



Empowering Kurdish women in London: a consultation on their needs

April 2011



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Roj Women's Association campaigns to improve the lives of women in Kurdish regions and communities of the world. Kurdish women are subject to double discrimination as a result of their gender and of their ethnicity. Our aim is to further their rights and to expand the opportunities available to them by means of drawing attention to the factors that shape their struggle and of advocating for the necessary changes to overcome them.

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Goals and objectives

The ultimate purpose of this research coincides with that of Roj Women's Association: empowering Kurdish women to challenge discrimination and to overcome by themselves obstacles than hinder their development, well-being and sense of empowerment.

The specific objectives of the study were firstly to identify unaddressed needs of Kurdish women living in London, particularly given their gender and ethnicity, and secondly to identify the services and ways in which organizations like Roj Women's Association can support these women to tackle the needs and problems pinpointed in the first stage of the research.

Methodology

This methodology of this study is ground-breaking insofar it is the first attempt to produce data on Kurdish women living in London using methods that involved a systematic collection of information and a wide range of participants.

Sharing knowledge across civil society organizations is not as common as it would ideally be. Indeed, gathering expertise from voluntary and community organizations is challenging and to this date there have been no attempts to compile the knowledge of those organizations with constituencies that include Kurdish women amongst them. In general, there is a lack of effective communication which derives not only from limited capacity but also from the reluctance of some to share expertise due to, it has been mentioned, potential conflicts of interest.

The fact that this study brings together the knowledge of an array of civil society organizations and community centres, as well as of a sample of individuals, is an achievement per se. In addition to a successful exercise to pool existing knowledge, this report constitutes a guide to inform the design of programs and projects of those voluntary sector organizations and statutory agencies that work with Kurdish women in London.



Methodology design

The consultation began with a **first phase in which the focus was the identification of unaddressed problems and needs of Kurdish women in London.** After conducting literature review of available research, expertise was sought among Roj Women's Association's Trustees, staff and volunteers, as well as among representatives of organizations with similar constituencies through questionnaires.

We are thankful to the following groups for their participation and insights: *Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organization, Imece: Turkish Speaking Women Group, Derman: for the well-being of Kurdish and Turkish Communities, BEMWG: Black and Ethnic Minority Working Group, and Evelyn Oldfield: support for refugee groups.* We are extremely grateful to Dr Umut Erel from the Open University for sharing knowledge and ideas with us and for her continued interest and support.

The **second phase** of the consultation **sought to find out what difference Roj Women's Association and other women voluntary and community groups can make and how to achieve it.** For this purpose, two focus groups were held. These were attended by 40 women in total in the Kurdish Community Centre in Haringey and in the Alevi Cultural Centre in Hackney. We are also thankful to these community centres for their assistance. Lastly, 50 Kurdish and Turkish women were surveyed.

All consulted beneficiaries are from the Boroughs of Hackney and Haringey, where most of the Kurdish population that migrated to London reside. Roj Women made considerable efforts to reach out for women spanning different religious, education and economic backgrounds as well as of different ages and generations. To ensure we would reach out for those with less opportunities to attend meetings or return questionnaires we organized forums in venues and times that were particularly suitable for women with heavy household and childcare duties. In some cases, instead of asking them to come to our premises we visited them in their houses and went to places we know they visit regularly at times when men are not so present.



Who are the kurds in london?

Cultural and political identity

In their countries of origin (Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria) Kurds have a marginal, persecuted status deriving from the failure of those states to recognize their rights as a minority and as an ethnic group. Kurds came to Britain in large numbers 20 years ago, mostly from Iraq and Turkey, where they fled the suppression of their language and culture. For example, Kurdish migration from Turkey started to be quite significant at the end of the 1980s as an armed-struggle displaced thousands of people from eastern and southeastern Turkey.

The Kurds' political exile has granted them a freedom in London to express their political and cultural demands. It can be said that the Kurdish community is among the most politicized groups of migrants in London.

Community size

It is argued that Kurds represent a much larger community in London that population records show. Their 'invisibility' derives from the fact that they are registered as per their nationality. For example, the graph of asylum seekers from Turkey peaked at 4,650 in 1989. Asylum applications from Turkey fell to a fluctuating plateau of around 1,500-2,000 per year throughout the 1990s. Most of these are believed to be Kurdish people fleeing the armed-struggle in South East Turkey, but due to their country of origin being Turkey they were registered as 'Turks'. Indeed the history of Kurdish flight to Europe tells us that Kurds formed the majority of applications from Turkey in the late 1980s and early 1990s (King et al, 2008).

