



Limehouse Project



The (BAME)* Lone Mother **EQUATION**

***(Black & Asian Minority Ethnic)**

AN EXAMINATION OF THE BARRIERS & ENABLERS TO
EMPOWERMENT FOR BAME LONE MOTHERS

by Jobeda Khanum & Onjali Raúf

Supported by London Civic Forum



A summary of this report can be downloaded in PDF format from www.limehouseproject.org.uk and www.londoncivicforum.org.uk

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Front Cover: *A Mother's Hand*, by Annisa Hussein ©

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Acknowledgments

The undertaking and compilation of this report has been made possible thanks to the help, support, time and expertise offered by:

Hanan Ibrahim & Hiba Cabdi Cali, *Somali Family Support Group (SFSG)*
Leman Nami, *Turkish & Cypriot Women's Project*
Zahra Hassan, *Karin Housing Association*
Asha Abdillahi, Shahanara Begum and Nilzat Tarmamad, *Account 3*
Hannah Fox, *Overlands Children Centre*
Carmel Miedziolka, *The Harrow Women's Centre*
Sue Cohen, *Single Parents Action Network (SPAN)*
Caroline Davey, *Gingerbread*
Naseem, *The Factory*
Benu Redey, *Asian Women's Lone Parent Association*
Sabaha Miah, *St. Hilda's East Women's Project*

Our sincerest thanks to the following members of staff and volunteers at the Limehouse Project for their continued assistance throughout the duration of this study:

Hannah Facey
Momina Begum
Angela Chan
Hassan Hoque and
Asma Nahar

Especial thanks to Tim Judge for acting as quality assurer on this project; Zakiya Hemlet for undertaking the weight of data retention when required, and Claire Harding, Catherine McLoughlin and Zoe Sykiotis of the London Civic Forum and London Empowerment Partnership for their endless support, patience and guidance in the writing and launch of this report.

And finally, for all the lone mothers from all walks of life who took part in our surveys, discussion forums and works: it is to you that we are truly indebted, and for you that we continue to strive in our works. Our heartfelt and eternal gratitude to you all for your time, your willingness to share your stories, and your truly inspirational courage in speaking out...

We, the authors, and *not* those who have assisted us, are wholly responsible for all errors and omissions to be found in this report.

Foreword



“It is imperative, now more than ever, that the voice of the lone mother is not ignored – to dismiss her, is tantamount to deliberately consigning entire families to the impoverished world of obscurity.”

As Director of the Limehouse Project, it has been my pleasure and privilege to meet and work with many lone mothers stemming from a wide variety of backgrounds and beliefs, living across Tower Hamlets and beyond. Each lone mother – like any other woman – has her own story, her own voice and her own private ambitions, all three of which usually relate in some way, to the future of her child/ren. Inspirational, courageous, passionate and ambitious, these women undertake to do one of the most difficult jobs consigned to any human being: that of bringing up her child/ren, alone.

Yet despite sticking by her children, despite doing the best she can in the circumstances she all too often finds herself in (as opposed to – if you believe our national media – “chosen”), the figure of the lone mother still continues to be disparaged, looked-down upon and in some cases, even blamed by academic, economic and policy circles alike for a multitude of socio-economic ills. Poverty has many causes, yet somehow, it is the figure of the lone mother who is forced to bear the burden of unjust, and often unfounded, accusations of doing ill by her children, her community and thus the wider society, simply through her very existence as a single person – an existence that is complicated even further for lone mothers of Black & Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) descent. For whether they are simply unable to access basic services because of language barriers, or having to live beyond the poverty line with no apparent way out, BAME lone mothers in particular are set to suffer some of the most dire consequences of recent cuts to England’s national welfare systems and third sector funding streams. Often dismissed as voiceless or incapable, it is common practice for decision-making bodies to construct their own conclusions with little direct consultation as to who BAME lone mothers are and what they need, thus forging ahead with judgments that have nothing to do with lived realities.

This report thus seeks to rectify some of the misconceptions which surround the figure of the BAME lone mother, and highlight – in their own words – the “solutions” that impede their journey to self-empowerment. In so doing, I hope it goes some way to affording her the dignity and the right to be heard that all human beings deserve, regardless of who they are, or where they are from...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Farida Yesmin'.

Farida Yesmin
Director, Limehouse Project

Executive summary

Why this research?

BAME lone mothers and their children face well-documented social and economic problems. Lone parenthood is difficult for everyone, and BAME women face particular challenges around cultural, family and religious conflict. They are also affected by wider difficulties accessing appropriate services which face many parts of the BAME community.

BAME lone mothers are not a small group: in Britain today, almost a quarter of households are headed by a single parent – and 92 percent of these are headed by a woman. Ten percent of the UK's single mothers are of BAME descent. These figures are much higher in London – nine boroughs have more than 40 percent lone parent families. These families are considerably less likely to be in paid work, meaning that many are in poverty. Furthermore, BAME families are more likely to experience problems which put them in contact with council children's services departments.

The Limehouse Project and London Civic Forum believe that greater empowerment for BAME lone mothers will make them more able to overcome these challenges.

About the project

The research for this project was conducted by The Limehouse Project, a community-based charity in East London. It was commissioned by the London Civic Forum as part of London's Empowerment Partnership (LEP) work programme – the final project in the LEP's Empowering Diversity Action Research series.

The initial aim of the project was to identify the barriers faced by BAME lone mothers seeking to engage with their communities, and highlight the approaches which were most effective in enabling them to overcome these barriers.

During the course of our research, we found that the largest single issue facing BAME lone mothers was a lack of adequate targeted service provision, principally around training, literacy and child care. This lack of infrastructure makes it difficult to address more complex issues about empowerment. As such, this report also considers the drivers for targeted service provision, and makes recommendations for ways it could be improved.

What we did

- Conducted **ten in-depth interviews** with representatives from organisations which work with either BAME women or lone mothers, to discuss levels of current service provision and key barriers/enablers for their client groups. These were selected from an initial list of 30 to give a mixture of sizes of organisation, target audience, and location. For more information on this, see section 1.
- Ran three **action learning sets** with BAME lone mothers in different locations in London. These were held in partnership with local organisations, and covered women's experiences of lone motherhood, the challenges they have faced, and what they think could be done to help them overcome these. For more information on this, see section 2.
- Gathered **150 questionnaires** from BAME lone mothers across 14 London boroughs. These findings informed our qualitative research. Full findings are available in appendix A.

Key findings

- 1. There can be no 'one size fits all' approach to empowerment**
Different women in different communities face different challenges: service providers need to understand this if they are to genuinely empower women. Childcare, illiteracy (both in English and in first languages), mental health issues and poverty are the most prominent barriers to empowerment.
- 2. Trust and communication are key**
Building trust and developing communication channels are crucial to overcoming the barriers to empowerment faced by BAME lone mothers. Word of mouth communication is particularly effective with this group, and local grass-roots organisations are often best placed to provide it.
- 3. Childcare is a priority**
Without affordable and flexible childcare, women cannot access many of the empowerment opportunities available to them. Lack of childcare stops women from taking up work or training opportunities, and making it harder for them to improve their own lives.
- 4. Policy makers need to consult directly with BAME lone mothers**
Policymakers and employers tend to underestimate the ambitions, aspirations and skills possessed by BAME lone mothers, and thus stop them reaching their full potential. The women we spoke to have a clear idea of the problems and dangers they face, and what can be done to overcome them – listening to these would create much more empowering services.

