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Mr Cameron's new language initiative for Muslim women: lessons in policy implementation

Introduction

The government has stoked great controversy with its recent announcement that it is to spend £20 million on a programme to teach Muslim women to speak English with the aim, in the Prime Minister's words, of 'building a more integrated, cohesive, one nation country where there's genuine opportunity for people'. The Shadow Home Secretary, for example, has accused the Prime Minister of 'unfairly stigmatising a whole community', and the Muslim Council of Britain, while welcoming the plans for language tuition, said it was wrong to single out Muslim women as other minorities 'also struggle with English', to say nothing of the brouhaha unleashed by the spectre of an English test of those coming to Britain on a five-year spousal visa after two and a half years, with Mr Cameron telling the BBC that those who failed '...can't guarantee that they'll be able to stay'.

Aside from the political tempest generated, not least by Mr Cameron's linkage of an inability to speak English with an enhanced susceptibility to extremist messages, there is, however, a separate, and crucial issue to address: that of ensuring successful implementation. How policies are designed, and the way they are actually implemented on the ground, are fundamental factors in determining the prospects for a successful outcome of this, or any policy. There are, indeed, many lessons to learn from previous initiatives attempting to engage Muslim women.

A key starting point to successful policy implementation is to recognise and understand the marginalised position of many Muslim women in Britain, as this has clear implications for how policies are designed and applied. The government says 22 per cent of Muslim women in Britain speak little or no English and, although the figure itself is disputed, this language issue, alongside other cultural, social, and religious factors, mean that many Muslim women in Britain may be 'outside the reach' of 'traditional' policy approaches. Indeed, Muslim women could be categorised as what sociologists call a 'hard to reach' group. Many first generation women migrants may not have been to school, for example. They may have little or no experience of paid work and many may not venture far beyond their own communities. This is by no means an attempt to stereotype Muslim women, for they are certainly not a homogenous group. Many Muslim women, especially those who were born and grew up in the UK, will not recognise themselves in the description above. But these are not really the policy targets of the government's new initiative. Rather, the policy is (presumably) aimed at those who may not have had the opportunity to learn English or, indeed, to engage with wider society. The epithet 'Muslim women' also hides an explicit recognition that there are many non-Muslim women across the UK – Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians, if they are to be defined by their religious identities – who also struggle with language and with wider social engagement and, reassuringly, the Prime Minister has said that the new language initiative will incorporate those as well.

There are, however, important lessons that can be drawn from both academic research and from practical policy application which would help those charged with implementing this new policy achieve a successful outcome. Accomplishing successful engagement of people from a different culture inevitably poses challenges. If this most recent initiative is to be successful – successful, that is, in terms of reaching the right people who need the assistance, and successful in achieving the right level of engagement among the community - lessons will need to be drawn from research

carried out with Muslim women themselves into the social and concomitant economic barriers that they face, and from successful policies in the past. This article draws on two projects which did just that, and outlines the key factors that led to their success.

Learning and Skills Council research

The first was a research project carried out in 2007 in West Yorkshire for the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), a government body charged at the time with skills development. The research took place in Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds, and Wakefield where there are some of the highest levels of South Asian (usually defined as Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi) populations in Britain. Bradford, for example, had a South Asian population of over 22 per cent according to the 2011 Census, compared to less than 6 per cent for England and Wales (1).

The research involved interviewing 212 non-working Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim women about their views on paid work, the barriers they face in relation to engaging in paid work, as well as their life and career aspirations. A special effort was made to reach those not normally reached by research, through using researchers drawn from their own community, deploying interpreters, and talking to real people about their real issues, in shops, markets, toddler sessions, doctors' surgeries, housing offices, advice centres, anywhere that women could be found. In total, 1,112 Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were consulted, through in-depth interviews, focus groups, or through 'interactive' posters displayed in various venues (inviting feedback on images and pictures from women who could not speak English). This constitutes one of the largest in-depth surveys of Muslim women's attitudes towards work, and their views on life in Britain, that has ever been undertaken. The LSC said at the time that it hoped the work would lead to 'practical policy proposals which could assist them to realise their potential and enter paid employment'. Given that the Learning and Skills Council is now defunct, we need to avoid the real danger that the report on this important issue, of direct relevance to policy today, merely gathers dust in an archive or, only marginally better, sits unused in cyberspace (2).

