

WOMEN DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES: 1980S COMMUNITY ORGANISATION AMONGST BLACK WOMEN'S GROUPS IN BETHNAL GREEN

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Context

- Increased migration in 1960s and 1970s
- 1981 British Nationality Act and access to NHS
- Black Report and Health Inequalities
- Cuts to local authorities and reduction in services

London Black Women's Health Action Project

- Founded in 1982 - Self-organising group of women in the Somali and Arab communities in Tower Hamlets
- Group's first director, Shamis Dirir - health care worker
- Early campaigning work on Female Circumcision and expanded to deal with women's broader health needs

“Pinpoint the health needs of their communities and help educate and explain the difficulties facing them”

(Source: Tower Hamlets Archive - LC1279 - 1985/6 Annual Report, p.1)

Campaigning and Support for Women

Campaign against Bill to Prohibit FC:

- Concern about criminalization of practice on grounds of custom or ritual as racist
- Argued government policy lacked knowledge about communities affected by legislation and done without consultation
- Worry that would create “confusion and unrest” in community and fear of prosecution would mean not seeking aid

Campaigning and Support for Women

Prohibition won't lead to prevention without education: “Main way to stop female circumcision will be through education and support for families concerned”

(Source: Tower Hamlets Archive - LC1279 - 1986/7 Annual Report, p.10)

Government offered funding to NGOs to run such educational campaigns – DHSS provide funding for educational materials

GLC Women's Unit Funding – allowed the LBWHAP to become “an information resource for other community and professional groups on the health needs of black women.”

(Source: Tower Hamlets Archive - LC1279 - 1985/6 Annual Report, p.2)

Meeting the Broader Health Needs of Black Women

The organisation stressed “community based health education at a grassroots level” as it “enables women to develop their confidence in order to understand their own health situation”

(Source: Tower Hamlets Archive - LC1279 - 1985/6 Annual Report, p.5)

Three functions to support that: generalised health education, providing follow on advice and information about the statutory service, and empowering women to utilise those services

Meeting Health Needs: Education

- Health sessions for Somali Women and Families: postnatal and antenatal care, sexually transmitted diseases, depression and stress management, and dental care and health eating
- Newsletters and leaflets - features on key health issues like Glaucoma, Sickle Cell, Cystitis and Cervical Cancer

Meeting Health Needs: Advice

- Bridge between clients w/ statutory services
- Impact of wider issues on women's health
- Creation of women's resource centre at Victoria Park

Meeting Health Needs: Empowerment

Helping tackle barriers to access:

- “The medical profession is notoriously bad at providing coherent explanations of diagnosis and treatment, and where black women have to content with language and cultural differences, the situation is compounded. Added to this is the fact that most health literature assumes a white middle-class model, so that even where women have access to information, it may not be applicable to their cultural or economic circumstances

(Source: Tower Hamlets Archive - LC1279 - 1985/6 Annual Report, p.8)

Helping women access education, advocating for interpretation services, challenging ways NHS saw women by providing a platform: “To bring black women to together and facilitate communications so that we can put our demands forward and fight for effective change”

(Source: Tower Hamlets Archive - LC1279 - 1988/9 Annual Report, p.1)

1980s Conclusions

- Three key areas of tension that impacted the lives of black women in Bethnal Green: immigration and multiculturalism, immigration and access to services, and discrimination
- Studying the 1980s work of the LBWHAP provides an excellent case study of the way voluntary sector organisations worked directly with specific communities to meet needs and address service gaps
- Competing narrative in the era of Thatcherism - showing that social justice and mutual aid were alive and well amongst the black women of Bethnal Green throughout the 1980s

What Happened After and Where Are The Now

- 1990s expanded out work to focus on health education of young people and to provide social work training. Positive work on FGM both within the UK and more globally in Somaliland. Programmes also included men and educating whole family
- 2000s change of name to expand focus beyond London and just women – becomes Black Women’s Health and Family Support – looks at employment programmes, older members of the community and young people. Collaborated with local partner Praxis to provide bilingual and interpretation skills
- 2010s turned away from FGM work for the most part owing to funding issues focus on other areas of work. Currently the women served by the organisation still struggle with issues of discrimination and language barriers but the organisation has seen important reductions in the practice of FGM.

Changing Tides

- Group is concerned about ability to compete for a funding that is all commissioned based – lost of their recent programmes as a result
- Ending of various local government streams brought an end to specific campaigning and education work outside of the community on FGM
- Group benefited from many of the upskilling programmes that were put in place over New Labour – allowing various staff members to become certified in essential areas
- Concern about the movement to have services based at hubs throughout the local area – when women in the local community still rely on the group as a trusted one stop shop