

Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in good work

Barriers to entry and progression

Key information

Publication type: General

Publication date: Monday 11 August 2025

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1. Acknowledgements

This report is produced by the Greater London Authority (GLA) and draws on research commissioned by the GLA, conducted and published by the [National Institute for Economic and Social Research \(NIESR\)](#).

We are grateful to NIESR's project leads Dr. Domiziana Turcatti and Dr. Katharine Stockland, and to researchers Dr. Anisa Butt, Jasmin Rostron, Professor Carol Vincent, Dr. Sherelle Davids and Marley Williams for their valuable contributions to the research.

Special thanks go to the **community researchers** who were integral to the research team and without whom this project would not have been possible: Hafija Akter Nipu, Nazmina Begum, Salomé Anya Smith, Saman Tahira Khan, Subita Begum, Uroosa Syed, and Yasna S. Khan.

We also extend our thanks to **Wapping Bangladesh Association**, the community partner, and **Muslim Women's Network** for supporting NIESR in engaging Bangladeshi and Pakistani women across London with the study.

Finally, we would like to thank the **members of the advisory board** ([Appendix A](#)), which brought together academics, representatives from community, research organisations and the GLA, for the advice provided throughout the research.

2. Deputy Mayor's foreword

London is one of the world’s most diverse cities, and is central to the UK’s vision for economic growth. The Mayor is committed to creating 150,000 good jobs by 2028, ensuring that all Londoners, regardless of background, can access quality employment.

Access to well-paid, good-quality work is vital to life chances, yet many Londoners still face barriers. Economic growth and reducing inequality must go hand in hand, so no community is left behind. Black Londoners, and Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, remain among the most excluded from the labour market.

To address this, we launched the Workforce Integration Network (WIN) in 2018 to work with businesses on improving employment pathways for underrepresented groups. Pakistani and Bangladeshi women face higher unemployment rates and a shocking pay gap – 60 per cent and 50 per cent respectively – despite rising educational attainment.

WIN commissioned participatory research with Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London to explore their career aspirations, the barriers they face, and the support needed for their success. The findings will inform policies to help employers and public bodies improve access to sustainable careers. Their stories reveal significant challenges, but also their resilience. It is shocking that experienced Bangladeshi and Pakistani women are still passed over for promotion or feel compelled to change their names to secure interviews.

This timely report outlines a way forward, calling on business leaders, local authorities and City Hall to redouble their efforts to dismantle structural barriers and build inclusive workplaces that reflect London’s diversity. City Hall is strengthening relationships with employers, and Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, through programmes that promote inclusive practices, support the case for diversity, and expand outreach to racially minoritised groups.

Finally, thank you to the women who shared their stories, whose voices are vital in the journey towards equality. We remain committed to building a workforce that reflects London’s brilliant diversity.

— **Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard, Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice**

3. Executive Summary

Despite rising educational levels, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women are among the most underrepresented in London’s workforce. This report explores the barriers these women face in accessing “good work” – fairly paid, secure employment with progression opportunities – and offers policy recommendations to address them.

3.1 Background

- In 2022, 48.1 per cent of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London were economically inactive, compared to 15.3 per cent of men from the same backgrounds. They had higher rates of economic activity than other racially minoritised women.
- The unemployment rate for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London was 16.9 per cent – significantly higher than the 5.5 per cent for men.

- Pakistani women in London face a 60 per cent gender pay gap, and Bangladeshi women face a 50 per cent gap, the highest among all ethnic groups.

These disparities are often attributed to religious values and gender or cultural norms. However, this framing reinforces harmful stereotypes of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, devalues their aspirations, and overlooks structural workplace inequalities.

3.2 Methodology

This participatory research, co-produced by seven community researchers, centred Bangladeshi and Pakistani women's voices to inform culturally relevant policy. Data collection and analysis included:

- a literature review and descriptive data analysis of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women's employment
- interviews with 32 Bangladeshi and Pakistani women and four employers
- a policy workshop with policymakers, employers, and voluntary and community sector (VCS) representatives.

3.3 Findings

Bangladeshi and Pakistani women face intersecting barriers to good work, including racism, religious and gender discrimination, and limited workplace flexibility. While cultural norms influence their employment experiences, their impact should not be overstated.

3.3.1 Barriers to resources and opportunities

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in London face multiple, overlapping barriers to good work. Many lack access to professional social networks and role models; and struggle to secure or afford further training, qualifications, unpaid internships and work experience.

Many women also struggled to find high-quality career advice and mentorship. Negative experiences with Jobcentre Plus and a lack of tailored employment support compounded their difficulties in finding secure work.

3.3.2 Migrant-specific challenges

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women who migrated to London as adults face added barriers, including language, skills, and unrecognised qualifications. These barriers are shaped by women's education, socioeconomic status, and migration experiences. Visa restrictions and uncertainty with employer-sponsored visas were key concerns, as they limited women's ability to work or progress in their careers.

Some women lacked confidence in using English in professional contexts and digital skills, making online job applications and career progression difficult. Translating qualifications and work experience from home countries to the UK job market remained a key challenge.

3.3.3 Racism and discrimination

Racism and workplace discrimination profoundly affected Bangladeshi and Pakistani women's confidence and career goals. Some women faced discrimination during recruitment, especially if they had ethnic or Muslim-sounding names. Others shared experiences of racism at work, especially for women who wear hijabs. Many noted that White British employees were more likely to be promoted than racially minoritised candidates, and to receive inadequate responses from HR or managers to complaints.

3.3.4 Positive workplace cultures

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women value diverse workplaces that respect religious practices, including providing halal food; appropriate prayer spaces and breaks; and leave or flexible hours for religious festivals. Diverse socialising practices are also important, as alcohol-centred events, especially outside work hours, often feel exclusionary, limiting women's sense of belonging and hindering career progression.