This was the first time that many of the women we spoke to had been consulted. Taking part in this research was a hugely positive step for many of the participants, and has generated a peer support network which will continue beyond the life of the project.

Recommendations

Based on our research, we recommend that local and national governing bodies:

- **Support** the construction of a national BAME lone mother/parent forum and lobby group.
- **Consult** BAME lone mothers as a specific group when designing services, particularly where some provision has to be cut.
- **Prioritise affordable and flexible childcare** to enable women to make the most of the opportunities available to them.
- **Work to overcome negative perceptions** of BAME lone mothers and de-stigmatise the language of lone parenthood.
- **Follow up** this research by supporting the emerging peer support groups we have worked with, and by assessing the impact of benefit cuts on BAME lone mothers and their children.

1: The service providers' perspective

"We are grassroots – we know what is happening in our communities. We live in those deprived estates; we work in those deprived estates – we know what needs to be done, and we do it."

Hanan Ibrahim , MBE, Founder & CEO, Somali Family Support Group (SFSG)

We spoke to ten organisations who specialise in working with BAME women and/or lone mothers. These were selected from a group of thirty interested organisations to give a good spread of sizes, client groups, and geographical locations.

Our interviews explored the main challenges facing the women each group worked with, and how these could be overcome. They also looked more broadly at policy towards BAME lone parents, and how different organisations currently work to meet their needs.

The key findings from our interviews were:

1. THE LACK OF A COHESIVE VOICE FOR THE BAME / LONE PARENT SECTOR

"Lone parents are tangibly seeing everyday government policy not reflecting their experiences on the ground."

Caroline Davey, Director of Policy, Advice & Communications
Gingerbread, January 2011

The BAME lone parent sector does not have a 'coherent' sector identity nor a singular body of representation. **Zahra Hassan, Director of Karin Housing Association** highlights the fact that BAME lone mothers "are categorised already as an isolated community – they are very hard to reach, hard to encourage to come out on their own. Somali lone mothers for example, will struggle on their own rather than have to ask for help from someone who is not Somali. So nobody really knows in terms of numbers how many lone mothers in our communities there are census-wise. They are everywhere – but they are hidden...invisible."

The glaring lack of statistical information regarding the existence of specific lone mother groups, points to a dire lack in both consultation and acknowledgement of BAME lone mothers as unique groups with specific, differentiating needs. With no real systems in place to monitor, assess or highlight the needs of BAME lone parents in particular, funding priorities and policy frameworks are likely to prove unsuccessful when targeting this particular community group. For example, in relation to the recent welfare changes and benefits cuts, **Caroline Davey, Director of Policy, Advice and Communication for Gingerbread**, voices her concern that ***"there are a huge amount of people who are busy just getting on with their lives who don't understand yet what impact those cuts will have on them. On the local housing allowance, a particularly thorough and very good impact assessment was undertaken which shows quite clearly the devastating impact the changes will have on the one million households who claim local housing allowance – a big chunk of whom are single parents. But that impact assessment came out after the cuts were announced and passed, and won't change the proposals – something like that is frustrating to see"***.

The evident absence of political or democratic engagement with BAME lone mothers highlights a real barrier for both service providers and policy makers as well as BAME lone mothers themselves, suggesting as it does the complete negation of methods by which to understand the real issues and potential solutions to problems being faced at ground level. A cohesive, structured national body which can voice the concerns of BAME lone mother communities, assist with impact assessments and provide strategic, realistic input to decision-making bodies is urgently required.



They [the government] think they can solve problems with an umbrella organisation – one big organisation to run everything and represent everyone. But it doesn't work that way – it creates a lot of bureaucracy and it means the poorest and the most vulnerable people get left out. Our people come to us for a reason – because they have nowhere else to go, no-one else that they feel they can trust. All the women that come here have a voice. They want to speak out – they are speaking out. But then most of the funding goes to big organisations of which they are afraid, and their voices are lost. What the funders and the policy makers don't seem to realise is that without mothers, you have nothing – the intelligence within our communities comes from the mothers. They need to be listened to and respected – not swept aside as women with nothing to say.

Hanan Ibrahim, MBE, Founder & CEO of Somali Family Support Group (SFSG)

2. EXTENSIVE CUTS TO SERVICES

“The changes that are forcing mothers into work are being made really fast, really quickly and quite extensively. But what's worrying is that the bits they need to implement – the support elements, are not happening at the same pace, and it is simply not enough. For example, they can pass all the laws they like, but they can't force employers to take measures to help people – and especially not lone parents who have small children.”

Shahanara Begum, Account 3, December 2010

With no strategic body through which to ensure their concerns, ideas and suggestions can reach key decision makers, BAME lone mothers and parents continue to be the subjects of, rather than positive instigators to, change.

Sabeha Miah of St. Hilda's East Women's Project adds that when it comes to making changes that will affect them first and foremost, “there has been a complete lack of consultation” with BAME lone mothers and a corresponding failure to realise that “with outreach work, you have to be on the ground doing it: you can't just parachute out and in again”. **Benu Redey of the Asian Women's Lone Parent Association (AWLPA)** also points out that “there has not been much support available from or between other women-led organisations – they seem to be more controlling over their client group and a lack of cross-referral. It would be good to see more cross-sector support and joined working so that can meet the needs of clients in a more ‘intelligent way’ – especially as budgets are cut and each of us focus on surviving so that we may still be here to do the work that we do”.

Without the consultation of either BAME lone mothers or the organisations which work to assist them, the real impacts of policy or economic changes upon BAME lone mothers in particular, are inevitably sidelined, creating gaps in understanding about what alternative support services are required. When asked about what forms of ‘support’ they or their service users require, the answers as provided by our interviewed representatives fell into the categories of:

- (i) The creation of practical and realistic programme delivery timeframes and structures based on client need;
- (ii) Financial and strategic investment by funders and policy makers to ensure different groups of clients and their corresponding needs are identified and form the core of current and future funding criterion;
- (iii) A recognition by national and local decision-making bodies of the truly significant role smaller, non-mainstream organisations play in empowering disempowered communities; and
- (iv) Tangible support for the development of a more open, collaborative framework of works between the government sector, the funding sector, and the “Third” sector for the purposes of empowering oft-marginalised yet substantial local community groups like BAME / lone mothers.