In London, Kurds from different countries tend to congregate in different areas with many Kurds from Turkey living in Hackney and Haringey and Iraqi Kurds in Hammersmith. A conservative estimate of Kurdish people in London today puts their numbers around 60,000, with women representing around half of that figure or 30,000 (Keles et al, 2009).

Poverty and exclusion

The Kurdish population in London disproportionately engages in low-wage employment, whilst many of the youth leave education with few qualifications. Another concern is the poor level of English amongst many first-generation immigrants. For instance, a common indicator of social deprivation – the percentage entitled to free school meals – gives a good idea of the relative status of the Kurds vis-à-vis the other two ‘Turkish speaking’ communities in London. In Haringey, nearly eight out of ten Kurdish pupils has free school meals, compared to two-thirds of Turks and half of Turkish Cypriots – the average for all pupils in the borough being four out of ten (Enneli *et al*, 2005 cited in Kings *et al*, 2008). Demographic structure also plays a role as Kurds tend to have families of five or more members.

The Kurdish community tends to keep to itself, particularly through membership of associations which (though not exclusively) are likely to have a strong political engagement. This self-enclosure is another factor contributing to Kurdish people ‘invisibility’ and to the general perception that they are a highly self-sufficient group, because many find employment in labour-market niches such as coffee-shops and kebab houses (King *et al*, 2008). Their strong kinship and social networks, however, disguise many social problems faced by these communities, such as poverty and discrimination against women, and of course, they also fuel social exclusion and lack of interaction with other communities in London.

Kurdish women

Many of the problems Kurdish women face in London today derive from policies that render women within this ethnic group invisible. While equal opportunities policies rightly target disadvantaged groups, they assume that these communities are a homogeneous group. Yet, women are marginalized within the Kurdish community (Uguris, 2001). The intersection of various layers of exclusion (gender and ethnicity being two of them) has thus to be made visible in order to address the specific barriers that Kurdish women face to pursue their own empowerment and development.

There are also differing levels of vulnerability and disempowerment among Kurdish women with those belonging to the first generation and recent arrivals being the most vulnerable (as opposed to second generation Kurdish women). These differences relate mainly to linguistic autonomy and educational attainment. Of course, this is not to say that young refugee Kurdish women do not experience abuse or discrimination. In this regard, Ali M. (2001) explains that *‘refugee young women experience persistent and violent bullying (...) Sometimes they attract negative attention and some have reported that teachers have caused difficulties and tensions between Turkish and Kurdish young people by intervening inappropriately and misinterpreting the situation in Turkey. Kurdish young people develop strategies for dealing with such situations by sticking together and hardly having any relationships with young people from other Black and Bilingual communities. The fact that family kinship also plays a part in their coming and applying for political asylum also contributes to the close relationships at school between the young people.’*

This research though focuses on the most vulnerable and disempowered among Kurdish women: the first generation and recent arrivals.



The findings

The findings of the consultation corroborate the feedback Roj Women's Association's members and Trustees have been receiving from hundreds of women from the Kurdish community who approached them informally over the last three years. Findings have also cast light over other problems and needs the association was not fully aware of and, more importantly, over ways in which these can be tackled.

What are the unaddressed problems of Kurdish women?

According to the sample of this consultation, the main barriers women of the Kurdish community face to fulfill their potential are:

Patriarchal cultural norms

A male dominated community keeps Kurdish women home-bound and voiceless, and renders them victims of gender and honor based violence.

The community they are part of still holds very traditional values which are not always positive. Participants in the consultation shared a critical attitude towards the Kurdish community for this reason. While they felt that the community was in many ways helpful, some members also contribute to the social control of women and young girls. Kurdish women have to overcome religious and cultural pressures, and they are afraid of rejection from their own community if they disclose abuses and ask for help.

'Community centres are dominated by men. Women don't feel confident enough to turn up' (Roj Women Association Trustee)

Many women expressed views that they see themselves as servants who have not got rights to take decisions, work, go to college or socialize. For women whose immigration status is insecure their need to stay submissive increases.

Violence against women is a direct consequence of patriarchal and traditional gender roles and norms. In Kurdish communities this violence is also compounded by honor-based norms. Forced marriages, Female Genital Mutilation and honor killings occur within Kurdish communities.

Unemployment

Kurdish women face multiple barriers to employment which include lack of English skills, lack of education, lack of UK labour market knowledge, lack of communication and interpersonal skills, non-recognition of qualifications acquired abroad, lack of recent work experience, lack of UK work experience, family responsibilities and discrimination (Working Lives Research Institute, 2005).

In our sample 90% of women are unemployed, although only 55% seek employment. In a vicious cycle, lack of financial independence renders women more vulnerable to the limitations imposed by patriarchal cultural norms.

