

## **Exploring Barriers faced by South Asian Muslim Lone Mothers and the Role of Intra-ethnic Organisations in overcoming them.**

Little academic attention has been paid to lone motherhood amongst South Asian Muslim women (Mokhtar and Platt, 2009). Yeung and Park (2016) explain the reason behind this is that stability and sanctity of marriage is of high value amongst South Asians, consequently alternative types of families other than two-parent families are often socially invisible. According to Mokhtar and Platt (2009) the prevalence of South Asian lone mothers is increasing. Although discourse on lone motherhood has been racialised by focusing on Black lone mothers since the 1990s, lone motherhood experiences amongst South Asian Muslims have not been addressed (Mokhtar and Platt, 2009). We do however know that the vast majority of South Asian Muslim lone mothers have been married and become lone mothers predominately through divorce, separation and widowhood (Mokhtar and Platt, 2009). This proposed study seeks to bridge this research gap by bringing together literature on lone motherhood social policy, South Asian Muslim women, and emerging literature on cultural capital in ethnicity studies.

### **Background to the Study**

Over time in political trajectories lone mothers have shifted from being perceived as deprived and deserving to receive welfare support, in order to remain outside the labour market to take care of children, to now being perceived as a burden upon the welfare state (Jørgensen, 2012). Due to this, lone mothers have been under increasing policy pressure to commit to paid work. Since New Labour, UK social policy is strongly orientated towards moving lone parents off social benefits and into work (Henricson, 2012). A number of policies have been deployed to encourage this, including the New Deal for Lone Parents and working tax credits (Henricson, 2012). Mokhtar and Platt (2009) criticise this policy approach for not considering the diverse circumstances and disadvantages ethnic-minority groups of lone mothers face in the labour market. Although they do not specifically address what interventions are needed, Mokhtar and Platt (2009) argue that there needs to be closely targeted incentives on work-readiness and employment opportunities for South Asian lone mothers.

Although existing academic literature does not predominantly focus on South Asian Muslim lone mothers there is evidence that South Asian Muslim women face distinct disadvantages in the labour

market. Khattab et al (2012) and Mokhtar and Platt (2009) argue that Pakistani and Bangladeshi women face ethnic penalties and discrimination in the labour market. Exploring statistical data Mokhtar and Platt (2009) have found that Pakistani lone mothers' unemployment rates are twice as high as Indian, Black Caribbean and White British lone mothers. Additionally, a significant cultural barrier to employment associated with South Asian Muslim mothers is the 'primary mother' norm which they take on (Churchill, 2011; Duncan and Edwards, 1999). This prioritises childcare responsibilities. This norm has been associated with cultural and Islamic values within South Asian communities and is a key reason for low employment rates amongst South Asian mothers (Aston et al, 1997; Evans and Bowlby, 2000). Moreover, those women who migrated to the UK are further disadvantaged by a lack of English skills (Tackey et al, 2006; DWP, 2011).

Specifically, Wigfield and Turner (2016) and Evan and Bowlby (2000) studies explore the cultural, ethno-religious and social barriers Pakistani and Bangladeshi women face in out-taking paid work. Most of the women interviewed were 'dependent' migrants; they undertook migration to the UK to follow their husbands who they were dependent upon. Together the studies found that a lack of English language skills, work experience, UK educational qualifications, wider social networks which are key in accessing jobs and an emphasis upon the 'primary mother' norm significantly limited their employment opportunities (Wigfield and Turner, 2016; Evans and Bowlby, 2000). Furthermore, Wigfield and Turner (2016) found that cultural norms lead to isolation and could be deleterious to engagement with others outside their community.

Together such ethno-religious and cultural disadvantages can affect South Asian Muslim lone mothers' chances of finding and keeping jobs (Jørgensen, 2012). Any cultural skills/resources they may have (e.g. education from country of origin) are devalued (Erel, 2010). Consequently, they are more likely to experience long-term unemployment, have fewer chances of socio-economic mobility and rely on means-tested benefits for longer durations (Churchill, 2011; Khattab et al, 2011). Those lacking in English skills may also find it difficult to understand their rights and responsibilities (Jørgensen, 2012).

Moreover, the Casey Review (Casey, 2016) has recently drawn significant attention to the lack of integration of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim women in British society. Their cultural and religious practices and low levels of English skills have particularly been described as denominators of integration and as depriving them of opportunities and jobs (Casey, 2016). Although the review

has received wide criticism for blaming integration issues on Muslim women (BBC News, 2016), it has drawn attention to the importance of integration in improving outcomes for these women.

Mokhtar and Platt (2009) have brought to attention that community networks can help South Asian lone mothers overcome the barriers and isolation they face. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theoretical conceptualisation of cultural and social capital, Cederberg (2012) emphasises the importance of exploring the functions played by BME/intra-ethnic organisations in improving ethnic minorities and migrants' lives. For Erel (2010) intra-ethnic organisations are central in developing new cultural resources and transforming cultural resources individuals already possess into capital that can advantage them in their everyday lives, the labour market and engaging in mainstream society.

It can be seen that the literature predominately focuses on barriers to employment for South Asian Muslim lone mothers. There is a lack of in-depth qualitative research focusing on the experiences of South Asian Muslim lone mothers, difficulties and barriers that they face in finding employment, understanding their rights and responsibilities and creating recognised cultural capital. It would be interesting to explore the role of intra-ethnic networks in helping them overcome the barriers they face.

Exploring such areas is currently important due to increasing policy pressures for lone mothers to commit to paid work, growing public attention being drawn to the issue of South Asian women's integration into mainstream society and an increasing prevalence and recognition of lone motherhood amongst South Asian Muslim women.