3.3.5 Balancing work and family

Cultural and religious norms, family expectations and caring responsibilities can limit Pakistani and Bangladeshi women's access to work – impacts vary by age, education and migration. Local family support, access to flexible work and affordable childcare are essential to balancing these demands, sustaining and progressing in employment.

3.3.6 Employer challenges and practices

Employers identified key barriers to Bangladeshi and Pakistani women's progression, including limited community awareness of opportunities, narrow recruitment practices, weak community links, non-inclusive workplace cultures, underrepresentation in senior roles, and biased appraisal processes. Structural issues such as short-term hiring also limit progression. While no employer had targeted initiatives for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, broader diversity and inclusion efforts included outreach, internships, flexible working, mentorship, and inclusive networking.

3.4 Recommendations

3.4.1 For employers

- Work with community partners and local authorities to invest in targeted community and school outreach programmes.
- Diversify and tackle bias in their own recruitment processes.

- Offer and value flexible working.
- Support Bangladeshi and Pakistani women's career progression within their organisations.
- Create workplace cultures that value and practice inclusion.
- Develop and implement equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) monitoring and reporting good practice.

3.4.2 For local authorities and the GLA

- Assess how well existing employment and skills provision benefits Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London, and work towards developing inclusive provision.
- Diversify employer engagement to include employers from small, medium-sized and large enterprises (SMEs).
- Encourage employers across sectors to enhance the access and progression of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women within their organisations.
- Act as brokers facilitating connection, relationship building and partnership working among employers, education providers, and community organisations supporting Bangladeshi and Pakistani women.
- Expand knowledge of local training and childcare provision among Bangladeshi and Pakistani women.

3.4.3 For national government

- Develop a national training programme for Jobcentre Plus staff in intercultural competency; and build community partnerships to deliver tailored employment advice.
- Increase provision of culturally sensitive, affordable childcare.
- Support women re-entering the workforce through targeted programmes, apprenticeships and training.
- Make local Get Britain Working plans more inclusive of equalities groups.
- Devolve skills and employment budgets to local level via mayoral authorities.
- Develop a process for recognising and translating international qualifications in the UK labour market.
- Mitigate the intersectional impact of immigration reforms on migrant women.

3.5 Conclusion

This report underscores the urgent need for structural change to improve the employment outcomes of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London. While cultural factors do play a role, the dominant barriers are systemic – including racism, lack of access to resources, and exclusionary workplace practices. By centring the lived experiences of these women and implementing the recommendations outlined, employers and policymakers can foster a more inclusive and equitable labour market.

4. Introduction

4.1 Background and focus

One of the Mayor of London's key priorities is to create more than 150,000 jobs by 2028, with a focus on inclusive economic growth that supports underrepresented groups into "good work" – fairly paid, secure employment with progression opportunities (GLA, 2018[Reference:1](#) and 2024).[Reference:2](#) Workplace inclusion can drive economic progress and help to ensure that its benefits are shared across society.

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are among the most underrepresented in London's workforce, with employment rates significantly lower than their White counterparts. In 2022, the employment rate for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women was 33 points lower than that of White women in London (ONS, 2024).[Reference:3](#) Mainstream narratives often attribute this to cultural and religious norms, overlooking workplace inequalities and reinforcing harmful stereotypes (Bi, 2020[Reference:4](#); Hussein, 2023).[Reference:5](#)

In 2024, WIN commissioned the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) to explore the career aspirations of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London. This study aimed to: identify the key barriers and opportunities they face to pursue and advance in good work; recommend policies and practices to improve their access to, and progression in, the labour market; and contribute to a new narrative that challenges stereotypes and recognises the agency of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women.

'Bangladeshi and Pakistani women' make up a diverse and heterogeneous group, including first-generation migrants, UK-born second-generation women and their children. They may hold multiple nationalities and differ significantly in migration background, legal status (e.g., refugee, student, work or spouse visa, or indefinite leave to remain), and length of residence – all of which influence their employment opportunities.

Across generations, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women vary in class, education, religious practice, language skills, marital and parental status, and identity. These intersecting factors are often more influential than ethnicity or nationality alone in shaping their experiences, including their labour market outcomes (Werbner, 2005).
[Reference:6](#)

4.2 Research and policy context

Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities form a key part of London's superdiverse landscape, with complex diversity across nationalities, ethnicity, legal status, socioeconomic background, culture, and lifestyle. Of England and Wales' overall Bangladeshi population, 49.9 per cent live in London, compared to 18.3 per cent of the Pakistani population (UK government, 2022).[Reference:7](#) The Bangladeshi community is concentrated in East London, whereas the Pakistani community is spread out over a range of boroughs with key communities in Redbridge and Waltham Forest (Brazzill, 2023).

South Asian migration to London dates back to the 17th century, long before the formation of Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971. Despite growing immigration restrictions since the 1960s, family reunification policies helped to establish settled Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities. From the 2000s, migration patterns diversified due to stricter immigration laws and the introduction of the 'hostile environment' policy, which limited access to services such as housing and healthcare for undocumented migrants (Qureshi et al., 2020 [Reference:8](#); Gentleman, 2023).[Reference:9](#) Family reunification has continued, although spousal visa minimum income thresholds rose sharply from £18,600 in 2012 (Kofman, 2018)[Reference:10](#) to £38,700 in 2023 (Jorgensen, 2024).[Reference:11](#) Student and skilled migration from Pakistan and Bangladesh have also increased, reshaping community profiles.

Recent national policy developments have shifted the wider employment landscape. The 2024 [Get Britain Working](#) white paper aims to reduce economic inactivity through reforms to Jobcentre Plus; improved support for health-related barriers; expanded childcare access; and targeted investment in young people, disabled individuals, and local communities.[Reference:12](#)

The 2024 [Make Work Pay](#) initiative proposes reforms to employment law – including stronger protections against sexual harassment, and expanded equal pay rights for racially minoritised and disabled workers.