Parenting related problems

The parenting workload falls mainly on women. On the other hand they feel unable to follow up on children's education and helpless because they don't know enough about the education system in UK.

Communication problems arise with their children and conflict follows. In Haringey and Hackney the Local Area Agreements express concern over increasing rates of criminal gang culture and educational underachievement among Kurdish teenagers and children.

'My son is a rebellious teenager and I do not know how to manage his difficult behavior' (consultation participant, 44 years old)

Isolation

It is not always possible for Kurdish women to socialize with others in their neighborhoods because of language barriers; moreover, women participating in focus groups reported that sometimes they are not allowed to see anyone due to oppression from their husbands. Divorced and separated mothers feel also socially isolated and do not always find it easy to make friends and find social support, as they cannot rely on family networks anymore (Erel, 2010).

Kurdish mothers from Turkey found it very difficult to meet people from other ethnic backgrounds and were strongly focused in their social life with others from the same background, yet they were interested in meeting and socializing with people from different ethnic backgrounds (Erel, 2010).

A high number of Kurdish migrant and refugee women suffer from psychological problems that lead to depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorders and attempted suicide due to the trauma linked to refugeehood and previous traumatic experiences in their countries of origin.

'Isolation is a big problem [for Kurdish women], particularly among those newly arrived to marry a British citizen.' (Roj Women Association Trustee)



How do Kurdish women think these problems can be best addressed?

We asked participants in the research how would they like to see the identified problems tackled. These are their suggestions and ideas.

Support in their parenting roles

First generation Kurdish parents need support in raising their children due to the clash between the host culture and their own. Since mothers take most of the parenting load they are the ones who require most of this support. It is not simply a question of literacy but of parenting skills too; and, of course, a question of sharing parenting workloads between both parents.

Support with basic literacy and English language skills

Participants reported that language is a barrier in their daily lives as well as to their empowerment. Their mother tongues are Turkish, Arabic, Kurmanji, Sorani and Zazaki, among other Kurdish dialects. Patriarchal values, higher levels of unemployment among women, overall isolation and the fact that women often lack reading and writing skills are the reasons behind their lower fluency in English and the obstacles they face to learn the language.

Not being able to express themselves fluently with anybody outside their close circles makes them dependent and unconfident. For example, it makes them fear strangers; they are afraid of getting lost; they cannot see professionals such as a doctor, a civil servant at the Council or a solicitor on their own.

“I went to see my GP and because they do not have translators I took my niece with me. I realized she was not saying half of the things I wanted to and I was very upset with her. My niece turned to me and said ‘shame on you, how could you tell all this to a stranger’, meaning to the doctor”. (consultation participant, 52 years old)

Language barriers also have an impact on integration. Not knowing the system they are living in and how it works, what are their rights as citizens makes life difficult. This makes them feel disempowered and apart from the wider society. Their exclusion from communities other than theirs has in turn an impact on London’s cultural fragmentation.

Support to enhance their employability

In our survey sample 55% respondents were seeking employment. While only 16% of them stated that workshops on self-employment, entrepreneurship and business start-ups would be beneficial in their job-hunt, 83% believed that basic general literacy courses (including IT, Maths, and reading and writing) would be more relevant for them.

It also emerged from the consultation that, among job-seekers, those who are housewives (the majority) want to volunteer, whereas job-seekers with a profession didn't. Those who wish to volunteer said that it would help them to gain work experience and to improve their English.

Voluntary work is indeed crucial for finding employment, not only for the reasons participants mentioned but also because it strengthens confidence, it provides with references as well as with knowledge of the UK workplace culture. Much of the voluntary work Kurdish women do goes unrecognized though. This is because their voluntary work is not formalized (through an agreement for instance) and because in the Kurdish community tasks that are considered an extension of 'women's caring role', such as cleaning the premises of a community centre or providing unpaid childcare or food preparation for community activities or other individuals, are not seen as voluntary work (Working Lives Research Institute, 2005).

Support to overcome low self-confidence, depression and other mental health problems

In addition to counseling and psychotherapy a great majority of participants believed that mixing with peers, being active and developing skills would be the best way to boost poor mental health.

In fact it emerged from our sample that for many Kurdish women volunteering would serve yet another purpose beyond enhancing their employability, which is assisting other women and expressing their solidarity. Making other women happy, meeting new people and learning more about women peers were some of the reasons given to justify why they would like to volunteer.

From the discussions and surveys it became apparent that volunteering programs could be designed so as to fulfill two of the identified needs, namely, as a way of supporting women into work and as means to tackle mental health and isolation issues.

'I am a disabled old woman but I would like to assist any woman who needs help; I want to share my experience' (consultation participant, 67 years old)

Participants also suggested that crafts, painting, cooking and music courses as well as sport activities such as dance, yoga and self-defense classes would be ideal to build relationships outside the family and as a first step towards gaining confidence to do things by themselves.