The women interviewed for the research shared great similarity with the women the government is currently seeking to reach with its new initiative. Although the majority spoke some English, ranging from the highest proportion of 87 per cent in Leeds, to the lowest of 73 per cent in Calderdale, the level of English spoken varied substantially, ranging from those who were fluent to those who could speak only a few sentences. Many women, 42 per cent, stated that they had never worked in the formal economy and had no experience of paid work.

Jobcentre Plus employability initiative

The second project this article draws on was located a little further south in Yorkshire, and concerns a highly successful and innovative pilot employment training initiative targeted at ethnic minority women in Sheffield in 2005/6 for Jobcentre Plus. As it turned out, most of the participants were Muslim. All the usual targets required by Jobcentre Plus for projects of this kind - training embarked on, job searches carried out, employability enhanced - were well exceeded. 60 per cent of those completing the course went on to acquire or seek out training or employment, for example, an exemplary figure given the multiple barriers that many of them faced.

The Jobcentre Plus initiative was small, but nevertheless significant, because it was closely targeted at ethnic minority women facing multiple barriers: poor English; objections from family, friends, and others in the community; caring responsibilities. There was a sound, even altruistic, economic motivation for Jobcentre Plus to commission this particular pilot project: figures from the Government Equalities Office show that Bangladeshi and Pakistani women (who are predominantly Muslim) are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive than any other group in the UK. The participation rate in the labour market of South Asian women, in particular, has been low, especially women of Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin. In 2010, 'non-employment' was 80 per cent among Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, compared to 30 to 50 per cent for other women (3).

26 women completed the course in full, just short of Jobcentre Plus's target of 30. Very few had ever worked; confidence and self-esteem was very low. Yet, 15 applied for a job or training course, exceeding the target of 10 set by Jobcentre Plus. Two even actually entered work while attending the course, unexpectedly, and beyond the outcome targets. It was targeted help, and it is targeting, Mr Cameron stressed in his BBC interview outlining the new initiative, which distinguishes the new policy from previous government-funded English lessons. The initiative's real success was reflected in all the participants saying that they would recommend the course to other women. The independent evaluation of the programme concluded: *'many customers gained in confidence and this will put them in a good position to start seeking work or additional training programmes'* (4).

Key Barriers

The LSC research in West Yorkshire, supported by other previous research, provided an academic rigour to the identification of the barriers to Pakistani and Bangladeshi women's personal and career development, rather than leaving us at the mercy of hearsay and stereotype. An understanding of these barriers is essential to inform policy design, whether the policy is aimed at teaching people how to speak English, or helping them gain work. Indeed ignoring the barriers will jeopardise the chances of a policy getting off the ground. These barriers, and their implications for policy design, are examined below. It is probably most germane to start with language.

Language

The LSC work showed that language was a major issue for many women, corroborating previous research for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that had concluded that people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage have the lowest level of English language proficiency of all the main minority ethnic groups (5). The DWP research pointed to the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities in 1997, which found that only four per cent of Bangladeshi and only 28 per cent of Pakistani women aged 45-64 years spoke English fluently or well. Data from the 2011 Census shows that a lack of English is a growing issue. A decade of relatively high inward migration has introduced what is effectively a new phenomenon in Britain, at least on a widespread basis: the number of households in the country where no one speaks English has increased to three million. In many parts of London, for example, a quarter or more households do not have anyone for whom English is the main language. In Newham, host of the Olympics in 2012, 24.3 per cent of households had no one speaking English as a main language (6).

Fluency in English obviously affects the ability of women to enter paid employment. On the DWP's figures, fluency in English increases people's probability of being employed by up to 25 per cent.

Wider than this, of course, it affects people's ability to interact more easily with the rest of society, as Mr Cameron has argued.

But learning English and attending appropriate classes may not always be easy. A range of issues may render it problematic: lack of availability of classes (a problem that will presumably be eased by the government's new initiative); lack of affordable childcare; and caring and domestic responsibilities for other family members, common for women in Muslim communities and often referred to by sociologists as 'familial' and 'cultural' factors. A study published in 2003 also found that some women, especially Bangladeshi women, were concerned about attending colleges in the UK for fear of being 'westernised' (7), presciently echoing what Trevor Phillips, the former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, would tell the Policy Exchange think tank in January 2016: 'Continuously pretending that a group is somehow eventually going to become like the rest of us is perhaps the deepest form of disrespect' (8).

