

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Somalis in London

At Home in Europe

9 October, 2014

Somalis in London report is part of a set of comparative policy-oriented studies exploring the views and experiences of Somali communities and policy responses and initiatives that support their integration. The research was undertaken concurrently in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo, Stockholm, Leicester and London. The reports are qualitative studies with data collected through focus group discussions with 91 Somalis living in the London boroughs of Camden and Tower Hamlets in 2013, as well as interviews with stakeholders working in government and civil society. The report focuses on the experiences and concerns of Somalis in relation to identity, belonging and interactions, education, employment, housing, health and social protection, safety and security, civil and political life and the role of the media.

Identity and belonging

In the main, focus group participants were positive about living in their neighbourhoods, in London and in the United Kingdom, citing the opportunities available in terms of education and employment as factors influencing this. There was recognition that the issue of identity was complex and at times confusing, and that identity formation is shaped both by an individual and a collective “sense of belonging” as well as an awareness of how “other” ethnicities and the indigenous population perceive and define minority groups. For the participants in the study, being Somali, British, black and Muslim overlapped. On one level, such intersectionality was not problematic as it encapsulates the complexities surrounding identity formation and belonging. However, on another level, having multiple identities also compounded potential discrimination, as there were several ways in which people experienced this. Adopting a “Somali identity” was seen by some participants as a “safe” identity, since this was not challenged by mainstream society.

Education

The importance of education was emphasised by all of the people who participated in the research. Research participants expressed concerns about underachievement at school, particularly in terms of the way that British-Somali boys were treated in mainstream education, giving examples of boys being stigmatised as “bad”, or referred to special education units if teachers were unable to cope with “boisterous behaviour”. Further difficulties regarding education included parents’ lack of understanding of the education system and being unable to properly support their children, since often parents had not been educated themselves. A child interpreting on behalf of parents was also highlighted as a problem. It should be noted that high numbers of British-Somali children now engage with supplementary education, which has improved achievement levels; however, underachievement remains a problem.

Employment

The importance of employment and the role of education and training in enhancing employment opportunities were recognised by British-Somali communities in this research. There were numerous examples of British-Somalis being successful in securing employment in high status occupations; however, there were also many examples of barriers to securing employment and experiences of discrimination. A significant structural barrier to British-Somalis gaining employment is the current economic downturn and recession, which means that jobs and opportunities are scarce. This has meant that there is greater competition for fewer jobs. It is evident that older women need support in accessing employment, as they face disadvantages in terms of language barriers, educational attainment, qualifications and work experience. However, young men also face disadvantages in the labour market; difficulties in accessing established networks is an important barrier.

Housing

There are a number of issues facing British-Somali households in terms of housing in Camden and Tower Hamlets. Significantly, London is characterised by very high housing costs, a chronic housing shortage and the concentration of lower income groups in the rental sector. Low income also affects housing choices. The shortage of appropriate affordable housing in the social and private rented sector, compounded by the impacts of welfare reform, poor housing conditions and difficulties navigating and negotiating complicated systems present a range of problems for British-Somali communities in the study areas and across London as a whole. There is evidence of hidden homelessness, with more than one household sharing the same accommodation. There is also evidence of families being eligible for rehousing, but being unable to move due to the shortage of available properties within London. This means that often the only option is to move to the suburbs of the capital. There is, however, evidence of good practice and initiatives to improve the housing circumstances of British-Somali communities.

Health and social protection

For British-Somali communities in London, there are clearly difficulties in accessing appropriate healthcare. The pressure placed on the NHS, the length of appointment times allocated to patients, compounded by a lack of English language skills and difficulties navigating sometimes complicated systems, pose problems for older British-Somali women in particular. Further difficulties are caused by a lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness on the part of medical staff, a lack of interpreters and British-Somali staff in GP surgeries and instances of miscommunication

and misdiagnosis. Some participants felt that they had been unfairly discriminated against by the health system and this can lead to chronic conditions being left untreated and this is potentially further detrimental to health. Stakeholders reported a reluctance to engage with social services by British-Somali communities and none of the research participants in any of the focus groups indicated that they had any social services involvement.