“The confusion surrounding what is going to be cut and for who needs to be clarified –with changes being put into place so rapidly, we [service providers] are faced with having to get information out to our service users right now. The problem is, if all these changes and their impacts are hard for us to understand, how much harder for single parents on the ground? The fact that there has been such a complete lack of consultation with either us or lone parents in general, suggests that the true impacts won’t be felt until it’s too late. Take housing benefit for example – 10% cuts even in areas where rents are not very high could still mean £40 a month extra that needs to be found somehow – and far more for places like London where rents are very high. It will lead to greater debt, more families made homeless, dislocation of children having to leave their schools to move to cheaper areas...It’s a potential nightmare. We’re really going to need to work together to help parents through it all.”

Sue Cohen, CEO of Single Parent Action Network (SPAN)



3. THE NEED FOR DIFFERENT BARRIERS (& ENABLERS) TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED

“The difference between what we do and what other bigger, mainstream centres do is that we listen first – we don’t have a “20-minutes-and-get-you-out” type of service, and whilst I understand why some services have to do that, here it just wouldn’t work. We take the time to listen and work with the women who come to us – it’s open-ended, based on trust. That’s why we’re still here, and why we continue to be needed.”

Carmel Miedzolka, Director, Harrow Women’s Centre, December 2010

The cultural and political contexts which govern and influence the daily lived experiences of a BAME lone mother, inevitably differs greatly to those which shape the lives of a lone mother of English / white heritage: a fact which, “when it comes to policy making, is often ignored – forgotten,” says **Zahra Hassan, Director of Karin Housing Association**. “We don’t have politicians even at local government level who are from smaller but still very visible backgrounds like the Somali community – so there is no one to put our views forward to the people who make the big decisions.”

The specific needs of BAME lone mothers goes beyond simply ensuring services – and the staff who deliver them – are ‘culturally sensitive’. “A Somali / black single mother faces the same kind of problems anyone living in England can have – health, education, income, isolation – you name it, she is going through it too,” continues Zahra. “But when a black or Asian lady is living without a husband and has children yet cannot speak the language – well, you can understand the kind of life she must live. Single mothers already find themselves at the bottom of everything. It is even harder for the black or Asian single mother who is alone and cannot even speak enough English to ask for help.”

All interview participants agree that issues of accessibility lie at the very heart of disempowerment, particularly those concerning:

(i) LANGUAGE & ILLITERACY

Language barriers are far more complex than initially thought, with many of the interviewees highlighting the illiteracy of their potential service users in both English as well as their mother tongues. **“We work with many women who can speak but cannot read or write their own language – so leaflets printed with translations does no good,”** says **Hanan Ibrahim of SFSG**. **“Many of them have not had the chance to be educated – they were too poor, or too busy just trying to survive to have been ‘educated’ properly. So they need to be helped from stage one.”**



“Right now, the most pressing need for women from our communities is for help with improving their English skills. But because of cuts, most of our – and other local – ESOL classes have been cut. I really don’t know how local women are going to be able to improve their English and build up their confidence enough to go and apply for a job. They will also be sent on training courses by the DWP – but it’s all linked – if you don’t know the language, you can’t complete the training. Interpretation services have also been cut – so I don’t know how women will cope with being asked questions about their income support etc alone. We’re trying to help as much as we can – often working beyond our roles. But it is becoming very hard, especially with increasingly limited resources. I am very worried about the futures of all the women we work with.”

Lemana Nami, Development Worker & Fundraising Officer, Turkish Cypriot Women’s Project

The Somali community was highlighted by a number of interviewees as an example of the need for a sensitive and staggered approach to empowerment for particular BAME women's groups. The Somali language, having not been officially recognised until 1972, has resulted in many of the country's now adult populations being familiar with only the tribal languages and dialects of which they speak. The outbreak of civil war and the migration of Somali lone mothers to Europe and eventually the UK, presents a unique problem in the form of a large community of women who cannot read or write the 'official' language of their country.

"The way the Somali community find and interpret information is by word of mouth – not letters or leaflets. It is one of our strengths. Any person or organisation who is targeting them needs to know their behaviour – the way they think intellectually. They have to be tactical, honest and upfront – and to do that, they need to understand their language, culture and religion. Somali people are straight-forward people – but they are also very suspicious of those who claim they want to help them. They find it hard to trust the person knocking on their door claiming they would like to help – it is a cultural trait and an imbedded result of war. So you have to be perseverant and tell them how it is – tell them that if you don't do this, then you will be facing this – you cannot run away, so let me help. It takes time, but with time, they will begin to trust."

Zahra Hassan, Director, Karin Housing Association



(ii) CULTURAL DISLOCATION AND A NEED FOR TRUST

The causes of lone parenthood are often the same for women across the ethnic spectrum, and include experiences of domestic violence; the breakdown of a marriage/relationship; having to travel to the UK "without their husbands, or more often, losing their husbands to war and conflict"¹. For some BAME lone mothers, this is accentuated by struggles with religious, cultural and community pressures. And whilst these can prove positive enablers at community levels through the creation of a support framework which provides information "through someone they know and trust"², they can also pose as specific barriers within themselves.

"I'm a single mother myself – and I can tell you, one of the biggest problems I have faced in wanting to do the work I do, is my own community," says **Hanan Ibrahim of SFSG**. "They would say things like "Look at her – she is out all hours, leaving her children, working alone. She is not a good mother." That was hard – very hard to take. But I continued because I knew my people were suffering and I wanted to help. And I was lucky – I had the confidence and I knew a little English and I did not care what others thought of me. But if you are not like that – if everywhere you go you hear bad things being said about you, and are treated badly by everyone you meet, how do you cope? If you combine not being able to speak the language with the constant, endless psychological battering you get by strangers as well as your own people –all because you are black or a single mother, well...what do you do?"

One of the most successful ways in which particularly hard-to-reach and often-isolated BAME lone mothers are targeted by smaller grassroots organisations is through the delivery of news regarding free services distributed by informal means.

¹ Hanan Ibrahim, MBE, Founder and CEO of SFSG

² Zahra Hassan, Director of Karin Housing Association

“From my own experiences, it is the language barrier and not being able to understand the system that makes things so hard for mothers of minority and ethnic communities,” says **Naseem from The Factory**. *“The first thing that needs to be done is to get women out from exclusion and encourage them to be part of a community.* And through word of mouth, that is exactly what we do. We also provide informal learning programmes – it is one of the most effective parts of our work and is spoken of widely. We know that you can’t push a class and tell a mother they have to be somewhere twice a week: they’re not ready for a condition which puts their children second. *They have to get used to being around people and realise they don’t have to be embarrassed about not being able to speak English or have problems and that they are not alone. It makes them want to come back, to learn and develop, and before you know it, they are in a position to help others.”* It is therefore essential that when considering the language needs of a particular BAME group, the full context of their status, their cultural practices and religious beliefs be taken into account before an effective approach is planned or made.

4. THE BAME (+Poverty=Deprivation/s) LONE MOTHER CYCLE

“It’s not just about moving them on to having confidence or gaining information or maybe even getting them into employment. It’s also preventative for mental health problems – because if you are isolated and you don’t have the support of family and friends, it is that much easier to fall into depression and feel so isolated that it can seem as if there is no way out.”