Education

Another barrier to employment, engagement, and interaction is education, or lack of it. According to the DWP, people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage have the lowest levels of education and qualifications among people migrating to Britain aged 16 and over (7). That is a broad brush picture, of course, and the LSC research in West Yorkshire provided a much more in-depth understanding of the educational barriers facing many Muslim women, and the link between these and cultural and familial issues. It identified three broad categories of Muslim women who engaged with the research: those with little, or no, formal education; those whose education had been curtailed; and those, at the other end of the scale, who were well educated.

The women with no or little formal education had not been to school at all. When they arrived in Britain, they often had no understanding of the English language. They tended to be older, 35 years of age or more, first generation migrants, many from poorer families, and had been brought up in rural villages in Pakistan or Bangladesh. Their families could not afford to send them to school or, because they were girls, they were not expected to go to school. When they became teenagers, they were often educated by their mothers, being taught, really, about only two key issues: the Islamic faith; and 'how to be a good wife' - cooking, cleaning, looking after children. A 46 year old Pakistani mother of three epitomised this with her comment to the researchers:

'I only went to school for a few months. The idea of working was never a consideration, it was expected that you get married and look after the children, school is not important to our families for us [women]'.

The second group identified in the LSC research *had* been educated, however, either in Pakistan, Bangladesh or in Britain, but had not been able to use their qualifications. 38 per cent of those interviewed had formal qualifications from school, at standard or advanced level, or even degrees and, although women educated in Britain had different educational experiences to those educated in Pakistan and Bangladesh, there was a common denominator between them: they were *not permitted to continue their education beyond a certain level*. Some, of course, might not have wanted to continue to study, but many of those interviewed explained that they did not have a choice. *All* said that their education was cut short by the fact that they 'had to get married', or

sometimes to help to care for members of their extended family. All of the women had had arranged marriages and explained that as they were growing up they always knew that at some stage they would be expected to get married. A Bangladeshi mother of five, aged 35, told the researchers: *'I dreamt of education, but it was not an option for me. I knew I'd have to get married at a young age and had to leave dreams of education and qualifications behind'*.

For some, domesticity was perceived as a life choice. They stated that they preferred being a wife and a mother to any other role. 10 per cent of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women responding to the interactive poster displays indicated that they identified with the image of a woman who *'is happy looking after the family and doesn't want to work'*.

Then there was a third group, around 11 per cent of the total, comprised of women usually in their early twenties, who had been educated to at least degree level, often in England but also in Pakistan and Bangladesh too. Around two thirds of these were highly ambitious, motivated, and had decided that they were going to have a career and were going to delay both marriage and childbirth. Some of these well-educated young women had what they referred to as 'love' partners and had decided to eschew an arranged marriage. The key difference between these and the other women was, unsurprisingly, social class. The well-educated were more likely to come from 'professional and managerial' families, whose fathers worked in relatively well paid occupations and within which, often, other female members of their family - mothers, sisters and aunties - had worked too, providing alternative, working, role models for the women.

Cultural and societal norms

A key factor to understand in the design of any policy aimed at Muslim women is the importance of cultural and social norms. This is axiomatic, of course, but the depth of their influence and implications is easily overlooked when the viewing is from a western perspective.

The impact of these factors is pervasive, manifesting itself at different levels. At its most direct level, there are peer pressure influences. Some non-working women interviewed in the LSC research who had worked in the past in this country explained that when they carried out paid work they were perceived to be 'different', almost outcasts, by their own community. This was particularly noticeable amongst older, first generation migrants who had worked when they first came to the country up to forty years ago. A 60 year old woman told a focus group, for example, that she had worked at a local confectionary factory when she first arrived in Britain. Other Asian women in her community would talk about her when she went into the local shops, saying that she was *'a loose woman'*. Talking about her memories of that time she said:

'...you see they didn't know about work, they had never worked, they assumed that I was going to a place that was full of men. Actually all the workers on the production line were women'.

Such cultural differences, and the isolation from the rest of society that is fostered by them, manifest themselves in a range of ways which can be deleterious to engagement with others outside their own community. In the Jobcentre Plus pilot in Sheffield, for example, some women were not sure when it was appropriate to shake hands, or when to look or smile at someone they did not know. This is why so much of the pioneering project in Sheffield focused on life planning, confidence

building and, crucially, used mentors, drawn from the communities the women themselves belonged to, alongside the 'traditional' job searching advice. The mentors facilitated 'mentoring circles', enabling the women to support each other, and share issues in small groups while developing their personal action plan. A further, crucial element in the Jobcentre Plus pilot was work shadowing, so that the women could find out about the workplace for themselves in a supported way. Sessions on confidence building were a clear hit, far outshining any other activity in terms of popularity, demonstrating their usefulness in relation to learning and engagement.