Policing and security

Although there was recognition that the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) played an important role and that there was a need for law enforcement, it was felt that British-Somali young men experienced discrimination by the police. Stakeholders also commented on the lack of trust between young British-Somali men in particular and the MPS, and identified exclusion from school, lack of employment and the area they lived in as factors which made young people vulnerable to crime. The excessive use of stop and search was highlighted as a significant problem, and that this also perpetuated a lack of trust and poor relations between British-Somali communities and the MPS. Concern about lack of knowledge of one's rights was expressed by focus group participants, and stakeholders also cited families being unable to support young men who had been arrested or charged with offences as being problematic. Some positive examples of initiatives intended to improve relations between the police and the British-Somali community were identified, and there was some willingness among the men interviewed to work for the MPS. However, it was felt that the culture of the MPS would need to change to be attractive to young British-Somali people. It also seems evident that there is some discrepancy between the MPS' priorities and the priorities of the British-Somali community, particularly around forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM).

Participation and citizenship

For some research participants, citizenship in the United Kingdom was straightforward, comprising rights and opportunities in terms of education and employment. Integration was seen as a key component of citizenship, however, and there were recognised barriers to integration. Among participants, perceptions of being accepted—or not—by mainstream society shaped experiences and expectations of citizenship in the United Kingdom. Many felt that although they were “officially” British citizens, they were not actually accepted as being British by the majority population. It seems evident too, that although British-Somalis are politically aware, both in terms of events in their country of origin and in the United Kingdom, they are not fully engaging with participatory democratic mechanisms and their involvement in civil society is limited. There were no examples of affirmative action aimed at British-Somali communities and an historical lack of ethnic monitoring information.

Role of the media

British-Somalis in the United Kingdom have a keen interest in the media, both in terms of events in Somalia and issues facing Somalis in the United Kingdom. However, the British media are considered to play a major role in inciting hate crime and creating obstacles to integration and cohesion. Stakeholders and focus group participants felt that international and national reporting about Somalia as a country tends to focus on negative stereotypes of a famine-ravaged, failed state, characterised by civil war and piracy. British-Somali communities in the United Kingdom are also often portrayed as refugees fleeing violent circumstances. Reporting on British-Somalis living in the United Kingdom is also considered to be rather negative as the focus is on

asylum seeking, large family size, benefit dependency and reliance on welfare services, religious extremism, terrorism and FGM.

Based on the research, the key areas of concern and barriers to integration for British-Somali communities in Camden and Tower Hamlets include a range of obstacles in accessing services and a lack of understanding from providers and organisations. Poor relationships with “official” bodies, most notably between the police and young male British-Somalis, are a major area of concern. Young men are at risk of being criminalised and are also at risk of crime. A lack of positive role models and negative stereotyping by the media compound these difficulties. British-Somalis are a distinct ethnic group and are often stereotyped. They are perceived as a tightly knit and secretive community by official bodies and there is evidence of a reciprocal lack of understanding and trust.

There is evidence of a lack of knowledge about how “the system” works among British-Somali communities, and there is also concern among stakeholders that cuts in resources could further marginalise these communities. British-Somali communities in Tower Hamlets and Camden experience underachievement in school, high levels of unemployment, and poor health and housing outcomes. There is an increase in loneparent families and absent fathers, with British-Somali women often facing a “triple burden” in terms of motherhood, employment and managing the home/bringing up the children.

There is, however, a good deal of evidence of successful initiatives in both boroughs. Despite dialogue previously happening with the “wrong” people, there are a number of voluntary organisations that fill the gap left by the mainstream. Early years education, supplementary education, youth clubs and women’s organisations play a vital role in Tower Hamlets and Camden, but these organisations operate in extremely challenging times and their future is in the balance due to cuts in funding and competition for increasingly scarce resources.

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