SO MANY VOICES, 
SO HARD TO HEAR

A RESEARCH REPORT 
BY THE WOMEN’S 
SOLIDARITY FORUM.
I warmly welcome this important report. It tells us so much about the real pressures that are being faced by women today. Women make up 51% of the population, but we have to shout louder if we’re to be heard at least half the time in the public debate. This report is one way for women to do that. And it’s never been more important to hear women’s voices. Women are the family “shock absorbers”, taking the strain of making ends meet, looking after the home, caring for children, sick or elderly relatives, and getting on with their own lives.

Today, with women’s unemployment at its highest in a quarter of a century, with public services suffering under the cuts, and with family budgets under pressure as prices rise and incomes flat-line or fall as result of the weak state of the economy, women are right in the middle, juggling to keep the show on the road.

Women are resilient in the face of these pressures, and while we fight for justice for our families and communities, we should also celebrate our strength.

I’m delighted that the Women’s Solidarity Forum brings together the voices of ordinary, powerful, magnificent black and minority ethnic women – we should take note of what they have to say.

Kate Green MP
Shadow Spokesperson for Equalities

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A very special thank you to the dedicated members of WSF who hosted the listening events, developed the research, planned the event and compiled the report. We would also like to give special thanks to the following groups and organisations who contributed to the research and supported the WSF in many ways:

- OXFAM UK and the Routes to Solidarity Project
- Muslim Communities UK
- Manchester City Council
- Asian Lite Magazine
- Rusholme Sure Start Centre
- Tameside Third Sector Coalition
- Savera Group (Saheil)
- Mohila Asha
- Zimbabwean Women’s Organisation
- Union Street Media Arts CIC
- Social Action and Research Foundation
- One North West
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Women’s Solidarity Forum (WSF) undertook this research in recognition that there was limited localised research into key critical issues that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women face in relation to three key policy areas*; BME women and worklessness, the impact of the spending cuts on BME women, the organisations that support them and their representation in local decision making.

WSF held Listening Events throughout Greater Manchester and the information gathered was used to inform the position papers on the three key policy areas. WSF is committed to ensuring women’s voices are heard at all levels of policy discussions and understand that providing safe spaces for dialogue with women is a vital part of the process.

The aim of this project is to enable BME women and their organisations to gain a greater visibility, voice and influence over decision making in Greater Manchester by allowing us to voice our concerns and provide solutions directly to decision makers from Greater Manchester local authorities and the new combined Greater Manchester Authority. This project has also enabled BME women to highlight their experiences and the issue of intersectional discrimination (discrimination based on both race and gender) within organisations who represent BME communities within the race equality sector.

The methodology was designed with a community engagement approach in mind that would reach out to as many ordinary women as possible, including the most vulnerable and ‘unheard’. 10 Listening Events throughout Greater Manchester were held which were attended by 100 women between July 2011 and March 2012. Key questions were put to the women by an experienced facilitator (a trained WSF staff member) at the events around the three policy areas and detailed notes were taken by a second facilitator-note-taker. The consultation was also available in paper form as well as an online form so that as many people as possible could input.

WSF also made other important accommodations so that as many women could take part such as considering the venue, time and timings of the consultations and providing travel expenses and refreshments.

At the Launch Event ‘From Grassroots to Policy’ in March 2012, the findings were presented by WSF members and there were opportunities for local decision-makers to comment on these findings during a panel discussion. Roundtable discussions also took place so that extra information could be noted and gathered to add to and strengthen the position papers. This report is the final consolidation of all material gathered to support a discussion on the three policy areas and to offer recommendations going forward. This is the impetus that is needed for real change to take place and a foundation from which the Women’s Solidarity Forum can progress.

As a result of the event 100% of respondents reported that they knew more about the problems women face in relation to these key policy areas, 70% felt better able to influence decision making and 75% felt better able to tackle problems BME women face.