Aspirations

The LSC research in West Yorkshire also provided a great insight into the aspirations of the women. We had heard about the barriers they faced, but what did they want to achieve in their lives? Did anything significant emerge above the parapet of the stereotypes? Again different broad categories of women emerged from the interviews but, in relation to most cases, Mr Cameron's objective of providing 'genuine opportunity for people' hits a salient note.

One group, around 11 per cent of those interviewed, had very low aspirations for the future. Women falling into this category tended to be comprised of those without any formal education, and those with formal education and qualifications but whose education was halted through arranged marriages and subsequent childbirth.

There was a second group as well, and it was a big group. These were women who *had* ideas and ambitions when they were at school about jobs they would like to pursue, but did not manage to fulfil their ambitions. Again, this was primarily because they married at a young age and had children. Over 40 per cent of women interviewed fell into this category. Many of these wanted to work, but were unable to do so, facing a range of different, sometimes multiple, barriers: a lack of affordable childcare; potential earnings being less than welfare benefits; family pressure to not work; and a lack of confidence. Many had little, if any, work experience, and a lack of relevant qualifications. A really crucial factor was that they often lacked confidence and knowledge about how to find and apply for a job and, even, what a job entails on a daily basis.

There was another category of South Asian women at other end of the spectrum. Although less than 10 per cent of those interviewed, these were women who were very ambitious, with long standing aspirations, often held since they were at school. They were well-educated, to the equivalent of advanced school or college certificates or degree standard. But again, there were constraints, eloquently summarised in the LSC report:

'The likelihood of these women entering the workplace will be determined by a series of factors: how soon they marry; the views of their husband and his family towards women working in the paid labour market; how quickly after marriage they have children; the level of support from their friends, family and the surrounding community; as well as their own determination to succeed.'

Key Lessons for implementation

Alongside the insights provided by the LSC research, the Jobcentre Plus project pioneered in Sheffield provided a 'model of engagement' designed specifically to overcome some of the very obvious barriers that many Muslim women, with and without qualifications, so clearly face. The key

elements in this, all of which could contribute to the chances of success for the government in its teaching English initiative, are discussed below.

Pro-active recruitment

The first task in any social intervention of this type is recruiting the participants onto it. This is not always as easy as it sounds. Recruitment of participants onto the Jobcentre Plus project in Sheffield was a fairly difficult process. In Sheffield, a multi-faceted, pro-active approach was adopted: contact was made with numerous community groups in the three parts of the city where the project was being run (all of which had large South Asian populations); posters were displayed in prominent places where women were likely to see them, and leaflets distributed; and an outreach worker drawn from the same community as the potential recruits to the programme was employed to visit places where potential participants could be found, such as shops, schools, housing offices, mosques, doctors' surgeries, community centres. Outreach workers literally walked around the communities, engaging with potential participants and recruiting them. The outreach workers proved by far to be the most fruitful source of customer recruitment, epitomising the pro-active approach.

Whichever agencies are charged with implementation of the government's new teaching English initiative will need to be similarly pro-active in recruitment, given the cultural and familial pressures some of the women face. Moreover the approach will need to be similarly multi-faceted, using advertising in appropriate languages and in appropriate places; enlisting appropriate community organisations which are in touch with women; and, possibly most important of all, deploying outreach workers to bolster recruitment. Overall, the way to do it could be summarised in the phrase: go to the customers, do not wait for them to approach you.

Maintaining attendance

It is one thing to recruit onto a programme but it is quite another to maintain attendance, no matter who the client group, though this is especially the case with groups of people not used to this kind of participatory engagement. Again, the approach in Sheffield was pro-active and, again, it was successful. One way in which this was achieved was that each of the women was contacted prior to each session by 'phone and/or text to remind them of the training.

And another way in which it was achieved – although critics might decry this as profligacy with resources, or alternatively a representation of the nanny state – was that participants particularly lacking in confidence were directly transported to and from the training venues. It is important to understand the rationale behind this: some participants had never in their lives been involved in something like this; some needed a bus to get them to the training venue but had never got on a bus before, some didn't even know how to get on a bus.