Naseem, The Factory, December 2010

BAME lone mothers are faced with having to cope with a multitude of disadvantages and struggles which often lie beyond their control. From economic poverty to mental health issues, a large number of BAME lone mothers are left struggling to cope alone with not only their own support needs, but those of their children.

Contrary to media portrayals of BAME lone mothers as ‘feckless teenagers’³ living comfortably off the state, all interviewee participants conceded that a primary feeling all lone parents tend to display is that of guilt – of simply not being able to do enough. “BAME lone mothers already feel like they’re a problem – and agencies like the Job Centre make many of our clients feel absolutely useless and helpless”, says **Sabeha Miah of the St. Hilda’s East Boundary Project**. “Their confidence drops and it is clear to see mental health and well-being issues arising as a result.”

Constantly over-burdened with feelings of inadequacy and fear triggered by economic poverty, low self-esteem, illiteracy, learning difficulties and the “knowledge that they’re going to be pushed to the back of the list when it comes to jobs” (Sabeha), leads to the creation of a bitter and punishing circle of self disparagement. These internal pressures, combined with long-term unemployment, social exclusion, isolation, racial discrimination and debt, is also leading to a marked increase in suicide rates amongst BAME lone mothers. *“Within last year alone, I know three women who killed themselves”*, says Hanan Ibrahim.

³ Sue Choen, CEO of SPAN

“A mother, prepared breakfast for her family before going into the bathroom and hanging herself. It’s happening. And now, with these changes and yet more pressures, I am afraid.”

Concerns about mental health issues being faced by BAME lone mothers is a foremost concern expressed by each of our interview participants. Furthermore, the tendency for BAME lone mothers to either hide or dismiss any breakdowns in their mental well-being for fear of yet further chastisement or even worse, the loss of rights over their children, makes it all the more difficult for organisations to reach out and engage with women who desperately need help.

“What has been most depressing about some of the stories that the government has put out in the last three months around welfare changes that concern lone parents, is the perpetuation of the myths of people on benefits as workshy scroungers and single parents as being lazy or dependent on the state. We know from the single parents that we speak to that one of the most damaging things they see is the day-in, day-out reflection of who the media and government think they are. That’s partly why we developed the “You’re Brilliant” campaign. The government could do more to promote a positive imagery around single parenthood – it would really help take the sting out of what will be very difficult times ahead for everyone.”

Caroline Davey, Director of Policy, Advice & Communications, Gingerbread



5. CUTS TO BAME AND LONE PARENT ORGANISATIONS

“The way this society is going, I think a lot of things will turn into mayhem. Because a lot of things are done without thought – nobody asks first-hand the person who is suffering about what they need. There is someone in a high chair making the decisions and they haven’t even thought to get even a 2% survey done to get in touch with people living the realities of poverty. With all the cuts, the good that has been achieved will slowly be pulled apart. It’s just basically turning everything upside down.”

Hiba Cabi Caldi, Somali Family Support Group (SFSG), January 2011

As organisations face deep cuts and many close their doors after decades of service to their local communities, those that survive are already struggling to meet current and steep increases in demand for even their most basic services. What is more, they must do so with severely reduced human and financial resources. “I’m not sure where we will be in a year’s time,” says **Leman Nami, Development Worker for the Turkish Cypriot Women’s Project (TCWP)**. “We serve hundreds of women a month – but cuts have meant no ESOL classes, no free crèche, and a reduction in the large bulk of our staff. We now have only 2 advisers to deal with a higher body of women coming to us for help whereas before we had 18. And it seems that local authorities expect you to join big partnerships under an umbrella body and deliver very high ‘outputs’ with half the resources. I am very worried about our future – and where the women who we will have to turn away will go.”

The keen sense of frustration felt by interviewees at the reduction and closure of services is mirrored by fears for what these reductions will mean for their client groups. The reiterated need by BAME lone mothers for a ‘Safe Space’ where they can access informal / semi-structured training programmes, volunteer, build up their confidence and offer one another

mutual support, is already becoming a sparsely available asset. And with the demise of a 'Safe Space', comes the inevitable narrowing of legitimate yet approachable advocates for their needs.

All interview participants voiced serious concerns about the long-term impacts and costs to society that current changes to the welfare and financial systems will yield. With the demolition of support structures, free services, safe spaces and advocacy routes at a time of severe economic austerity, the link between the mental, financial and even physical burdens BAME lone mothers will have to bear, will inevitably hold severe repercussions for the future well-being of their children and their surrounding communities. "I think there are an awful lot of problems ahead," says **Sue Cohen of SPAN**. "The answer to our problems is not, as seems to be the given, to push single parents into really rubbish jobs like cleaning – or call centres if they're lucky. But that's what is actually happening. A lot of single parents work outside of school hours which means they can't be there for their children – which leaves their children more vulnerable as well. It really does become a living nightmare."

2: The BAME lone mothers' perspective

"Who wants this?"

Who wants to be a single parent and struggle with raising a kid on your own?

No-one! But we're looked at as if it's our fault...it feels as though we're being punished for something that is out of our hands."

Carmen, Lone Mother,
Bow, 18th January 2011

We held three informal, discussion-based Action Learning Sets (ALS) located in East and North London, each of 1.5 hours duration, with a total of 18 women. All 18 participants will be invited to form a network of peer support groups for other lone mothers in their local area during the course of 2011.

Mothers who were able to attend the Action Learning Sets stemmed from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds – from Somali, to Bengali, Algerian to Arabian and Afro-Caribbean lineage. No age limitations were imposed so as to ensure we could obtain the views of both younger and older generations of BAME lone mothers.

1. BAME LONE MOTHERS ARE AMBITIOUS – & KNOW WHAT THEY WANT

"We need places that can help us with our confidence, self-esteem and motivation – we need volunteering placements that come with crèche. They (the government) need to make women feel worth it – as if they're worth something. Because right now, it doesn't feel as if they do."

Anonymous, Mother of 1, 18th January 2011

Evidenced throughout each of the ALS's was one clear and overriding fact: BAME lone mothers – like many women across the world – have an idea as to what they would like to do. Passionate and eager to create the best lives possible for their children, every ALS participant harboured personal ambitions to which they aspired to – whether it was to get a job, to learn new skills, take part of specific training programmes, start up her own business, or simply find some way of ensuring that their children did not suffer from a lack of economic security or the lack of a father figure.

The reasons participants gave for wanting to establish a new business or paving a way into childcare or a similar caring profession, yielded similar answers across all three ALSs. These included such professions being viewed as: **flexible** in nature - they could fit work around their children's schedules; **female-friendly** - where women with specific socio-cultural beliefs and needs could feel safe, unthreatened and **worthwhile** – participants were eager to relate their concept of community and their roles within it. Such professions were also viewed to being **more open to the transferrable skills already possessed by mothers** in particular.