Support to build more balanced gender power relations

Although Kurdish men were not part of the research it was apparent that to tackle at least three of the problems identified above an increase in the understanding among Kurdish men and women of the imbalance in gender power relations and their discriminatory effect is essential. Thus, any attempt to empower women from this community should be holistic and target men as well as women.

Services available in Hackney and Haringey boroughs

Women's voluntary and community organizations provide a women-only space and focus on empowerment and independence. They provide with an integrated 'one-stop-shop' service and have the ability to reach out for 'hard to reach women'. Many women would not attend a mixed gender service. *"Women's voluntary and community organisations have the added advantage of being independent from the state which is why they are better able to support vulnerable groups who are usually considered to be 'hard to reach'. Without them these particularly marginalized groups would have nowhere to turn."* (Women's Resource Centre, 2006:10-12)

While there are numerous services available to ethnic minorities across London, Roj Women's Association believes it is important that these services are tailored to the problems and needs of each community and they consider gender discrimination within those communities. This is not always the case because it requires a level of specialization which is not always attainable for voluntary sector organizations, which count with very limited resources.

In addition to this, existing services that could meet Kurdish women's needs sometimes struggle to meet the demand. This situation is not likely to improve in the current climate of funding cuts, which affects the women's sector across the board. Too often, available services are simply too far to reach for women facing the problems explained above; patriarchal values and lack of economic independence severely limit their mobility. In the case of Kurdish women, whose communities mainly concentrate in the London boroughs of Hackney and Haringey, this means that programmes and activities that require regular involvement and participation based outside their mobility range are out of reach for them.

Ideally, services and empowerment projects in ethnic minority communities, whether they target women or other groups, should spring and be organized by the community itself because of issues of cultural sensitivity, trust, language barriers, and accessibility (no need for groups with limited mobility to travel long distances). On the other hand we must ensure the community takes a participatory approach in the design and management of projects as well as an empowerment-based approach.

If women voluntary and community organizations seek empowerment beyond welfare and relief then holistic and feminist approaches, aware of gender power unbalances within communities, that target not just women but the whole community are particularly well-suited.



Main organizations providing services for Kurdish women

Organization's name and borough	Services provided	Languages available
Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organisation, KMEWO (Islington)	Advice, volunteering, career orientation	Arabic, Sorani, Farsi, Dari, Turkish
Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation, IKWRO (Islington)	Advice, domestic violence intervention, counseling.	Turkish, Farsi, Dari, Arabic, Sorani
Imece: Turkish Speaking Women's Group (Hackney)	Advice, domestic violence intervention, counseling, health promotion, volunteering.	Turkish
Derman: for the well-being of Kurdish and Turkish Communities (Hackney)	Counseling, advice, mental health support and outreach.	Turkish
Nia Project (Hackney)	Legal advice for women (on Wednesdays).	Turkish
Roj Women's Association (Haringey, Hackney)	Counseling and advice for victims of domestic violence; parenting skills, painting, folk dance courses.	Turkish, Kurmanji, Arabic, Sorani



Our conclusions

In light of this study's findings Roj Women's Association sees an imperative need to fund and resource the women's sector that deals with ethnic minorities in London. Those women's groups focusing on one community are possibly more likely to identify and effectively tackle the specific needs of the ethnic group they work with and to be aware of gender issues within them.

Roj Women's Association recommends that, in order to address patriarchal control, lack of women's economic independence, parenting stress and women's isolation from their community and wider society, donors consider funding projects and programs that target Kurdish women such as:

- Culturally sensitive advice in their own languages, including advice on services available for children and the UK's schooling system,
- Parenting skills courses,
- Individual and family counseling,
- Mobility-enhancing activities, such as projects to encourage the use of public transport or visiting parts of the city beyond their immediate neighbourhoods,
- ESOL courses combined with literacy in Kurdish or Turkish language courses,
- Volunteering programs to enhance employability, to break through isolation and to allow women to express solidarity,
- Training on specific trades and vocational training,
- Building women's capacity to advocate for the changes they need, such as projects that educate on the UK's political system and encourage civic participation and activism,
- Promotion of intercultural dialogue across communities.

Of course this is a non-exhaustive list. In any case, donors and service providers should mainstream a critical approach to traditional gender roles across their services, while finding dedicated spaces for women-only that allows them interact without feeling controlled or repressed.

Lastly, it is important to remark that, while Hackney and Islington are better provided with services, Haringey suffers a more notable deficiency in services that support Kurdish women, despite the fact that a vast part of the Kurdish population concentrates in that borough.

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