The Women’s Solidarity Forum Team continues to be touched and inspired by women who have shared their thoughts, pain and future hopes with us and contributed to make this report a true reflection of their insights.

*There is an estimated 186,600 women who do not identify as White British living in Greater Manchester (2009). The WSF works with these women and the organisations that support their needs to get their voice heard.
IMPACT OF CUTS

This paper explores the direct lived experience and impact that government and local authority cuts are having on women and particularly BME women. In talking to these women, the Women’s Solidarity Forum gained insights into the reality of how the budget cuts, nationally and locally, are affecting women and particularly BME women.

ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Within the discussion about the impact of the government cuts, the women expressed their thoughts and concerns about the cuts to services which they felt were a lifeline and a point of contact to them and their children. They felt these services were essential to their social, economic and personal development, in areas like education, childcare and legal aid.

‘When I went to ESOL classes, it was free and my children could be looked after in the crèche at the SureStart centre, they then started charging. I stopped it because it was too expensive. I want to do other courses but it’s too expensive. Also a crèche charge on top is too much.’

Strong concerns were raised with regards to the free services which have helped women in the past which have begun to charge a fee. This has made it very difficult for women to access education and training and improve their confidence to increase their chances of getting a job. Many women expressed that in the past they had necessary support like free ESOL classes, computer classes, legal aid and resources like interpreters and translators which helped them to be more independent.

Important services and beneficial charities have now been or are being scaled back or have been stopped altogether, increasing isolation and reducing the support women receive for a number of issues or goals they have in life.

Many of these services such as free childcare have now ceased in most cases causing major barriers to women attending accredited courses for qualifications. Many Sure Start Centres have lost or had to close down their crèche facility meaning women cannot be free of children to attend short courses. Women would be more isolated and children would not have the opportunity to interact with other children impacting on vital early years development of many children. Consequently, some women can no longer afford to attend courses because they have to pay for childcare.

LEGAL AID

Some women reported that Legal Aid is very difficult to access; they said these services were constantly over subscribed due to their lack of funding. The Citizen’s Advice Bureau services were also often difficult to use, many women reported that they have to wait a long time for appointments and support which they cannot always do as they have young children to pick up from school. Many local services have either closed down or offer very limited support. This has further increased the burden on women who are experiencing domestic abuse or have no recourse to public funds.

BENEFITS

Cuts to benefits have also made it harder for some people to survive day to day, especially single mothers. Some women found that despite their ill health, their benefits are still being cut and there was a big concern that the cuts in Housing Benefits for single women will make day to
day living very difficult for them. Some said that they sometimes hear about changes to benefits on the news and are worried that people who can’t speak English may not understand and won’t be able to claim any benefits.

Many women felt that policies are constantly being changed and they were not aware of what they are entitled to and how to access such entitlements. Across the board, women felt that they have not been informed about these changes in time in order to make necessary plans nor had they been approached to consult about them. Some women reported that they felt that their personal welfare is being forgotten as the cuts are still happening and as redundancies are threatening livelihoods. Some women felt that morale within the voluntary sector will drop because workers and volunteers will not be able to cope with the overwhelming amount work when there is a lack of basic expenses like travel and childcare costs.

They feared that the long-term costs of the cuts were greater than is evident at present. The women reported that they had already seen crime rates increasing in their local area and felt this was due to people resorting to crime as a means to survive and earn money.

‘I moved here a year ago. If it wasn’t for Sure Start centre I wouldn’t leave the house or have anything to do, I would have been depressed and isolated. Coming here I feel people are friendly and I fit in. I can speak to workers who will point me in the right direction.’