"I used to be a gym instructor but after my kids, I didn't go back. I'm single now but I've been really busy, getting help from to get a business plan ready – I'm desperate to start as soon as possible. Why? Because my daughter's really talented – she's been called to auditions and showcases but auditions cost money – sending her to a proper school for drama would cost money. And it's not as if anyone is helping you pay for the food and the bills and the kids' school clothes. The other day my daughter was upset – when I asked her what was wrong, she said she didn't know what to do – that she "didn't want to have to pick between her family or her future." I'm her mum. It's my job to take care of it. This business would allow me to give her what she needs. It'd give me the chance to leave something for my kids that they could be proud of – not debts. I just need help and investment. To survive, I need to earn big money."

Anonymous participant, Bow, 18th January 2011

"I want to work as a dietician for elderly women in hospitals and community places. But I'm going crazy – because they tell me I don't have the experience. That I must do what they tell me to. So what now? I have to clean for a living? I clean schools part-time, but because of that, they have cut me off from benefits – but tell me, how am I supposed to live on a part-time cleaning salary and provide for my children? How am I going to give them what they need? If I could get a little training, I would have hope. But they don't listen. It feels like they don't want to help us learn something we want to do. So we're trapped."

Khadra, lone mother of 3, 20th January 2011

"I want to do work with children – but first I have to improve my English. My son is at school now so it is easier, but the other things are hard – they tell you to look for jobs all the time but what jobs? There are no jobs for us. I want to train – but they never help you with training..."

Farhana, 21 January 2011

2. BAME LONE MOTHERS KNOW WHAT HELP THEY NEED – THEY JUST NEED HELP GETTING IT

"You really have to chase and fight for every single little bit of information you can get your hands on – nothing is made easy. Even though you know – and they know – that you don't have the time or energy to be chasing things, you just have to do it, or you won't survive. Information that we really, really need, needs to be more available to us – it's like they don't actually want to help you at all. You have to really dig for it because it's all sectioned off. And it's exhausting ..."

Carmen, Mother of 2, Bow, 18th January 2011

A frequently stated barrier to engagement identified by all ALS participants concerned the extensive lack of information regarding their rights and entitlements in relation to their status as lone parents. As a result, many participants identified feelings of frustration, anger and a sense of social exclusion. A cycle of immobility is thus created by which many BAME lone mothers are unable to move past **systematic, bureaucratic barriers** of service deliverers which require / expect clients to be in possession of particular facets of knowledge or articles (i.e. the English language, how to use a computer, access to a mobile phone etc).

By being unable to access the information they need to successfully house, provide for, or create a stable economic environment for their children, BAME lone mothers face **economic barriers** and remain unable to combat the problems of debt, homelessness, poor physical and mental health, and long-term destitution. With unemployment rates for African, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Mixed race women already three times higher than that of white women⁴, the ongoing lack of clear, coherent and user-friendly information available ensures this cycle of poverty continues to be perpetuated.

⁴ Equal Opportunities Commission 2003, 'Facts about Women and Men in Great Britain 2003', EOC, London.

NIGELLA

Nigella suffered from severe post-natal depression after the birth of her daughter and the subsequent collapse of her marriage. She had no friends or family nearby and following a series of racial abuse incidents at her flat, felt unable to leave her residence. "I felt completely trapped and ready to die – there was nowhere for me to go. I was a single mum with a baby and no money, living in flat that was leaking and overrun with mice. It was a nightmare. My husband had taken everything with him. I tried Social Services to see if they could help me but they were horrible – so I stopped talking to them. No-one offered any help – I didn't know that post-natal depression was a real thing that I could get help with. I don't know how I got through it, but I climbed out on my own somehow. I still find it really difficult to talk to people – my confidence is gone. But I don't want to live like this anymore. I don't want my daughter to have to suffer for what her father has done to us. She doesn't deserve this."

LYDIA

"After I first came here, I worked for years at checkouts but I found that when a lot of English people got together, they would talk and leave you out. I suppose it's a natural thing but it leaves you feeling so isolated. So you learn what you can do as fast as you can. After my children were born, I started thinking about what else I could do. Having your own children gives you in-depth experience – so I began thinking about child-minding. Back then, all you had to do was talk to social services. But even taking that first step of speaking to someone who was encouraging and who was saying, "Yes, we can help you!" proved wonderful. That call changed my life – because whilst everything was falling apart in my home life, suddenly there was this person saying "Of course you can! And we're here to help!" So I was sent the child-minding application pack through the door and just went for it. From that, I decided to train for NVQ in childcare and now I've been a crèche worker for over a decade!"

3. BAME LONE MOTHERS FEEL STIGMATISED

"I don't even like to be called a single parent – I don't like that label. They hear it and think we're like the girls that want this – that plan to get pregnant and live on benefits. I work hard, I look after my family. It wasn't as if I ever wanted this – we don't choose to be single, and we don't choose to be 'single parents'."

Chantelle, Mother of 2, 18th January 2011

The participants across all three ALS's maintained that in order for any real, meaningful engagement to take place between themselves, local authorities, governing bodies or places of import i.e. the Job Centre, they should be seen as "individuals, as real women with a brain, with feeling, with histories – as real people" (as stated by an ALS participant). The often ingrained discrimination that accompanies the label "lone parent" or "lone mother" is further enunciated by the fact that BAME lone mothers are exactly that – as belonging to a minority ethnic sector of the wider population. The injustices, hurts and long-term psychological and emotional scars resultant of incidents of being on the receiving end of judgmental, rude and insensitive service deliverers, is one of the most potent disablers of a BAME lone mother's quest for self-empowerment.



"The worst service I ever encountered was over the phone – I think it was the Housing department. My children and I have been moved nearly every year for the past 12 years – places which are far away from the schools or from this crèche and I had called up for help regarding my flat. But it was awful. They speak to you as if you're a piece of nothing – as if you don't deserve any help. There are some days you can fight it – speak back and try and set them straight. But other days it's too much. But you do what you can for the sake of your kids. And if that means having to go back and ask again and again, you do it – even though they could have saved a lot of time and money by helping you the first time around. Sometimes, it just doesn't make sense."

Carmen, Bow, 18th January 2011

4. BAME LONE MOTHERS FACE MORE THAN JUST ONE LEVEL OF DISCRIMINATION

“I am five things to you. Firstly, I am a Muslim lady. Secondly, I’m a black lady. Thirdly, I’m a lone mother. Fourthly, I’m a Somali immigrant. Fifthly, I am a British citizen. I am five things to you – more than the average white person. So what do you see?”

Hiba, Mother of 4, Harrow, 20th January 2011

The connotations which align themselves with the words ‘lone mother’ take on a number of additional meanings when added to by the initials ‘BAME’. “I hate to say it,” says Kareema, mother of 2, “but I can’t help but feel that discrimination plays a big part in my life. It’s stopping me – and I know that at some point, it’ll try to stop my children.”

A large majority of our ALS participants felt themselves to be consistently viewed and thus judged, as a primarily “black” or “other” women before they have even been given the opportunity to speak. “People are always rude to me because they see this black woman with three kids and automatically think the worst,” says Chantelle, mother of three. “But I try and be the bigger person. I try and show them that I’m not what they think of me. So I try not to be angry and be as calm as possible. Some days though, you can’t help it – you just can’t take it anymore.”

