

A RESEARCH ON AFGHAN WOMEN'S CHALLENGES IN LONDON, UK

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RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This research was initiated after a GLA-led multi-agency meeting with the Home Office and Local Authorities highlighted a lack of evidence explaining why Afghan women in the UK experience isolation and what support they need to integrate and become independent. To address this gap, I conducted community-centred research involving Afghan organisations, 25–30 Afghan women attending ESOL and sewing classes, mental health practitioners, researchers, and refugee support colleagues.

The findings provided clear explanations of the root causes of isolation and offered practical, culturally informed recommendations for statutory bodies. These insights were presented to the GLA in June 2025 and have since influenced GLA priorities, informed Local Authority practice, and shaped AHO's programme design to better support Afghan women's integration and independence.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why are Afghan women often isolated, not integrated, not independent?
- How can we support them/help them to integrate and become more independent in the UK.

KEY FACTORS BEHIND ISOLATION

CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS AND GENDER NORMS

Afghan women are taught modesty, obedience, and silence, reinforcing traditional family roles and limiting their public voice.

- Traditional gender roles limit Afghan women's external engagement and reinforce isolation in UK.
- Depends on the culture of the rural or urban community where they have been brought up and their own particular family culture.
- Do their families allow them to integrate? What are the risks, and what are the benefits?

“Afghan women are raised and brought up with the concept that women should sit at home taking care of home and children. The men are the breadwinners. This is rooted deeply in their mind and changing it is hard.”

“Culturally, it is injected into the women’s brains that girls do not talk and do not question, do not raise their voice and they give this as a gift to their daughters.”

“Male family members act as gatekeepers; females should get the male permission to do something.”

“Things are different between cultures in Afghanistan and here, making us confused and isolated.”

LANGUAGE/LITERACY BARRIERS AND DEPENDENCY

- Limited English proficiency leads to dependence on male family members for everyday tasks and accessing essential resources, hindering women's communication and overall independence and integration.
- Organisations always talk to men of the family rather than women who cannot speak English.
- Also depends on the age of women who come to the UK. Do they want to integrate?
- Are the English classes culturally appropriate? Cultural restrictions and mixed-gender classes discourage some women or might not be acceptable for some families.

The level of ESOL classes

The distance to college

- There are other priorities such as caring responsibilities, or health issues
- Language barriers and cultural differences cause isolation and misunderstanding, with some women mislabeled with mental health issues.

FAMILY CONTROL AND TRUMA

Experiences of conflict and displacement lead to insecurity, reducing self-worth and community involvement.

- Both Afghan women and men face trauma (from conflict, loss, insecurity) and this goes from generation to generation. Trauma decreases confidence and increases a sense of insecurity which cause controlling.
- In many families, men have the idea that if women go out then they will one day stand up for themselves. If they question, then men do not have a proper answer. This is especially true here in the UK where human rights are taken seriously.
- These control dynamics limit women's independence and isolate them from opportunities in society and access to activities and services.
- Domestic abuse is daily and normal life in many Afghan families.
- Every Afghan woman has at least experienced one or two types of abuses
- Other women and family members are also enabling the domestic abuse. (e.g.) being a daughter-in-law in a household would be terrible.

“Most men know the law in the UK so they change their physical abuse which can be easily seen to abuse which is more hidden such as emotional, mental, spiritual, financial, and psychological abuse. This is even deeper but not evident. These abuses are hard to be repaired. (domestic abuse instead of domestic violence)”

MISINFORMATION AND FEAR

- Families often restrict women's independence fearing shifts in family power in the UK.
- Misinformation about UK services: Fear of family separation or government intervention causes many women to silently endure abuse and harm.
- Going out may be misconstrued as immoral in their perspective as some Afghan people see the West as an immoral place, prefer to stay safe at home - rather than being seen as immoral.
- Fear of community judgement and cultural expectations limit women's mobility and engagement in social activities.

ECONOMIC INSECURITY & BARRIERS TO EMPOWERMENT

- The benefits of women working outside the home are often underestimated by families.
- Many women face financial abuse and have limited control over household finances, increasing dependency and long-term isolation especially when women cannot manage their own financial accounts.
- Women's poverty is common among many Afghan families.
- Misconceptions around government benefits encourage women to stay home, but this increases vulnerability to mental health issues and other disadvantages.
- Many Afghan women have their previous qualifications unrecognised, forcing them into low-skilled jobs or restarting their careers entirely.
- Language challenges and cultural norms limit access to training and mixed-gender learning environments.
- Childcare responsibilities and health issues restrict opportunities for education, training, and employment.