[Reference:13](#) The government is also consulting on mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting for large employers.

On 12 May 2025, the UK government published the white paper [Restoring Control over the Immigration System](#)

[Reference:14](#) This paper focused on proposing reforms to regular migration routes; further reforms to the

asylum system and border security are expected later in 2025. Key proposals include doubling the standard settlement period in points-based system routes to ten years; reducing graduate visas to 18 months; and increasing the immigration skills charge by 32 per cent. A new “temporary shortage” occupation list will be used for roles below “skilled graduate roles”, and the social care visa route will be closed. English-language requirement levels would also be raised for visa applicants (House of Commons Library, 2025).[Reference:15](#) These proposals are likely to impact and cause uncertainty for many migrant communities, including Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrant women. It will also impact London businesses, particularly in the care sector, who may face worker shortages and higher fees to sponsor foreign workers.

Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, especially second-generation, have experienced high levels of educational mobility (Luthra and Platt, 2017).[Reference:16](#) In 2019, Pakistani students were 19 percentage points more likely to pursue higher education than White British students; Bangladeshi students were 27 percentage points more likely (Rasul and Mirza, 2019).[Reference:17](#) An increasing number of Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants have been arriving in the UK as students (Niaz and Nazir, 2018).[Reference:18](#) Recent Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrants also have higher levels of education due to immigration policies that prioritise highly skilled workers (Mahbub, 2014[Reference:19](#) and 2021).[Reference:20](#) However, these educational gains are not translating into quality employment.

4.3 Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in the labour market

Of all racially minoritised groups, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are among the most underrepresented in London’s workplaces, despite their rising educational attainment:

- In 2022 in London, **economic inactivity** rates were higher for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women (48.1 per cent) compared to men of the same background (15.3 per cent) (Figure 1). Bangladeshi and Pakistani women had higher rates of economic inactivity compared to other Black and racially minoritised women (Indian 25.7 per cent, Black 26.3 per cent, Asian 32.4 per cent) and White British women (22.6 per cent) (UK government, 2023).[Reference:21](#)

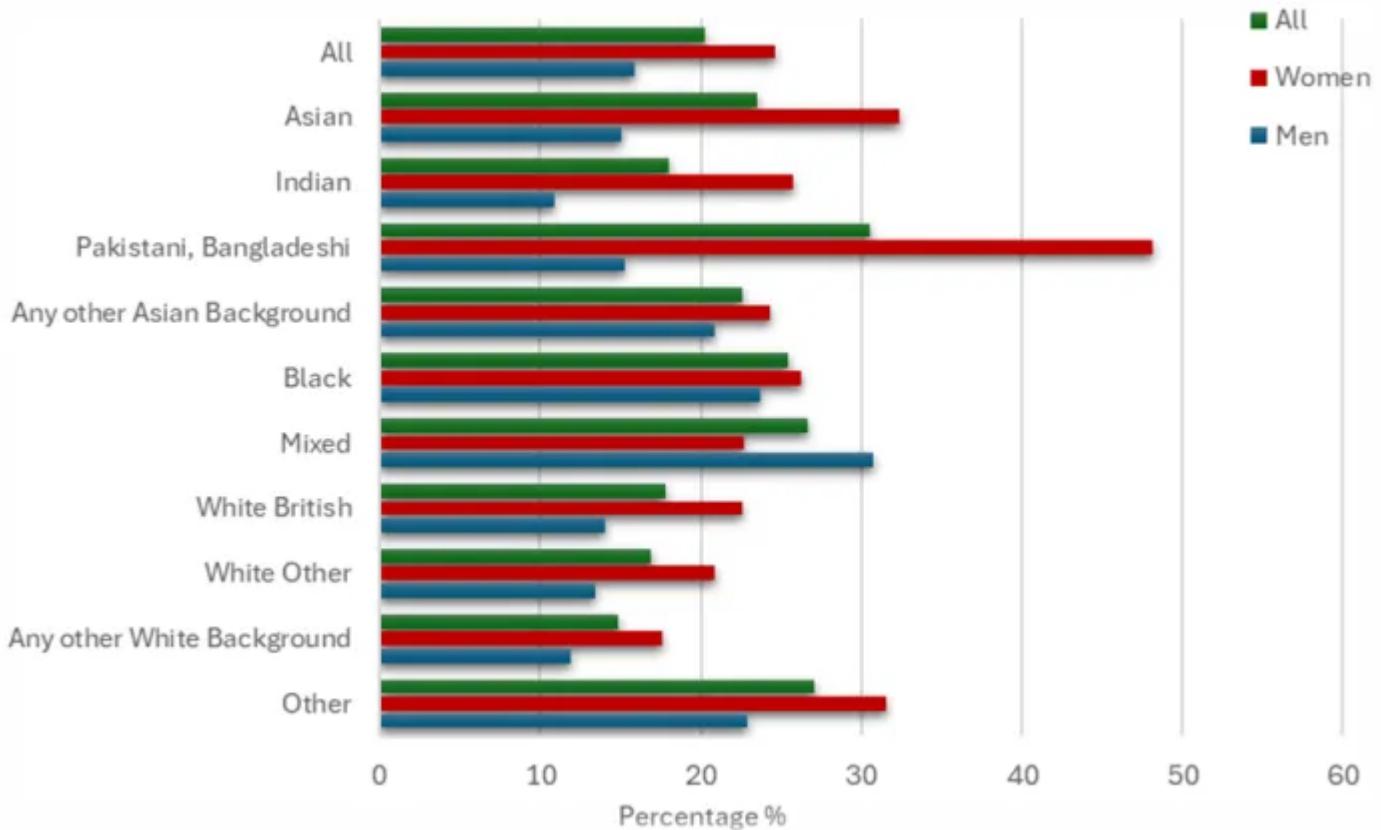


Figure 4.1 -

Percentage of 16-to-64-year-olds economically inactive in London, by ethnicity and gender

Source: ONS Annual Population Survey 2022

- In 2022, the combined Bangladeshi and Pakistani ethnic group had the highest **unemployment rate** in Great Britain (8.5 per cent), with women from this group experiencing the highest unemployment rate among all women (10.7 per cent). The evidence shows there is a distinct challenge for London, as unemployment for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women was even higher – at a staggering 16.9 per cent, compared to 5.5 per cent for men of the same background (Figure 2).