CONCLUSIONS

Many of the women interviewed reported that the impact of the cuts were a current and present reality for them, not something to be experienced in the few months from now. They felt that their wellbeing and opportunities for self-improvement and self-actualisation were being directly threatened by the nature of the cuts. Whilst they understand why the government cuts are happening, they felt that had they been consulted prior to the cuts, they would have suggested other ways of making those efficiency savings without harming the services they consider essential. In any case, many of the women did not feel that enough consultation had taken place around the cuts, or that enough had been done to reach out to the most vulnerable people that the cuts have impacted on the most. Many women recognised that the issues and processes have a knock on effect on each other leading to a myriad or web of inter-related socio-economic problems that need to be highlighted. One of the most critical themes that emerges out of this research is that spending cuts and changes to the benefits system could also result in women and their children living in poverty.
VALUES
Within the discussion about representation three themes ran throughout. The themes of how BME women are represented, who they are represented by and what representation feels like, were clear steers. The women separated their public and personal lives and the roles they inhabited in these spaces. There were very real concerns for many of the women in terms of their sense of empowerment and their ability to be advocates for themselves, their children and families. These concerns straddled both family and community life and roles.

‘Of course I think my voice is important, we have kids and family, why do we always get left on the shelf?’

PRIVATE
A large proportion of the women said they had specific tasks to fulfil within the home, undertaking duties such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. Many of the women felt the part the played in their family was quite a passive role which did not allow them much opportunity represent just themselves, as they felt they always had to consider everyone else. For some of the participants interviewed this resulted in them not always feeling valued by their family members. They reported that they did not want to be housewives all of the time, they would like time to be able to do other things during the day. This sense of wanting more freedom and independence did not diminish the emphasis the women placed on seeing their own families doing well.

‘We want to know what’s happening around in the community and area, because in the future these decisions will impact on our children.’

PUBLIC
The women interviewed separated their private lives from their public lives in relation to their interaction with the local authority and local services. These services include schools for their children, services run by community and voluntary groups and other local services in their localities. Many of the women wanted to strike a balance between their roles as housewives and their roles as members of the community. For many of them, active participation in community meetings with
other women made them feel more like active citizens and community members.

Despite their engagement in their communities the majority of the women said they did not have a voice in their community or the within the local authority. There seemed to be several factors that contributed to this feeling of a lack of voice and influence. These included a lack of involvement in decision-making forums, a limited knowledge of English and the closed nature of local authority and community meetings. Some women did say that they had a voice at parent’s council meetings, parent’s forums and at their Sure Start centre.

However, many of the women felt that even when their local authority consulted with them in making decisions, the actual decisions seemed to have been made by the local authority prior to consultation. They also felt that the time chosen for meetings were often not conducive to the lives and the work that they do on a daily basis, therefore representation was generally poor which meant no one was addressing the issues the women actually faced.

For many women, this resulted in them feeling that their involvement was at surface level and a tokenistic gesture. Many of the women said this lack of inclusion resulted in them feeling isolated, depressed and experiencing low morale. They said they had to push and push to get their issues and experiences heard and understood. Those who said they spoke out felt that their assertiveness was often treated as aggressive behaviour.

For some of the women the barriers included a lack of confidence, a feeling they were under qualified or under-skilled. They said their self-worth is extremely low. A factor that did encourage participation was seeing other BME women visibly involved in their communities and at events.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from these initial discussions with over 100 women that there is a more complex picture that needs to be explored in terms of representation and what it means to BME women. In our social research we have found that there are some generic reasons for the lack of participation and representation of BME women within roles of responsibility and positions of power. However once we explored in more depth we found that there were many interrelated and complex reasons that need to be unearthed further. Overall, there was a strong sense that there is a need for more safe spaces to be created where women can learn, share and feedback the issues affecting their lives in the personal and public sphere.

‘A lot of us have this attitude that, there’s no point getting involved because nothing ever changes’
WORKLESSNESS

The discussion on worklessness helped us to explore economic activity and inactivity as experienced by the BME women who took part in this research. Key ideas of access, ability, barriers and success arose that are important for us to understand if we are to support women to improve their circumstances. Some of the unique insights coming from the research findings point to the enablers and disablers of economic activity and the paths to it.