QUOTES FROM AFGHAN WOMEN IN SEWING/ESOL CLASSES

- *“Husbands do not help with the household chores saying that if you want to do something out (education, work, training) you should also do all your household work. The women who do this, get tired after a while, so they have to decide to give up and stay at home.*
- ***If we (women) work, then the UC money will decrease and the salary we get will not be enough for life. In this case, we have to make excuses not to work and stay at home to get the UC money.***
- *We are told not to talk to men.*
- *There are many such cases among Afghans, but women keep quiet as they are illiterate, do not work, and do not know about the system. They are scared of negative consequences. They think their situation will get worse.*
- ***One of my friends is in a terrible situation and her husband always beats her. I would like to report to the police, but I am afraid that the government split them apart and take her children. She is registered as a woman with mental illness, and nobody knows her problem.***
- *When there are arguments between husbands and wives, some husbands tell their wives that they cannot marry because they have children, but they (the husband) can marry another woman. They say that their British passport brings them a wife.*
- *I know a woman who is banned in her home by her husband. She does not have a telephone to talk to her family; she is not allowed to take her children to school because her husband thinks she will find a friend who can misguide her in the wrong ways.*
- *The women think that the government will split their family and take their children from them. That is why they sacrifice themselves and keep quiet.*
- *If we would like to grow and become independent, then the only way is to leave our husband as their controlling mind will never change. Which is not possible.*
- ***For us things will not change but we should not marry our daughters early at their 18th, let them become older get their education and develop to become independent.***
- *When women arrive here in the UK, they are forced to become pregnant when they get pregnant then get busy with children and never come out of it.“*

WHAT WE LEARN FROM THIS RESEARCH

- They are hopeless and helpless about their situation.
- The husbands seem to be not only not supportive but also controlling.
- The men of the families feel insecure, so this makes them to restrict their wives of the external contacts.
- Women are the main victims of the economic situation of the families.
- Women are kept at home which adds up to their ignorance of the system and their own rights.
- Their language barrier, the culture in which they grew up and their unemployment have great negative effects on their current situation.

SUPPORT AND INTEGRATION: CULTURALLY SENSITIVE SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Engaging directly with Afghan women fosters trust and ensures their voices are heard without male intermediaries.

- Hiring female staff familiar with Afghan culture reduces discomfort and improves participation in support services.
- Involve them in a community that is familiar to them (other Afghans)
- Ask women about their problems rather than the male of the families
- Being diplomatic in the involvement of the women of the families.
- Support groups create safe spaces for Afghan women to share experiences, build confidence, and engage in activities.
- Involve organisations who work for Afghans. They know the issues among Afghan families.
- In these organisations, they advise each other, can laugh with each other which is healing. They inspire each other, e.g. driving, yoga
- Culturally sensitive support is needed to challenge norms gently and empower women to improve wellbeing and autonomy.
- Culturally appropriate ESOL classes adapted to women's needs improve learning and integration.



EMPOWERMENT, RIGHTS AWARENESS, AND COMMUNITY GROWTH

- Raising awareness on domestic abuse, husbands' support in the household chores, women's poverty, women's right/independence, and how it benefits the entire family.
- Both should be empowered to not feel a lack of confidence and security to control each other.
- Specific training to Afghan families (men & women) on how the support and empowerment of women contributes to the prosperity of the family.
- Financial literacy is vital to empower women and foster independence.
- Afghan men to be educated that here the life is not the same as in Afghanistan. A man cannot do all the work alone. The women need to be involved. Awareness decreases the problems of separation and household problems.
- Women need to be aware of their self-respect and rights — like taking breaks, caring for their health, getting enough rest, and having time for themselves. Without this balance, long-term stress can lead to exhaustion and illness.

EMPOWERMENT, RIGHTS AWARENESS, AND COMMUNITY GROWTH

- Involving families and community projects help women navigate systems and build confidence for independence.
- Creating initiatives for Afghan women at their level that do not necessarily require higher education such as sewing, handicrafts, and cookery.
- Organisations/projects that can hear the voice of Afghan women with illiteracy, language barriers, who stay at home for different reasons and face domestic abuse.
- Organisation/projects that enable such women to know their rights as employees (to get the deserved salary).
- Help women who worked in Afghanistan with the translation of their qualifications to the UK and their employment.



Photo: taken from US news (Javed Tanveer)

THANK YOU