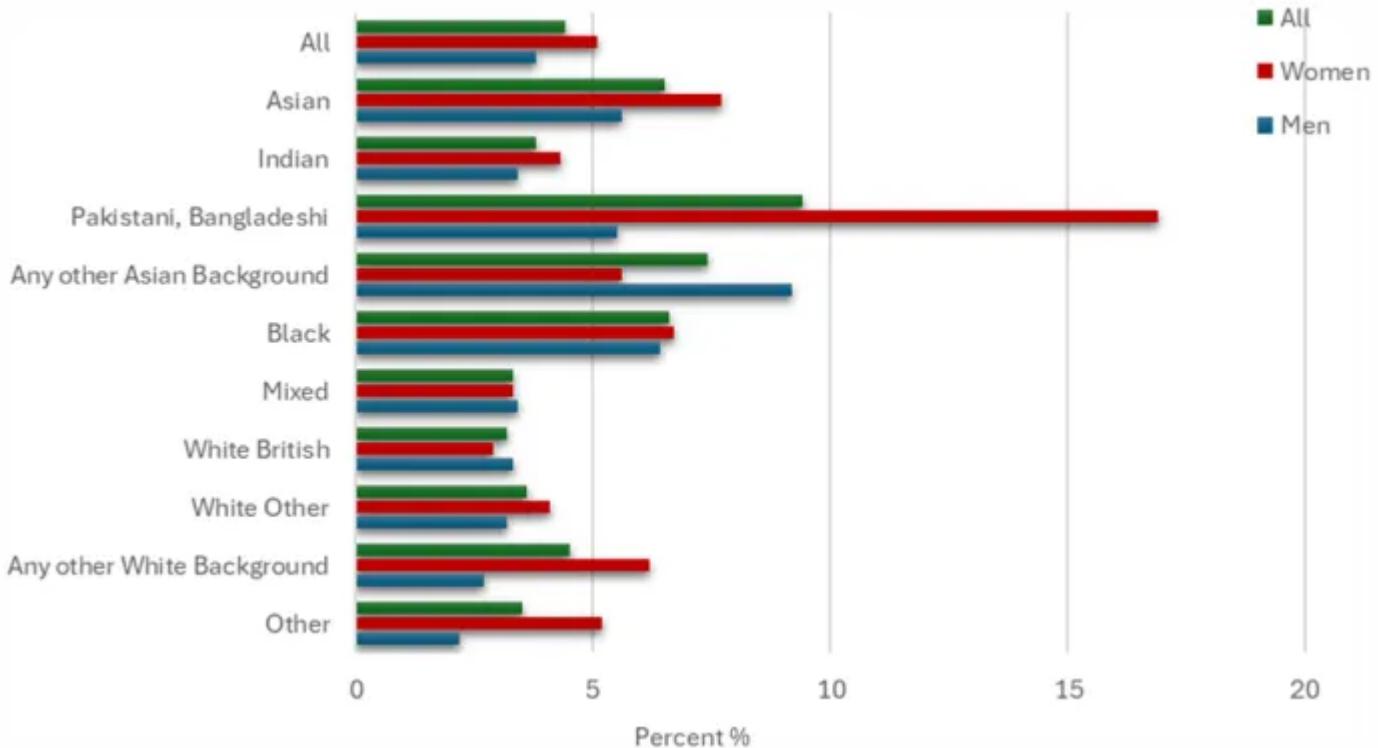


Figure 4.2 -

Unemployment rate by gender and ethnic group, London for adults aged 16 and over

Source: Annual Population Survey, Jan-Dec 2022.

- From 1992 to 2020, Pakistani and Bangladeshi **mothers had the lowest employment rates** compared to mothers from all other ethnic groups in the UK, with a substantial employment gap that is most pronounced when compared to White British mothers (Rose et al., 2023).[Reference:22](#)
- Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers also have the highest levels of family caregiving responsibilities compared to all other racially minoritised groups in London (UKHLS, 2022).
- In 2023, female employees in London earned, on average, 14 per cent less than men (GLA Intelligence, 2024a)[Reference:23](#), the ethnicity pay gap across genders in London was 22.5 per cent (GLA Intelligence, 2024b).[Reference:24](#)
- Pakistani women in London face the largest **gender pay gap** – approximately 60 per cent, while Bangladeshi women experience a gap of around 50 per cent. Both groups face significant **ethnicity pay gaps**, with Pakistani and Bangladeshi women having the largest disparities compared to White British women in London, a trend also observed across the rest of the UK (UKHLS, 2022).
- Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London seem to be employed in female-dominated sectors** such as healthcare, education, public administration, and the charity sector (Bi, 2020).[Reference:25](#) However, they face barriers entering and progressing in fields like journalism, law, and the creative industries. A 2020 survey of 443 Muslim women, many of whom were Bangladeshi or Pakistani and based in London, revealed a mismatch between their current employment and their earlier career aspirations, particularly in sectors like media, medicine, and law (Bi, 2020).[Reference:26](#)

4.4 Rationale and significance of this study

Mainstream policy discourse and research on Pakistani and Bangladeshi women's low levels of employment have often focussed on factors beyond the workplace. These include language barriers, poverty, health issues, caring responsibilities and gender or religious values and norms perceived to be prevalent within these communities, that may discourage women from looking for work (Dale et al, 2002[Reference:27](#); Khan 2020[Reference:28](#); Aston et al., 2007[Reference:29](#); Tariq and Syed, 2018).[Reference:30](#)

In a cultural context marked by islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment, this rhetoric can be harmful and **devalues the human capital, skillsets, and educational qualifications of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women.** It also **reinforces gendered and racialised stereotypes**, such as the construction of Muslim women as lacking agency and promotes essentialist understandings of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in the UK. As a result, this narrative **overshadows the inequalities within the workplace** that keep Pakistani and Bangladeshi women out of secure employment.

