gaining new knowledge through workshops. The volunteers also recognised the importance of their work in empowering the women through giving them the information and resources they need to expand their view of their own futures and capabilities.

They have more information about what services to access, they have the skills to be able to ask for the resources. There's the resources of the staff here, we're able to guide them, and there's the resources they have in each other... The fact they can go to one another and get advice and learn how people have done it... But as well as that we've been teaching them things like going to the doctor's and about the British school system, a presentation that teachers came and did, that really supported them to know how the system works, that their children should be getting homework and to know what's expected of their children so they can support them in the best way and ask for help at school. So, it's really about empowering them with understanding how systems work and where to go for information. (Anousheh, volunteer)

This information and knowledge capital was something the women weren't acquiring anywhere else. For an older woman living in the UK for a long time but never having been able to go shopping without her husband, having the knowledge and confidence to do so was a simple yet powerful impact. For a younger woman, her ultimate goal was to find a job. For many of the women, the liberations they aim for are for their children. For example, wanting them to have educational opportunities they did not have themselves.

Challenges

There are some challenges that emerge in the case study. These largely stem from the precariousness of a small project relying on volunteers and limited funding. The women were reluctant to offer criticism of the project in interviews and expressed discomfort when asked what could be different. A couple of the

women approached the academic researcher after their interviews to raise some issues for improvement around the consistency of ESOL teachers and childcare. One of the women did raise these issues in the interview itself. Laily stated that 'one thing we have struggled with is the English teacher has changed a lot', reflecting on the need for 'stability' in the relationships the women develop with staff.

Laily also stated that 'one of the reasons I come is for me and the kids get looked after which is good but it is a long day for them'. Reflecting on the fact that friends she had invited were unable to attend because 'not all husbands are willing', she said that if children had 'more structured lessons' or were 'learning about the Quran or culture' it would help persuade husbands. This reflects a clear challenge in engaging the most isolated women. However, the project is reaching women who do not engage with other services and is able to build trust with some husbands because of its foundations within the communities it serves.

Discussion and conclusions

The case study offers an argument for bottom-up needs-focused practice with marginalised groups, particularly refugees and migrants. The success of the project rests on the provision of a women-only space in which to access support, social integration, English lessons, childcare, and workshops relevant to their lives. Each element contributes to the impacts on the women's lives. A large part of the project's success in engaging a hard-to-reach group of women is because they are a grassroots organisation where people with similar backgrounds to the women are working to build trust over time with a sensitivity to the particular needs of the target group. The staff's understanding of the target group and provision of the women-only space allows them to provide appropriate reassurance to the husbands, many of whom also access the organisation's services. Some of the women are not able to access other services because of lack of support from husbands or families reflecting the cultural resistance some marginalised women face (Ali, 2015; Casey, 2016). This links to the 'four walls of isolation' described by the project coordinator in interview. The gendered prejudice towards Muslim women further demonstrates this need.

However, in the austerity climate, such interventions are shrinking rather than growing with Refugee Action (2017) stating that statutory funding for ESOL classes in England was cut by 60% and more than £100million between 2010 and 2016. The women's project did not have any funding in 2017 for English classes and was offering these 'in kind'. A reliance on volunteers and of work provided 'in kind' could be viewed as a collusion with political ideologies of localism and of rolling back the state (MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014). The charity, however, does also engage in awareness-raising activities through conferences and events at local, national and European levels to campaign for the support needed for migrant groups. Another way the project resists neoliberal values such as individualism is through facilitating an empowerment based on interdependence rather than simply independence. The social aspect of the project involves the women supporting and helping each other with English and

through bringing food to share. This demonstrates a social aspect to integration and a focus on building community.

That the women are engaging in a safe space outside of mainstream provision and wider society suggests there are some limits to the integration facilitated. The Casey report (2016:8) states that 'where communities live separately, with fewer interactions between people from different backgrounds, mistrust, anxiety and prejudice grow'. For some of these women, it is the first time they have socialised beyond their families and therefore the steps towards integration are necessarily small. The primary focus on people from Afghanistan is a strength with boundaries. It is key to its success in engaging marginalised women but also limits the diversity of engagement. This demonstrates how inclusion is often necessarily inter-related with exclusion for marginalised groups. This is reflected in research by Bright et al (2018) who found that in faith-based youth and community work, there needs to be safe *exclusive* spaces provided to facilitate *inclusion* for some minority groups. It is also supported by Guista and Kambhampati's (2006) research which found that engaging with a familiar community was key to feeling settled in the UK for female migrants. The fact the women are engaged in groups where those around them have similar backgrounds, needs, skills and confidence levels, means they are not intimidated, reflected by one of them stating that 'other classes were too advanced'. Similarly, issues around female health and equality can be discussed in a safe setting for the women because the other participants, staff and volunteers understand cultural sensitivities. The provision of tailored services for such groups is supported by Ali (2015).

Overall, the findings of the case study demonstrate the project is reducing the isolating factors identified in the literature, particularly lack of English language and knowledge of systems and services (Change Institute, 2009; Casey, 2016). The increase in wellbeing for the women involved demonstrates a clear response to the high levels of mental health issues identified among marginalised migrant Muslim women (Social Policy Research Centre, 2014). Whilst the project is supporting positive integration this is not the politically-charged deficit-focused notion of integration often promoted by top-down policy. The project recognises its beneficiaries have strengths, capacity and skills but that there is a clear need for knowledge and resources to facilitate their empowerment. Learning English, understanding UK systems such as education and health, and a focus on their own wellbeing, all contribute to a model of provision that responds to their needs while recognising their assets. The model is needs-focused rather than starting with assets, but it is a bottom-up needs-based approach. The women bring food to share and a key aim for year two of the project is to support them to share skills and talents such as tailoring and cookery through women-led workshops. This demonstrates a shift from needs to assets as the women increase their knowledge capital, redressing the power/knowledge deficit that marginalises the women. It reflects the call for combined ABCD and needs-based approaches, and for ABCD to be critical of neoliberal ideas of self-help (Berner and Philips, 2005; Hebert-Beirne et al, 2018). Overall, the case study in this paper demonstrates an

approach to working with needs without reinforcing prejudice. Whilst this paper presents a grassroots needs-based response to women's marginalisation in London, more needs to be done to tackle the wider discourses of populism that exacerbate isolation and stigma for migrants, Muslims and other marginalised groups across the Western world.

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