The psychological and emotional strains of battling consistent and ‘instant’ racially-based discrimination by service providers is one of the biggest – and most problematic – barriers to confidence and self-empowerment for BAME lone mothers. Signs of mental exhaustion were evident in older BAME lone mother participants, one of whom, Rukeiya, mother of five, stated, “I don’t want my children to go through this. But at the end of the day, I can’t do anything. They will always be seen as foreigners and be punished for it. That is what they are – punished for it.”

Younger BAME lone mothers however, are willing to accept that whilst they alone cannot combat racial discrimination in general, they can make a difference to the way they are perceived by the individuals they meet in the course of their lives. Hiba, mother of four, points out that “Yes, there is discrimination, but we have to stop playing the victim too. Even if you don’t speak English, you have to try and people will understand you – passion comes before language. Understanding can come before language. And we have to remember that we were someone in our country! We were valued and respected. As a woman, we have to put that power back on ourselves. You have to be able to walk into a room and say “I exist, whether you like it or not. What are you offering me?” So we have to stop the complaint culture – because if we don’t, we’re in danger of passing it on to our children. And I don’t ever want my son or daughter to think they can’t do something because of their colour or religion.”

5. BAME LONE MOTHERS NEED TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED AS MOTHERS & GIVEN THE TRAINING, TIME & CHILDCARE SUPPORT THEY NEED

“A mother is the constant in a child’s life. The greatest fear we have is “what would happen to our children if something happens to us?” Right now, people are scared – we are all scared. And we want to do things – be the role model and give our kids a better chance. But if you’re forcing us to leave our kids and do things that aren’t really of any gain and which only increase our worries and stress, tell me, where’s the good in that?”

Lydia, Mother of 2, Whitechapel, 21st January 2011

One of the biggest causes of upset and worry amongst the participants of all three ALSs was that of feeling as if they had been given no choice but to sign-on as a Job Seeker under the threat of having their basic benefits cut. “They make you travel far – sometimes 3 or 4 buses to places you have never been and for which there are no signs, to go on training courses that you don’t need, don’t understand or know will not be useful,” says Elham, mother of 5. “They don’t help you with what you really need, and they don’t listen. They do not like us, so they threaten us.”

Many participants felt that the actions used to ‘encourage’ parents back to work were taken without thought or consideration given to who they were as women of BAME origin in possession of skills, qualifications and ambitions rarely valued in the UK, as mothers whose priorities were first and foremost their children, or as unemployed people stuck in a recessive economic climate. “There should be financial incentives for women to stay home”, says Kareema, mother of 2. “You get mothers out working all the hours God sends and what becomes of the children? Who is looking after them? Spending time with them? Listening to them and making sure they’re ok? That’s where you get family breakdowns and communication between kids and parents disintegrating. Yes, money is needed – but it should be the choice of the mother. For most of us, it would be our choice to maybe go to work and do things for ourselves when the kids are in older and in school.”

The lack of aligned and affordable childcare services to accompany the government’s recent call for more parents to enter the workplace, was at the forefront of many participants concerns, and taken as proof that swift decisions had been made “without giving lone mother the proper time and support they need to get themselves back into work after long periods of time spent caring for their children”⁵.

Hiba, Farhana and Khadra, as seen overleaf, are all examples of women eager to get back into work – but despite their best intentions, find their paths blocked time and time again by contradictory messages, dismissive bureaucratic systems and a resounding inability on the part of mainstream service deliverers to take into account their specific needs.



"I was sent from the Job Centre to go to T&G – a place where they told me I would get help to find jobs. But when I go there, they tell me to sit and look at a newspaper and find a job. And I have told them, "There is no job for me!" All the jobs are for managers or for more qualified people. I need training and help. But they never helped me. So I stopped going. They make you travel and run around for nothing – there are no jobs for me. I know that. I just want to do classes, but they say there is nothing. I would like to work in my son's school so I can be with him and look after him when he needs me – and I can have holidays same time as him. My son's school is very good – they do ESOL class which I go to. I really like it – everyone is nice and they treat you nicely. I like the mum's group too – they should do more things like that. Not things which have no point."

Farhana, Whitechapel, 21st January 2011



"Sometimes I feel as if I am going crazy. I have lived here for over 20 years – and never did I have to take benefit! Not one single time. My husband worked and we were happy. But then he lost his job and over four years, became abusive to me and my children. After 4 years, I could not take it any more – I had to send him to jail. My world fell apart. I speak good French and English but cannot get a good job. I want to be a dietician or a translator. But there is no help for me. Instead, they are cutting my job sign-on because I clean schools part-time. But it is not enough money for my family to survive on! They are cutting my housing benefit too and say to me "you have to find a job, 40 hours a week!" But I am getting old and am also diabetic. I tell them "Listen, please listen to me. I can only work part-time – otherwise I fall ill and cannot work at all." But the Job Centre does not care. I have cried so many times. I have filled in so many job applications, only to be told "I don't have the experience". Sometimes I go to an adviser and the first thing they say is "what is your passport! How long you been here?" 20 years I have been here. For 20 years we paid taxes and did not take a penny. And now I have to go through this."

Khadra Isma'il Mohamoud, mother of 2, Harrow, 20th January 2011



As a mother, my main priority is for my children to succeed, for my children to be happy and get to higher levels in their education and their lives. But for them to do that, I have to have a stable and settled job. As a lone parent, that is difficult – really difficult. Because you have gap years – gap years of 4,5,6,7 years. You take that to an employer or take your CV to a recruitment agency, and they are not interested – not even a little bit. How do you go back into a jobs market as a mother and get the confidence you need back after that? How do you get them to notice your CV with those gaps – because saying "I'm a mother – I brought up my children" isn't enough. The job and role of a mother is not valued enough in this society for an employer to look at you and think you a capable, efficient woman. Besides, if graduates and trained people with packed CV's can't get a job, what are we supposed to do? Where are we supposed to go?"

Hiba, Harrow, 20th January 2011

6. BAME LONE MOTHERS PREFER SMALL, APPROACHABLE ORGANISATIONS TO LARGE, MAINSTREAM SERVICES

“I wish there were more places like the mum’s group I go to. Everyone is nice and friendly – and I enjoy it and learn. Everywhere else is harder. They do not treat you like you are a person.”

Khadra, Harrow, 20th January 2011

Discussions centring upon the different levels of services received by BAME lone mothers point to most participants being on the receiving end of largely negative and in some cases, even hostile services. When asked what mainstream services they would recommend as examples of a good approachable service, a majority of the 18 ALS participants could offer no answer. “It’s hard finding places like *the Overland Children’s Centre+ – you know, places where you can come and don’t get treated badly”, says Carmen, mother of three. “It’s why I do it – catch two or three buses to get here!”

The informality of smaller organisations and the “feeling that they’re actually listening to you – that you’re not just a number they have to try and get rid of” (Rukeiya, mother of four) is a common reason cited for their popularity of smaller, local community based organisations. “You’re not dismissed or just pushed out the door – I have made friends here – and not just with other women, but with the workers and volunteers,” says Ayan, mother of one. “They are my family – I don’t think I would have survived if I hadn’t found this place.”