Previous research has found that workplace inequalities continue to limit Bangladeshi and Pakistani women's access to secure, fulfilling employment. Discrimination during recruitment is common, including bias against Muslim sounding names hijabs and marital status (Adesina and Marocico, 2017[Reference:31](#); Amer, 2014 [Reference:32](#); Women and Equalities Committee, 2015). Many Bangladeshi and Pakistani mothers face barriers when returning to work, often forced into roles below their qualifications due to inflexible working conditions (Rose et al., 2023). Stereotypes portraying Muslim and South Asian women as less capable and dress codes that conflict with religious practices can prevent career progression, or lead to exclusion. Career progression is also hindered by limited confidence, guidance, and networking opportunities, especially in settings involving alcohol or after-hours socialising, which many women avoid for cultural or caregiving reasons.

Being a Bangladeshi woman myself, I faced various cultural and religious barriers that limited the jobs I could apply for. I also faced situations that made me feel uncomfortable to continue to work in certain workplaces ... I wanted to be part of this project to contribute to bring about changes for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women and awareness of the factors that affect them in the labour market.

— *Nazmina Begum, community researcher*

4.5 Methodology

This section presents a summary of the methodology adopted, with the full methodology available in [Appendix B](#). This research was **participatory in nature**. This approach promotes research as a meaningful experience for the women and communities involved, ensuring research addresses questions that are socially salient and culturally relevant (Mata-Codesal et al., 2020)[Reference:33](#). This project aimed to place the voices and lived experiences of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women at the centre of policymaking.

Seven community researchers with lived experience of the challenges and opportunities faced by Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London co-designed this study, and contributed to data collection and analysis. Their insights are central to this research and their reflections are highlighted throughout the report. A diverse advisory

board – made up of representatives from the VCS, academics, policymakers, and practitioners – provided strategic advice, facilitated community outreach, and strengthened the research’s impact and engagement. This project draws from the following qualitative methods:

- **a literature review and descriptive analysis** of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in the UK and London.
- **interviews** with 32 Bangladeshi and Pakistani women and four employers.
- **one policy workshop** with policy makers, employers, and VCS representatives
- fieldnotes from meetings, workshops, and conversations with community researchers, and with the advisory board for this project.

The participatory nature of the project enabled us to utilise both our experiential insights and professional expertise, enriching its process and outcomes ... The project stirred deep emotions in everyone involved. Some were thrilled, others hopeful or enthusiastic, some felt the anger and sadness over the challenges faced by the resilient women in our communities. But we all shared a sense of hope and recognised the project’s potential impact.

— *Yasna S. Khan, community researcher*

In 2018, the GLA established WIN to address the structural barriers to employment for underrepresented groups, with a focus on ethnicity. To inform this work, **WIN commissioned NIESR to explore the career aspirations of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London; the barriers and opportunities they face in and out of the workplace** to pursue and advance in good work; and the policies and practices needed to tackle these.

This research provides a challenge to stereotypes of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women as lacking agency, instead centring their career aspirations, skillsets, and resilience in navigating workplace inequalities to inform better policies and practices. It emphasises the role employers can play in improving workplace culture, recruitment, and progression. The findings will help WIN and the GLA to shape inclusive employment policies, strengthen community engagement, and contribute to the Mayor’s goals on inclusive economic growth.

5. Accessing good work: systemic barriers and inequalities

This research reveals that Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in London face multiple intersecting systemic barriers to accessing and progressing in good work. These challenges stem from socioeconomic disadvantage, migration experiences, and limited access to professional networks, financial resources, and quality information or mentorship. Many struggle with affording further training, balancing work and study, and accessing work experience opportunities. Migrant women, in particular, face additional hurdles, including visa restrictions, language barriers, digital exclusion, and difficulties translating qualifications or navigating the local job market. A lack of role models, sector knowledge, and effective engagement with employment services – often due to negative experiences – further compounds these disadvantages.

Building trust [with interviewees] was essential, especially when discussing sensitive topics. I faced challenges like language barriers and scheduling flexibility due to family commitments, but these experiences were valuable learning opportunities. The interviews revealed the resilience and determination of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women.

— *Hafija Akter Nipu, community researcher*

5.1 Barriers to resources and opportunities

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in London face intersecting disadvantages that limit their access to the social networks, and financial resources, that often facilitate entry and progression in good work. Many of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi women interviewed [Reference:34](#) identified their own or their family's experiences of migration, coupled with socioeconomic disadvantage, as a key barrier to their job prospects.

Many of the second-generation women interviewed – particularly those seeking to enter legal, cultural and creative industries – highlighted a couple of key barriers: limited access to professional social networks; and a lack of financial resources to afford postgraduate qualifications or unpaid work experience. They related this to their ethnicity and class background:

This was one of the things that I also found within design – if you didn't know people you just wouldn't get far, and someone like me, who is Bengali, is female, doesn't come from an affluent background, I don't have those connections.

— *Runa, British Bangladeshi administrator in the public sector, 25-30 years old*

The issue of financial backing was particularly pronounced for those women seeking to enter the legal profession. Because some women had to self-fund their qualifications and unpaid work experience, their training took much longer than their wealthier peers, delaying their careers or causing significant financial hardship:

At one point [at the corporate law firm] they asked me, 'Are you going to do the LPC [legal practice course]?' Which is basically a postgraduate diploma that you have to do to qualify. Now the LPC costs £14,000, and they asked me, and I said, 'Well, I'm planning to do it but I'm saving really hard to try and finance it.' And the responses were essentially, 'Oh, why don't you just get your parents to pay for it? That would help.' And I had to then, quite

embarrassingly, explain to them, ‘Well, my dad’s a taxi driver and I don’t think that he can come up with £14,000.’

