

Somali Community and the state of Employment

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Introduction

Over the last five years, overall unemployment rates have been steadily declining. In February 2015, the unemployment rate was reported to have dropped to a six and half year low and the number of job vacancies rose up to 730,000 (Chan 2015). The present unemployment rate is the lowest since the 2008 financial crisis. This is a significant achievement as unemployment was at 1.72 million in 2008 and this had a direct link to the rising number of people claiming Job Seekers Allowance (ONS 2014). But this progress is not being enjoyed by British people from ethnic minority backgrounds. The number of unemployed young people from ethnic minority background, for example, rose to almost 50% in the past 5 years, which is an indication that marginalised sections of British society are potentially facing further marginalisation. This dichotomy is especially concerning for ethnic minorities from refugee backgrounds who've been hit even harder by the cost-of-living crisis compounded by an enduring longevity of unemployment. This report provides an overview of current employment conditions of the Somali community in London. It is compiled from 6 focus groups with Somali community members across London and extensive consultations with CSO member organisations and community leaders conducted between 2014-2015, in addition to the use of existing relevant literature. It highlights the entrenched levels of unemployment within the Somali community, contributing political and socio-economic factors and how that has a compelling effect on their standards of living.

Unemployment within the Somali community: context and barriers

Officially, the total population of Somalis in England and Wales are just over a 101,000 and this number is derived from the 2011 Census. The figure is likely to be much higher than that when unaccounted numbers of extended relatives living within many individual households are included. Still, even within this figure only 26,600 are estimated to be in employment indicating that nearly 75% of the Somali population is unemployed.

Historically, early Somali settlers in the UK in the late 19th century worked as seamen and as naval work declined, they searched for factory work in industrial cities. Many however became unemployed which affected their social progression (OSF 2014). Refugees that arrived after the Somali civil war faced similar difficulties in the UK job market despite evidence of qualifications and white-collar work experience back home. The non-recognition of qualifications from Somalia seems to be one of the key persistent barriers to employment, which is fuelled by the cut in programmes that supported people by providing a free evaluation of their qualifications compared with British equivalents. Many Somalis who had previous qualifications found their diplomas were not recognised and were faced with either re-qualifying and/or reassessing the type of employment open to them (Somali Development Services Report 2004). This has had a direct impact on the outlook and social integration of Somali households and has likely contributed to a lack of confidence and self-esteem. There is therefore a seemingly endemic circular problem that stems from unfulfilled employment potential.

There are also logistical barriers that prevent members of the Somali community to find work. Women in particular, who've primarily been homemakers, find that they are required to find work once their children have grown. But for the majority of them who have not been in paid work find the processes and procedures for finding employment extremely daunting.

Those who do find employment often work in elementary occupations at the lower levels of social work, health and human services, customer service, administration, transportation and storage. Many more are likely to provide cleaning services or work in manual labour.

These jobs offer basic pay, little training and no progression. Regardless of age, gender or skill levels, the Somali community have the lowest employment rates compared to other migrant groups.

CSO's focus groups and community consultations as well as previous research have identified some of the persistent barriers to employment that Somalis feel they face as:

- Lack of trust in authorities and local government and lack of confidence in approaching organisations.
- Lack of employees from the community in senior positions in local government.
- Lack of language skills, especially for new arrivals but also for some of the older generations, who still perceive themselves as recent immigrants and this affects their potential to engage with the labour market.
- Structural lack of employment opportunities
- Lack of recognition of qualifications some Somalis have in relation to the job market.
- Lack of role models, particularly for young Somalis who have become used to seeing the older generation's reliance on the welfare system
- Lack of childcare facilities for mothers with young children that are available within their financial means.
- Negative stereotyping of young Somali men and experiences of discrimination, both perceived and actual
- Regulatory frameworks in the United Kingdom and the inability to raise capital affect the entrepreneurial potential of many Somalis with an aptitude for self-employment. This issue is especially affected by religious regulations that prohibit the usage of interest loans.

It is noteworthy that compared to other European countries, the UK provides a regulatory framework that is easier to access with regards to self-employment opportunities and this is part of the reason for many Somalis with citizenships from other European countries resettling in the UK. But for many of them, the intricate processes still prove to be difficult to navigate.

The deep-rooted levels of unemployment are likely to have further detrimental effects on their state of mental well-being and physical health as well as facing isolation, low self-esteem, depression and poverty (OSF 2014).

The socio-economic ripple effect of unemployment

Over 80 percent of Somali pupils in London qualify for free school meals. In Waltham Forest, home to nearly 4,000 Somalis, 73% live in households on benefits. More than 50% of British Somalis in London rent from local councils, which is the highest proportion of any foreign-born population (Economist 2013). In the eastern borough of Tower Hamlets, the 2010 Census data showed that Somalis were twice as likely as white Britons to be behind with the rent. Additionally, research conducted by London's Poverty File in 2011 showed that the boroughs which faced higher rates of infant mortality were Newham, Harrow and Haringey with the rate surpassing 5.8 percent. The populations that live in these boroughs are mostly ethnic minorities of whom the majority come from Somali backgrounds. These statistics highlights the socio-economic consequences of unemployment and its structural link to poverty. The vast levels of unemployment lead to economic marginalisation and this is taking a toll on both them and the public sector.

Most families live in overcrowded houses with several children often sharing a room, which has an impact on their ability to do their homework. This could be part of the Somali children's lack of educational progress.

Between 2010 and 2011, only 33% of Somali pupils attained 5 good GCSEs and this is with the help of after-school homework clubs and private tuition. Many parents struggle with lack of comprehension of the English language and often have very little education themselves, making it difficult for them to help their children with school assignments. A potential corollary can therefore be drawn between the lack of role models within the family with a precedence of accessing further and higher education and attaining professional employment and children likely to follow in those footsteps, which can create generational continuation of dependence on welfare.

Conclusion

The Somali community have a long history of migration and settlement in the UK. That history is unfortunately marred with a prolonged existence of unemployment and often living in deprived conditions. As the next generations of Somali-Britons are growing up, it is important to break this cycle and create opportunities for employment where there is a lack of dependence on welfare. Somali community organisations are making strides to contribute towards the creation of these opportunities with many of them running skills and employment support and training programs and after-school homework clubs. Most of them are unfortunately hit by the funding cuts and are therefore struggling to continue these programs with many of them discontinuing some of the programs or operating on a part time or voluntary basis. Somalis face disadvantages in terms of language barriers, educational attainment, qualifications and work experience. The community organisations help address some of these barriers by providing language classes, employment and education support and facilities that assist with the translation of qualifications attained outside of the UK as well as providing courses to attain new qualifications.

Supporting these organisations both financially and in terms of capacity building can alleviate some of the pressures the public sector faces and, in the long term, increase the number of Somalis in employment and actively contributing to the British economy.

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