The outreach capacities and high levels of trust placed in smaller, yet well-known organisations, such as the Overlands Children Centre, the Turkish Cypriot Women’s Project or the Somali Family Support Group, were in themselves demonstrated by the participation of attendees at the ALSs. By utilising the outreach capacities and mutual sense of trust placed by the participants in the hosting organisations, the ALSs yielded successful results.

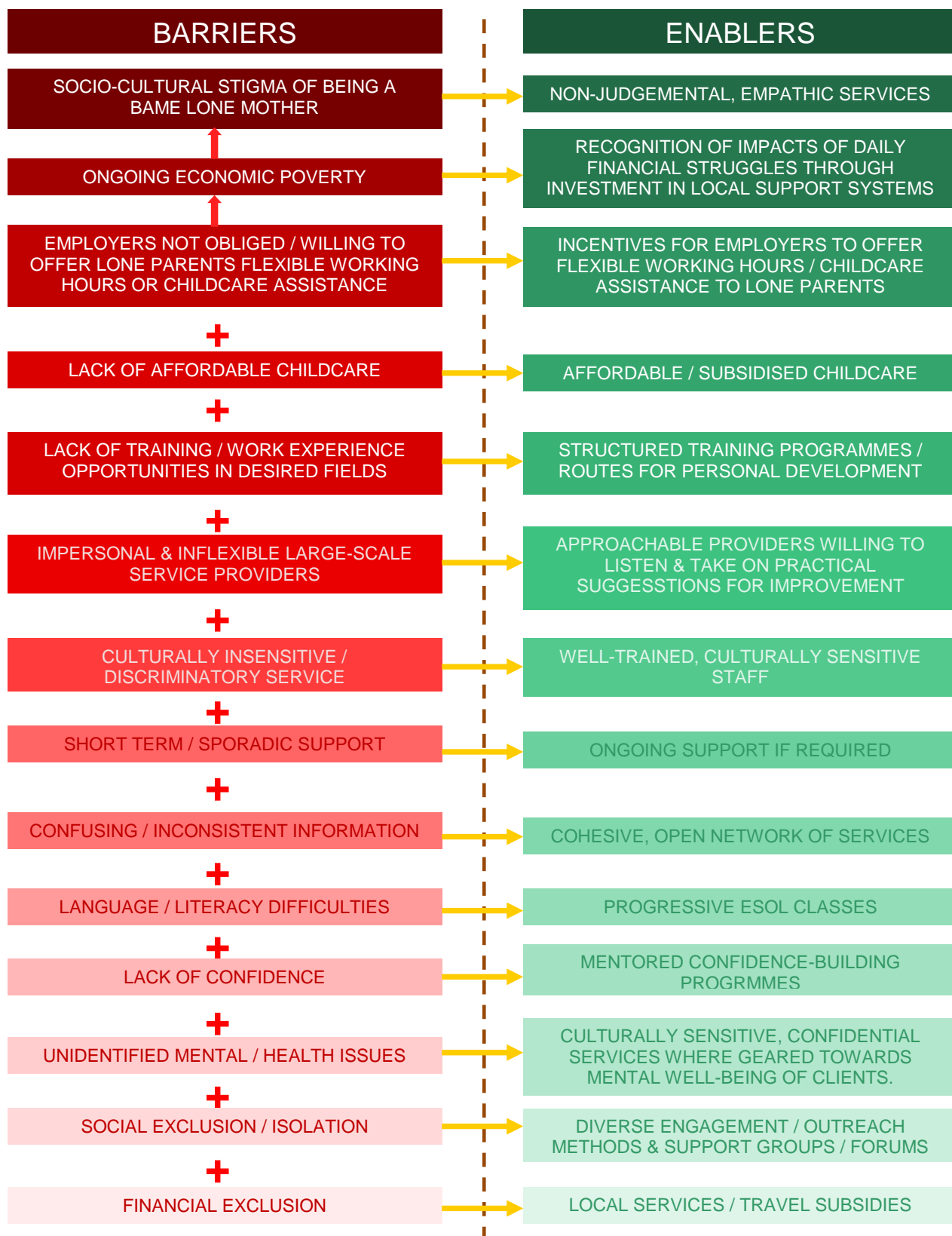
7. BAME LONE MOTHERS CARE ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THEIR CHILDREN

“In our culture, family is everything. I don’t care what happens to me – my worries are not for myself. My priority is my children. It is always about my children. Yes, life is hard, but I cannot regret having my children in my life.”

Zamzam, 20th January 2011

Each of this research study’s ALSs ended with a single question: “what is your biggest worry?” and each time, the participants came back with the following words: “the future of my child(ren)”. The psychological and financial burdens which each of the participants confess to finding overwhelming at times is borne for the simple reason of attempting to safeguard the future opportunities and well-being of their children.

Conclusion



Recommendations

- 1) **Policy makers and funders should work:**
 - i) **To consult BAME lone mothers** and service providers as to what is best for them as they know what they need and how they can assist, and
 - ii) **With the media**, to de-stigmatise lone parent and lone motherhood status, and explore the reasons for lone parent status.

- 2) **Enable a forum for collective sharing** of concerns and issues amongst BAME lone mothers which:
 - i) Permits voices and opinions to be heard, and
 - ii) Empowers user-led designs of programmes and services for BAME lone mothers.