### **Aim and Research Questions**

This study therefore aims to explore the experiences of lone motherhood amongst South Asian Muslim women, the barriers they face in their everyday lives including barriers to employment and education opportunities and how such barriers can be overcome via the support of BME/intra-ethnic voluntary organisations. Therefore the key research questions which will be explored are:

What are the experiences of lone motherhood amongst South Asian Muslim women? What ethno-religious and cultural barriers do they face in their everyday lives?

How does being a lone mother affect women's employment and education opportunities? What interventions are most effective in increasing employment and education opportunities?

How do intra-ethnic voluntary organisations support South Asian Muslim lone mothers to overcome the barriers they face? How do they work in partnership with the wider voluntary and public sector? What interventions are appropriate in improving their services to aid lone mothers?

### **Contribution of the Study**

The proposed study will contribute to the national and international knowledge base on South Asian Muslim lone mothers. The study provides a unique opportunity to enhance the understanding of the experiences of South Asian Muslim lone mothers, who are under-researched and under-theorised. It will shed light on the diverse experiences of lone motherhood and the barriers they face in their everyday life.

It also provides a real opportunity to inform policy and practice to address specific needs for these lone mothers. Addressing the requirements of South Asian Muslim lone mothers has a potential of creating more targeted and tailored approaches to assisting them. It will inform practices of the voluntary sector organisations that provide services for these lone mothers.

The study will also develop theoretical knowledge to applying conceptualisations of cultural capital to ethnic minority studies.

### **Methodology**

This study will utilise a mixed methods, ethnographic research design to capture South Asian Muslim lone mothers' experiences and the role of intra-ethnic organisations in their lives. In-depth qualitative work shall be conducted over time to gain insight into the complexity of lone mothers' experiences. The research will comprise of three distinct elements.

Firstly, a detailed participant observation will be conducted of a South Asian women's voluntary organisation in an English city called SAW's Place (pseudonym). Around 450 women use their services each year, many of whom are lone mothers, already indicating the necessity and demand for such organisations. Lone mothers who use the services have become lone mothers mainly

through divorce and separation. SAW's Place offers many services for South Asian lone mothers including advice sessions, skills development opportunities and advice, and individual appointments. Participation observations will be conducted through volunteering at the sessions which run weekly. This will allow insight into the lived experiences of these lone mothers (Duneier et al, 2014) and provide an understanding of the situations and difficulties they face. It will also provide insight into the role of the intra-ethnic organisation in helping lone mothers overcome the barriers they face. Being a participant observer will involve spending an extended period of time with the lone mothers and volunteers/employees at SAW's Place building rapport, trust and acceptance over time (Duneier et al, 2014). This will be central in gaining a sample of participants for in-depth interviews.

In-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews with South Asian Muslim lone mothers shall be conducted. Semi-structured interviews will allow interviewees to answer upon their own terms and the interviewer to further delve into their responses (May, 1997). The interviews will explore the experiences of these lone mothers, the many barriers they face and the role of the organisation and its partners in their daily lives. A choice of either English or Punjabi interviews will be offered to the participants. This choice is essential because some participants may not be fluent in English therefore they will feel more confident and comfortable speaking in Punjabi. Approximately 25 to 30 participants will be interviewed.

Lastly, in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews will be carried out with key stakeholders including volunteers and workers at SAW's Place, members of the organisation's management team and local partners they work with. Interviews will further explore the role local organisations and actors play in providing essential services for the lone mothers and areas which need development. The interviews will be analysed informed by Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory.

## **Resources**

I am from a Pakistani Muslim ethnic background, fluent in Punjabi and have detailed awareness of gendered cultural sensitivities. This has played a key role in gaining the confidence of the organisation and is essential for the fieldwork and interviews. The organisation will provide training for the volunteering role which will be central to successfully engage with lone mothers. I hope to

secure funding to finance weekly fieldwork travel and relevant research/academic conferences or events.

### **Ethics**

The research will abide to The University of Sheffield and British Sociological Association’s (2002) ethical guidelines. As I will take on the role of an insider, volunteering at the organisation, it is especially important to discuss how practical ethical issues shall be negotiated (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The research purpose has been made clear to the voluntary organisation at the initial meeting arranged with them. Informed consent and overcoming deception will be addressed by making the research purposes clear to all volunteers, workers and single mothers attending the organisation and services. This will make sure they are aware of the student being a volunteer and researcher. Anonymity will be managed for the organisation by assigning it a pseudonym name. Participants’ names and any personal details will be altered in order to preserve confidentiality and anonymity. As the research will be conducted closely with the chosen organisation participants will be able to gain support and guidance from them in addition to myself.

**1953 words**

### **Timetable**

+3 PhD as I am currently studying and will complete ESRC recognised Masters Degree in Social Research before commencing the PhD.

Year 1 Months 1-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethical approval.</li> <li>• Refining proposal in more detail.</li> <li>• Exploring existing literature and theory. Refine research questions.</li> <li>• Beginning volunteering and observations at organisation. Developing field notes.</li> </ul>
Year 1 Months 6-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing and writing up literature review and continuing observations.</li> <li>• Beginning recruitment and drawing up interview schedule for interviews with lone mothers.</li> </ul>
Year 2 Months 12-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue recruitment if necessary and Interviews with lone mothers throughout year 2, transcribing.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruiting participants for key stakeholders interviews and interview schedule.</li> </ul>
Year 2 Months 18-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews with key stakeholders, transcribing.</li> <li>Engage in existing literature and re-examine.</li> <li>Working on methods section.</li> </ul>
Year 3 Months 24-30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyse and write up findings, link back to research questions, existing research.</li> <li>Reflect on research practice and methodological challenges.</li> </ul>
Year 3 Months 30-36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Suggestions for further research, conclusions. Complete thesis.</li> </ul>

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