— *Khadeja, British Pakistani solicitor in charity sector, 30-35 years old*

Some of the women raised concerns that unpaid work can worsen existing inequalities, or leave workers vulnerable to exploitation. However, several women interviewed who were currently working in voluntary positions (including work experience, internships or volunteering in the community), or who had previously done so, also saw these **unpaid experiences as a crucial part of their professional development**. This said this allowed them to **build the skills and experience** necessary to complete qualifications or to obtain paid work in the sectors they were interested in.

The way that I got into it was through a graduate scheme, an internship. So, they identified that [my field] is notoriously very elite and White, it’s a very White space. So, they created an internship scheme for two BME interns and that’s how I got my foot in the door; otherwise, I wouldn’t really be here if it wasn’t for that.

— *Anisa, British Pakistani policy manager in public sector, 30-35 years old*

I started doing a health course. I started ... volunteering in food co-ops and then running them... as I got more confident, I got offered more opportunities and then they offered me a sessional role, which I got paid to do. And then they took me on part-time. And at the same time, my supervisor signed me up for university. So, I got to go to university with two children and finish a degree ... For me, the only way I found myself into the job market, is through volunteering.

— *Ayesha, British Bangladeshi community support worker for a charity, 40-45 years old*

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women often have limited access to high-quality information, advice and mentorship about work. Many of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi women interviewed lacked information and support around career options and how to access these. The women in this study also identified barriers relating to a lack of role models and mentors. These findings suggest that this lack of support and mentorship can be for a range of reasons – including having family members who do not work, or who have only ever worked in certain sectors; and a lack of knowledge about sectors and career paths within their wider communities, particularly those that have been traditionally dominated by White elites.

[My job] is not very common... many people haven't heard of it, my family didn't know, only my aunt and uncle knew. I didn't know, so I had to look it up... Because it's predominantly White, and it's predominantly White male... it's not well known in other ethnicities.

— *Anisa, British Pakistani policy manager in public sector, 30-35 years old*

We've got a lot of interns who are part of that 10,000 Black Internship programme, and I make a real point to just tell them what else is out there, what else they can see, what they're interested in, and sharing all of my LinkedIn connections and stuff, because as I say, I wish somebody had done that for me.

— *Faiza, British Pakistani solicitor in charity sector, 55-60 years old*

Women reported mixed experiences of receiving information, advice and guidance in educational settings including school, college, and university. However, many women highlighted negative experiences of Jobcentre Plus, reporting a **lack of personal and bespoke support** in helping them **to build specific skills and pursue specific jobs**, as well as a **lack of attention to broader issues**, such as **confidence and mental well-being**.

The Jobcentre. They're terrible. They're supposed to help you find a job. They just tell you to do job searches and they tell you, 'Just go to the website and apply,' and that's it. This is not supporting. Supporting is sitting down, helping to update the CV, telling the women how to do the CVs. If they're stuck doing a personal statement, reading it with them, you know. Telling them how they can improve it. Preparing them for interviews.

— *Farzana, British Bangladeshi community worker, 35-40 years old*

5.2 Migration and the job market

Women who have migrated to London from Pakistan and Bangladesh as adults face a range of additional barriers – particularly around language, translating and gaining new skills and qualifications. This study highlights a range of challenges faced by migrant women. These vary considerably depending on women's educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, and their migration trajectories.

Some women raised concerns about constraints on gaining work or pursuing progression opportunities due to visa restrictions and/or uncertainties about their future visa status – particularly when visas are tied to employers' sponsorship. For some women, their visa status limits their access to public funds, student finance or state funded childcare, all identified as barriers to accessing work.

The main challenge that I'm facing is the visa sponsorship and ... [my job] is one of the jobs that falls under the criteria for offering sponsorship. It's under the skilled worker list, so the companies should be able to offer sponsorship to me for this sort of role, but it depends on the company ... whether they sponsor or not. I've done interviews with companies who are licensed sponsors, but sometimes I'm just rejected because I needed sponsorship.

— *Marziya, Pakistani, teacher, moved to the UK two years ago, 25-30 years old*

Language difficulties are a key barrier to finding work – recent migrants may still be learning English or lack confidence in their English-language skills. Others may be fluent, but feel less confident using the English language in professional contexts or experience discrimination because of their accents and manner of speaking.

I felt that job search here was very difficult for me just because my language was not that clear and I also had a problem understanding others' accent[s] so this was also a hurdle... I went to [a school] for an interview, they told us that the reason why we are not hiring you is because of my experience in Pakistan ... And regarding my accent ... they said that the students obviously are British, and I was Asian, so our accents were not matching. They said that they will not understand my language, so that was a big problem for me.

— *Amna, Pakistani, not in employment lived in UK for two years, 25-30 years old [translated from Urdu]*

Women expressed limited ability to translate qualifications and work experience from home countries, particularly when looking for work in the education sector. The high cost and/or time-commitment required to complete new qualifications, and a lack of knowledge about the local job market were also identified as challenges to accessing work.

[Becoming a] childminder is hard! It costs £4,000, you understand? ... The government doesn't provide it... [But] we are raising children. We know everything. Then why is it so hard, I don't know. Only God knows.

— *Amina, Bangladeshi, not in employment, lived in UK for 25 years, 45-50 years old [translated from Bengali]*

Some women lacked digital skills or did not feel confident in the skills they have – particularly those required to navigate the London job market, which relies heavily on online applications. Women also highlighted a lack of understanding on how to apply for jobs or what they could be qualified for:

In the beginning, the first ten years, I didn't have any idea about the education system here, how much my degree is equivalent to the degree here and what field I should go to especially ... I didn't have any, kind of, guidance or support.