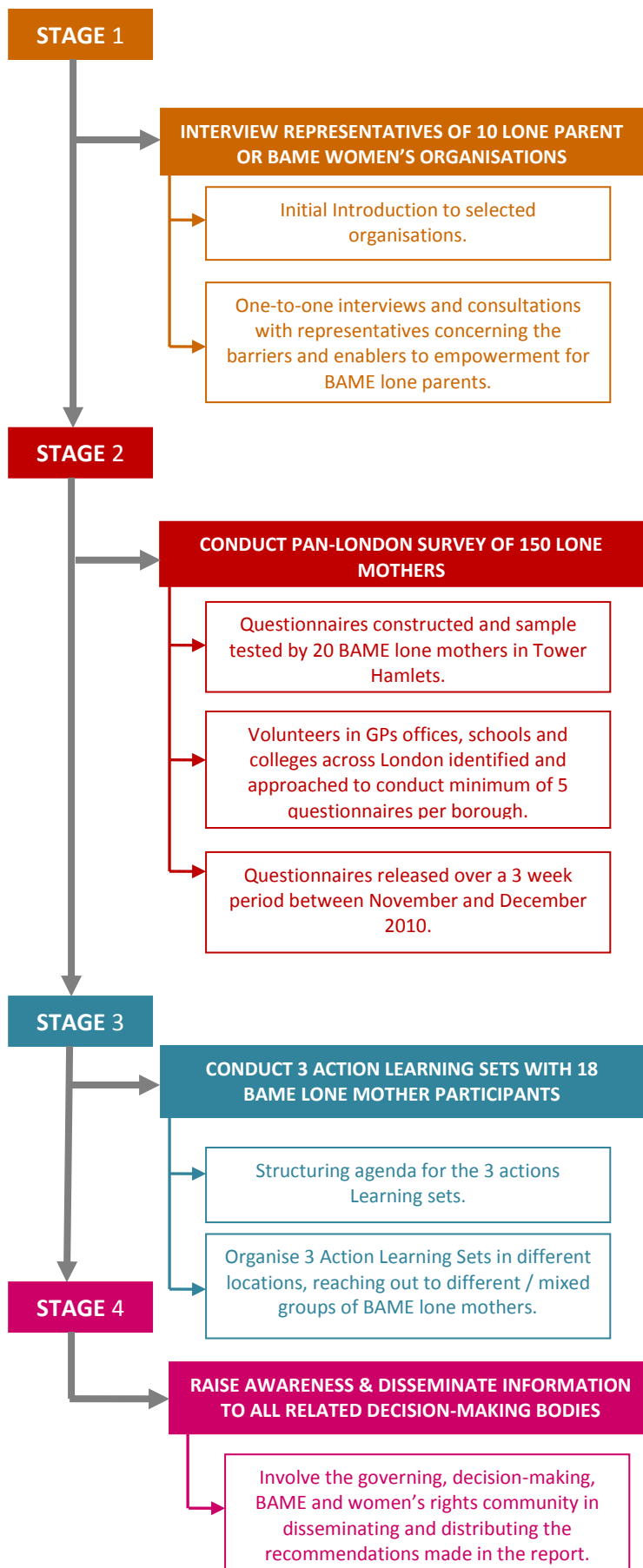
- 3) **Support** should be given for self generated BAME lone mothers peer support networks such as those resultant from this report.

- 4) **Support** should be given for the creation of both a local and national BAME lone mother and parent network which can work with national agencies.

- 5) **Acknowledgement** should be given and addresses made to the multiple layers of disadvantages and support needs BAME lone mothers in particular have, including:
 - i) **Service delivery agents** need to meet client needs by factoring in the multiple needs of clients and creating bespoke engagement methods.
 - ii) **Childcare** as a priority for training or employment programmes, as without childcare, BAME lone mothers cannot participate.
 - iii) **Illiteracy** issues be explored and taken into account. Illiteracy is high amongst BAME lone mothers, many of whom have no reading or writing skills in either English or their mother tongue. It is important to note for any programme seeking to work with this client group, that simple assumptions should not be made. ESOL classes are fundamentally important to this group, to enable them to move forward on to other programmes, training or employment.
 - iv) **Mental health** is a key concern for some BAME lone mothers. The mental health of BAME lone mothers needs to be at the core of any programme delivery so that any interventions may have long term success.
 - v) **Trust** is an important enabler mentioned both by BAME lone mothers and service providers – it is important that agencies working with BAME lone mothers give priority to building long term support relationships based on trust.

- vi) **Poverty** was a major concern amongst BAME lone mothers who are largely overwhelmed by coping with financial struggles alone.
 - vii) **BAME lone mothers concerns are predominantly for their children**: they strive to offer them a better life and want to ensure their children do not fall into danger or harmful ways of life. In this, both the mother and child(ren) are vulnerable to the potential impacts of the welfare benefits reforms, which will serve to only increase their deprivation or routes to help as services are cut, and benefits are cut.
- 6) **Childcare support is crucial**. This is highlighted as a separate and key finding in its own right, as both service providers and BAME lone mothers stress that recent changes and reforms do not take into account the simple fact: that without childcare, women cannot access the world of work, and thereby embark upon routes to empowerment.

Appendix 1: Action Research Methodology



Appendix 2 – Survey data

We conducted a survey of 150 BAME lone mothers across 14 London boroughs. Questionnaires were distributed through existing organisations, and through doctors' surgeries, schools and colleges.

Age of Participants

Under 19	19-25	25-45	45+
1%	28%	56%	15%

This reflects the age structure of the lone mother group within the UK as a whole – the vast majority are not teenage mothers.

Financial and other resources

Do you receive any help from the father of your children?	Yes	85%
	No	15%
Do you work?	Yes – full time	6%
	Yes – part-time	29%
	No	65%
Do you access services, projects or seek help from advice / community centres?	Yes	53%
	No	47%
If yes, which ones	Lone / parenting advice	29%
	ESOL / education	22%
	Skills and employment training	8%
	Other	17%

Which classes would you like to attend?

Answers included: English job training, career progression, nursing, relaxation, how to get work, help with children, to meet other mothers.

Do you consider yourself to be an active member of your community?

Yes	31%
No	69%

What would help you to get more involved?

The chief reason given was 'more paid opportunities', followed closely by 'more consideration for my lone parent needs' and finally 'more information about opportunities'.

Government

Do you feel that your voice/opinions are heard by your local council / government?	Yes	1%
	No	99%
Do you feel that sufficient effort is made by your local / national government to engage you / other lone parents in discussions that affect you and your family?	Yes	0%
	No	99%

Appendix 3 – Interviews with organisations

NAME	REMIT	WEBSITE
Account 3	London (East)	www.account3.org.uk
Single Parent Action Network (SPAN)	National	www.spanuk.org.uk
Turkish Cypriot Women's Group	London (Haringey)	www.tcwp.org
Gingerbread	National	www.gingerbread.org.uk
Harrow Women's Centre	London (Harrow)	www.thehwc.org
Asian Women Lone Parents Association (AWLPA)	London Islington, Camden, Tower Hamlets and sometimes further afield (e.g. Scotland)	www.awlpa.org
St Hilda's - Boundary Women's Project	London (Tower Hamlets)	www.sthildas.org.uk
Somali Family Support Group (SFSG)	London (Hillingdon)	www.sfsg.org
Karin Housing Association	London (East)	www.karin-ha.org
The Factory	London (Islington, Hackney)	www.thefactorycommunityproject.co.uk

Appendix 4 – Bibliography

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- *Coalition budget faces legal challenge from Fawcett Society over claims women will bear brunt of cuts* (The Observer, 1 August 2010)
- *Communities in Control: Real people, real power* (Communities and Local Government, 2008)
- *Interim Report into the Mapping of Empowerment Activities Across London*, London Civic Forum, 2008.
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Websites consulted

- www.scie.org.uk/publications/briefings/briefing29
- www.gingerbread.org.uk

“

If you **INVEST IN A MOTHER**, it is
THE GOVERNMENT who **BENEFITS**.

If we mothers are helped,

we can bring our children up in stable, secure homes –
help them be good, **PROUD, BRITISH CITIZENS**.

But if we are forced out of our homes,

if our children are forced to cope with a mother

who cannot help her child because she is too

tired or busy looking for work and money,

how will this help society? **BY IGNORING US**,

**THIS GOVERNMENT WILL FACE
MORE FAMILY BREAKDOWNS.**

WE ARE THE SOLUTION to their problems.

So why are they not listening to us?

”

*Naema, Mother of 2,
Harrow, January 2011*