VALUES

The term worklessness is used by the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency (formerly IDeA) to describe those who are economically inactive. This includes people of working age who are not working, not in full-time education or training and are not actively seeking work. It can also include those who are out of work because of illness.

Many of the women we spoke to had a different understanding of worklessness and the economic constraints that arise from this to the government definition of it. For many women the priority is family. While the concept of working and being economically active and independent is appealing and often a long-term goal, it comes secondary to the leading caring role within the family. This paradox however placed many of the women we spoke to in a position where they are financially reliant on others, whether that is the state, their families or their husbands. For some women this meant relying solely on benefits.

‘Should I pay for my children’s bus pass or food or courses?’

A large number of the women we spoke to at the time of the research worked in low-level employment, within the household or in their communities. Others were pushed into short-term or temporary jobs with low pay and poor terms and conditions. Few of the women held professional well-paid jobs or university qualifications.

Generally women felt that the issues and barriers to do with work and pay are inter-related. For example, vulnerable women need extra support before getting into work, or, single mothers need flexible working times to be able to work, however the job market does not cater for women so some are put off from working or even trying to find work.

One of the most prominent issues is the fact that to get a job, many women have to take a salary cut or a lower level job because of a lack of jobs. In addition, refugees and asylum seekers expressed deep frustration at the fact that their qualifications and professional experience is often not recognised in the UK. Of course, cultural barriers also exist in many forms and contribute to worklessness.

Many women discussed the contradiction of government policies impacting on them. For example; a lot of women said they feel the pressure to be in employment and not to claim benefit even though the reality for many of them was they would be financially worse off when working due to high childcare costs and unstable job markets. This coupled with others factors like feeling they are not welcome in the job market, ‘British jobs for British people’, poor rights for temporary workers and a lack of investment in skills development, means many of the women feel disengaged and disempowered from the labour market. Another contradiction is the cutting of ESOL classes further contributing to worklessness – some women just simply cannot speak the language well enough to get a job.
Women expressed a lack of experience, relevant qualifications, confidence and self-esteem to get jobs and they informed us that language was still a major issue. Many of the women had moved to the UK after getting married and had not had the opportunity to learn English, as many of them had children soon after arriving in the UK.

Women, who want to work found that because the cost of childcare is too high and without family members close by to look after the children, had no choice but to stay at home and be the sole carers for their children. Their husbands, who often had better job prospects and with the requisite language and education, could earn more for the family. Some women told us that they gave up their work to look after dependents and family members and became full-time carers. They said that although things are changing, they are still expected to stay at home and look after the children until the children enter their teenage years and to look after other family members.

Some women expressed frustration at having to choose between raising their aspirations and gaining relevant qualifications and experience and doing what is best for their children. Some of the women previously attained qualifications or trained but then started a family and now need to re-train to get back into work. However basic courses are expensive, for example a Health and Safety course costs more than a week’s food budget. Volunteering was recognised as an ideal way for women to get experience but it was difficult to get roles that again would be accommodating of dependants and flexible enough to work around their lives.

Many women who were out of work were worried that they could not guarantee support for their children as they grow or would not be able to provide for them. They did not feel that they could afford for their children to go to university if that was what they chose to do. Some of the women thinking of higher education were not comfortable applying for student loans as the interest charged was against their faith and many other women were not sure if they would be guaranteed a job at the end of the degree as there were such few jobs available and would be left with debt.

Young people and women representing young women referred particularly to key issues such as competing for jobs with older more experienced people also out of work and the support for young people being minimal post 19 years or after university.

Many women felt that if they got jobs it would make them more active and independent, they would gain new knowledge by learning new skills and also widen their social network. At the same time the women who are financially reliant upon their partners providing for them, felt that the care they gave to the family was their contribution in life.