— *Munaza, Pakistani, not in employment, lived in UK for 18 years, 40-45 years old*

6. Barriers to dignified work: racism, discrimination, and workplace cultures

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women often experience racism and discrimination in the job market and in the workplace, which can have a profound impact on their confidence and aspirations at work. Many of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi women interviewed reported experiences of discrimination, including bias among employers against ethnic or Muslim-sounding names at the point of recruitment. Given these concerns, many also expressed a preference for anonymous job applications.

I went to the Jobcentre in between [jobs] because I was on JSA [Jobseeker's Allowance] for a couple of months. And the person who was my job coach actually said something which I thought was just incredibly shocking ... 'But to be fair, you know, someone might look at your name and think, well does this person even speak English?' And I was sitting there speaking to her in English with a very professional CV and that was what she said to me, I mean it's unbelievable.

— *Sara, British Pakistani business development manager in charity, 45-50 years old*

I went for a job and I changed my surname to something less Bengali-sounding, and I actually got the job. So, then when it came to HR I had to tell them, 'That's not my name.' They took it quite negatively, and then I had to explain it to them, because it is true, we've seen it on the news, we've seen it in newspapers, and you know how applications are, they shouldn't have names, actually, they shouldn't have names, race, ethnicity, anything like that.

— **Rubi**, British Bangladeshi administrator in NHS, 35-40 years old

Several women raised concerns about racism and discrimination in interviews, facing aggressive questioning and unequal treatment. Some observed that while employers often interviewed a diverse pool of candidates, less experienced White applicants were frequently hired over racially minoritised candidates. They also found traditional interview formats and non-diverse panels exclusionary, unfairly disadvantaging women who may not display expected confidence or public-speaking skills, despite being qualified for the role.

But one of our assessment centres, one of the exercises was a lot of group work with other candidates, so some people would not be comfortable with that ... as women, especially as ethnic minority women, we're not used to speaking over each other ... and they don't get employed, even though they have the qualities, they just never shone in that kind of environment, but they're very good, they have, you know, they have good grades, they have talent, they didn't get the opportunity because of that.

— **Reshma**, British Bangladeshi specialist accountant in finance sector, 30-35 years old

Many women reported witnessing or directly experiencing racist behaviour and unequal treatment in the workplace from colleagues or line-managers.

There was an incident with a previous manager of mine, where I felt like I was definitely harassed ... I've heard that this happened with this specific person ... in the past with other women of colour. So, I would be inclined to say that I think there's an issue with racism there, but again, it's just been covered up ... There was no conversation had with her at all. All the conversations were had with me ... but she's a senior leadership member in the solicitor's office, and she's White. So, I have to believe that that's why they're more hesitant ... I was very, very, very stressed ... I was working until 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning a lot of days. I was being given tasks at 6pm and told that they needed to be done by midday the next day ... I did get quite sick. I had to take time off work for stress at that time. My hair was falling out; it was really bad.

— **Mehreen**, British Pakistani solicitor in the public sector, 30-35 years old

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women from a range of sectors reported racial inequalities in pay and progression, and felt **decisions on promotion and pay were often based on skin colour rather than merit**. Others were acutely aware of the lack of diversity at senior levels in their organisations, compared to junior levels.

Last year, there was a position that came up ... The colleague that applied, she has been working in that team for over 10 years ... They didn't give it to her, even though she was so qualified. They got this White colleague, who is the most inexperienced person, they gave it to her. Everyone can see, now, that that White lady, she can't manage the team, [and] my Bengali colleague, she actually still does everything ... those things happened time, and time, and time again.

— *Farzana, British Bangladeshi community worker, 35-40 years old*

You notice at our level and slightly higher, it's such a melting pot of cultures and people and nationalities, but the higher it goes it's very Caucasian ... When they have, like, pictures of who our board director is ... you never see ... [racially minoritised people], and I do wonder about that.

— *Fatima, British Pakistani nurse, 35-40 years old*

Several women spoke about gender-based discrimination shaped by religious, gender and racial stereotypes, which portray South Asian women (especially those who are Pakistani and Bangladeshi) as having less agency. Women also shared that wearing a hijab made them more likely to face workplace discrimination and micro-aggressions; and that they were often perceived as less intelligent or capable. They described how wearing a hijab could hinder job applications and interviews; and lead to tension and discrimination at work, where some women have been asked to remove their hijabs.

Then many times we wear hijab, for those who are White, they treat us differently, like can she really work? Or can she speak? I mean, they show an attitude with this mentality that it will somehow be a little aggressive. They behave differently.

— *Mahmuda, Bangladeshi, volunteer in local community space, lived in the UK for three years, 30-35 years old [translated from Bengali]*

I've even had friends who, because they've worn, like, a headscarf, they've been asked to take it off. When I used to work in student accommodation, I had a colleague who would constantly ask me about taking my scarf off.

— **Runa**, British Bangladeshi administrator in the public sector, 25-30 years old

None of the women who experienced or witnessed workplace discrimination felt adequately supported by their employers. Some left their jobs after reporting bullying, feeling that reporting it harmed their careers. Others noted employer inaction and felt discouraged from reporting issues to HR. Many women raised concerns about employer EDI policies, viewing them as superficial or tokenistic, failing to tackle underlying racism or the lack of genuine diversity in senior roles.

6.1 Workplace cultures valued by women

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women greatly value workplaces that are ethnically diverse, and that respect and accommodate their religious practices. The findings suggest that many Pakistani and Bangladeshi women experience a greater sense of safety and belonging, as well as increased confidence in their own progression prospects, in ethnically diverse workplaces.

The women in this study also underscored the importance of employers prioritising religious accommodations, such as inclusive dress codes; providing halal food; permitting breaks during work for prayer; and access to an appropriate space for prayer and washing facilities. Others highlighted positive practices including allowing staff to take time off during religious festivals, such as Eid, and flexible working hours during Ramadan.