The location is important too. There is little point in asking women, often facing multiple barriers to social engagement of any kind, to attend an English class at the opposite side of a city to where they live. The venues for such sessions need to be close to their homes, and in 'non-threatening' places such as community group venues, to ensure that participants, who we have already seen may often lack confidence, feel comfortable and, through this, to maximise attendance. Reassuringly, the government appears to recognise this, and the language sessions are reported to be planned in

homes, schools, and community facilities, with travel and childcare costs being covered. Nevertheless, the practicalities of this are important, and getting an appropriate location and venue will contribute significantly to the chances of success.

Individualised action plan

The Jobcentre Plus initiative in Sheffield also recognised the importance of a tailored, individualised approach to assisting the women on the programme. For each participant, an action plan was drawn up in order to identify specific needs and requirements for moving closer to the labour market. These were reviewed throughout, and at the end of each of the 12 half-day weekly sessions that were run, with mentors assisting the participants to meet the targets set out in the action plan. Again, there is a common sense rationale for this: when people are at such a distance from employment, or in the case of the government's new initiative, at such a distance from fluency in English and concomitant social engagement, they cannot be herded as one towards a learning destination.

Confidence building, life planning, and assertiveness.

Another crucial lesson to draw out of the Jobcentre Plus initiative is that securing progress and success is not *just* about delivering the appropriate technical learning material, be it English language sessions, or employability training. Rather, it is about recognising the social context in which people live their lives and responding to that in a supportive and appropriate way. In relation to an employability project, this means delivering more than the usual exercises in CV writing, job searching, and presentational skills. Women need to be helped to engage in worlds, like that of paid employment, or learning to speak English, which they may have little knowledge of. This was recognised in the Jobcentre Plus project in Sheffield through an emphasis within the sessions on confidence building, life planning, and assertiveness. The same applies to teaching English: a 'holistic', focus is needed in the government's new language initiative.

Engaging with Muslim men

The government's new language initiative is aimed at Muslim women, as was the Jobcentre Plus employability training programme. But of key importance, as demonstrated by the LSC research, is engagement with men from the community as well. Many women in West Yorkshire explained that their husbands and family thought that there was no financial need for women to work; that the responsibility for supporting the family financially should fall upon the male. There is no point in pretending that this constraining factor does not exist. There is, as ethnographers might say, a cultural dominance of the 'male breadwinner model' within much of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi community. The government itself has seemingly recognised this. In an announcement made simultaneously with their language initiative aimed at women, the government also said it would launch a review of the role of Britain's religious councils, including Sharia courts, with the BBC reporting this as an effort to 'confront men' who exert 'damaging control over their wives, sisters and daughters'. Indeed, the Prime Minister told the BBC in his interview outlining the language initiative that some 'menfolk' in Muslim communities were fostering segregation by preventing women from learning English or leaving home alone, and that could not be allowed to continue. The LSC report in fact emphasised the importance of the challenging task of addressing stereotypical perceptions of gender roles amongst Muslim men, alongside initiatives targeted at supporting Muslim women.

Conclusion

Shorn of its potential punitive elements, a government investment to help women speak English is, in itself, a positive development. It would help women to develop and enhance their social engagement, should they wish to. It would help them enter the world of paid work. Moreover, it would benefit the economy as a whole. The potential for employment for non-English speakers is considerably restricted and, as noted earlier, the participation rate of Muslim women in the labour market is historically very low. This non-economic activity is a loss for the individual and for the economy as a whole. The National Audit Office, for example, estimated that the overall cost to the economy from failure to fully use the talents of people from ethnic minorities could be around £8.6 billion annually. Given the complex and deep-seated barriers to engagement experienced by some Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, and the often all-embracing influence of cultural, societal, and familial norms as borne out by the LSC research in West Yorkshire, it is particularly important that policy is designed and implemented in such a way as to maximise its chances of a successful outcome. An understanding of those barriers is crucial to that, as is learning from past programmes which have demonstrated a fruitful outcome with the same community. Both are available through work already carried out for two of the government's own agencies. The opportunity, then, is available to deliver a non-contentious and, potentially, hugely rewarding educational intervention to teach women English and, even, maybe make progress towards a 'more integrated, cohesive, one nation country', providing it is done in the right way. If it is not, the very least of the discontent that might ensue is a poor return on £20 million of taxpayers' money.

Endnotes

1. 2011 UK Census Ethnic group, local authorities in England and Wales.
2. See:
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