The women called for more vacancies in jobs suitable for mothers, in the social care sector or educational sector. Women said that the labour market did not have enough opportunities for women to work remotely at home and employers should provide crèches. This would help women to get into work. There should be more opportunities to work from home, (perhaps doing something suitable for the domestic environment) allowing women the flexibility to pick their children up from school. The women expressed a very strong need for free childcare and nursery placements, more opportunities for further education, more spaces on language courses as well as other courses and flexible working conditions.
WORKLESSNESS CONT.

Places where women are finding successes are in setting up social enterprises and in swapping and sharing resources, although there is little funding to help entrepreneurial women.

CONCLUSION

The women from the listening events were very clear that they did not wish nor choose to be unemployed or workless. As BME women they felt they faced particular circumstances that made it difficult for them to be able to access work and balance family life. It was felt that you have to sacrifice one or the other, family or work. The women wanted to see greater investment in lower level courses and the creation of flexible employment that would enable them to be mothers as well as active economic citizens. BME women still face racism and other institutional gendered and cultural stigma. A final critical but central idea is that growing isolation from and less engagement of women in mainstream services is continuing and worsening because of the cuts to public spending and important points of contact are diminishing such as Sure Start Centres. This will be further exacerbated by future waves of cuts and some effects may take time to see but by then it might be too late.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report sets out five key recommendations to help policy makers to address concerns and provide solutions directly to the issues that have been identified through this research.

1. BME women should have access to retraining opportunities in order to gain qualifications and pursue new career paths to secure their employability.

2. More funding should be made available for BME community activities that increase outreach, engagement with services, skills and personal development opportunities and that create meeting spaces for BME women.

3. Work places should have onsite crèche facilities (the government could provide funding for employers to get this scheme going) or the government should provide free childcare places.

4. ESOL classes should continue to be provided to BME women to improve their literacy and spoken language. This will increase not only vital language skills but women’s confidence also in applying for jobs.

5. More joint partnership working and engagement between policy makers and BME women should take place to improve the understanding of the challenges that women face. This will help policy makers to create practical support infrastructures and to increase representation of BME women voices.
ABOUT THE WOMEN’S SOLIDARITY FORUM

We are a strong BME women’s umbrella organisation set up to support, provide a space for and campaign on behalf of grassroots organisations to influence social change. Through our combined expertise across the community, voluntary, public and private sector as well as our incredible lived experience, we continue to increase knowledge and information sharing. We also develop a collective voice, be visible, and raise and challenge important issues that disadvantaged groups face in the frontline.

We feel there is a lack of representation of women’s voices that are not defined by their religion, nationality, background, sexuality or race but whose experience predominately as women has defined and shaped their life paths. Within that we recognise and respect that we are Black women and operate within a Black perspective framework.

The Women’s Solidarity Forum (WSF) came together as a result of training from Oxfam’s Routes to Solidarity Project, a 3 year project funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government. The project goal was to create a stronger BME women’s sector, with increased strategic and influencing power, particularly in the North of England.

Through a variety of approaches, the WSF has been initiating and taking part in local, regional and national lobbying. At the same time, WSF is developing and widening membership of their network. The main areas of activity are around considering the impacts of decisions and policy on the most vulnerable and promoting, listening, valuing and investing in the BME and BME Women’s Voluntary and Community Sector. WSF is also a leading member of One North West coalition, leading consultations with women across region and have informed their recent publication, ‘Equality at Heart of The Big Society’.

Locally WSF has been lobbying for greater representation and participation of women in the workplace and in strategic positions in order to make Big Society meaningful through the ‘BME Women’s Charter for Participation’. This will be an ongoing piece of work for WSF.

Regionally, WSF has been very involved in the NW BME Policy Forum with strong. Nationally, we have consulted on a number of important issues, including the Government and Big Society, Women and Equalities including the closure of the Women’s Commission. WSF has also met with the Government Equalities Office to build relationships as a long-term strategic partner and ensure that gender equality is integral to the Government’s agenda.

At present, WSF would like to form partnerships with women’s organisations and attract new members to help shape its future. If you would like to support our work please contact us on:

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‘Together, we can influence change’
To influence change contact:
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