My workplace currently is quite great, in that they make adaptations for people of different faiths. So, I'm Muslim, and we pray five times a day and my current workplace has created a dedicated space that people could pray in, which is great because none of my other workplaces had that facility, or most of my other places didn't have that provision for their Muslim staff.

— **Reema**, British Bangladeshi nurse, 30-35 years old

Coming here, and it's all female-led, and it's really empowering ... I don't feel like a brown woman. I just feel like a human, and that was one of the biggest things that I really, so it just made me want to say, 'Actually, I want to progress here. I want to just go for it.'

— *Subi, British Pakistani programme manager for a charity, 35-40 years old*

What interested me the most was how important workplace diversity was for many women, especially for those who grew up in the UK. This was something that I always felt was important to me, but I didn't expect that other women would feel the same, so this was quite surprising for me.

One woman I interviewed spoke about her struggles during her early career trying to get into her desired career path but due to systematic barriers and the lack of diversity in that field, she felt she wouldn't fit in and wouldn't be able to achieve her goals there, which affected her career aspirations. This shows how important targeted recruitment and internships are, so that workplace diversity can be increased.

— *Subita Begum, community researcher*

The Pakistani and Bangladeshi women interviewed greatly valued workplaces that offer diversity with respect to socialising and networking events that are not centred on alcohol. This is because workplace drinking cultures are exclusionary for many Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. These findings suggest that workplace socialising that occurs outside of normal working hours, and that involves alcohol, is often experienced as profoundly exclusionary by Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in London. Women in this study emphasised their experiences of feeling socially excluded at work because of these cultures, as well as their concerns that their progression opportunities were negatively impacted by this exclusion.

It was between me and a new junior ... a White male, young boy ... I trained him up, he had a few data breaches and such but somehow, he managed to get the job over me even though I was told that job was gonna be for me. I figured it out, it was because I was missing their drinking sessions and all of this ... Being an Asian woman, someone who's Muslim and wears a scarf, it was very clear there was discrimination. I would be in the room; they would give everyone drinks and I would just sit there on the side. But this young particular boy would be the one serving the drinks and all this, so it was very obvious they liked him because of the socialisation part as well. Because I was told the role was for me but after this particular day of them all drinking I was told the next day, 'You should really look elsewhere.' It impacted my mental health, I ended up taking six months' leave, as it really affected me.

— *Shakira, British Bangladeshi business partner in finance sector, 25-30 years old*

7. Balancing work and family responsibilities: the importance of flexible work

Balancing aspirations and responsibilities in work with their familial responsibilities as mothers and carers was identified as a central issue for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women interviewed. Some also identified cultural and religious norms around women's work as a barrier to accessing good work – although this varies considerably among women of different backgrounds. These findings point towards a complex picture, whereby some women report being discouraged from working by their families and wider communities, while others report the opposite. This is a hugely complex issue; and class, age, education, religious background, and migration trajectory are all factors that affect these dynamics. Further research is needed to explore these variations in more depth.

Pakistani and Bangladeshi women often have caring responsibilities that they manage alongside their paid work. Access to flexible work and affordable childcare is vital in allowing women to remain and progress in good work. This is a common challenge for women with children across ethnicities, but women with greater financial resources have more resources to navigate this inequality. The findings show how Pakistani and Bangladeshi women's caring responsibilities for children and wider family members often have a significant impact on their decision-making around how much they work or work at all; what sorts of work they pursue; and their overall wellbeing.

I wasn't earning money just for myself. I was earning money to make sure that, you know my mum was okay. My brother was at university as well ... I was looking after my youngest brother as well, because dad had left the family. So, you know, I just had to prioritise money over career.

— **Hena, British Bangladeshi partnership manager in public sector, 45-50 years old**

The women in this study identified a range of additional factors that shape their ability to manage these multiple responsibilities, such as whether they have family members in the UK who can help with childcare and household responsibilities. Another important factor is access to flexible working patterns, such as part-time contracts, flexible working hours and term-time or school-hours-only contracts. The right to work from home or locally and access to high-quality, affordable childcare also play a key role in balancing work and family responsibilities.

Affordable childcare would honestly be at the top of my [wish] list. It's very hard to find childcare that doesn't break the bank. At this point, if I was to put my children into childcare so I could do a longer workday, it would mean a lot of my monthly pay going towards childcare. It's not feasible, because also there's cost of living. We need to be able to live comfortably and not have our full pay go into childcare.

— **Zayna, British Bangladeshi, administrator in NHS, 30-35 years old**

Migrant mothers often face additional childcare barriers, both because their visa statuses may prevent them from accessing free childcare, and lack of nearby family support. Women who took career breaks due to familial or caring responsibilities faced several **challenges when attempting to re-enter the workforce, such as struggling to find jobs, having to retake qualifying exams, or do unpaid work experience again**. Women over 50 reported even greater challenges to re-entering the workforce after extended career breaks.

I can't claim any public funds ... There are so many things that I cannot claim because I'm not British. And I just feel like it's a bit weird, if I'm working, and you're taking my tax, and you're still not providing me [with] ... benefit[s]... That just seems unfair. So, you want me to go to work, but you won't provide me with free childcare.

— **Mehak, Pakistani, accountant, lived in the UK for seven years, 30-35 years old**

There are so many new graduates coming out all the time, it's very hard to return to something. So, whatever I would have to do I'd have to start from the beginning ... But I've also ran out of time, like, I'm [in my 50s] and if you're going to retire at 67 or whatever, who is going to invest in employing me? So, it's interesting ... Also I think, you know, when you have big gaps in your career it's harder to explain.

— **Tayibba, British Pakistani, not in employment, 55-60 years old**

8. Employers' perspectives and practices

Four employers across advertising, consultancy, marketing software and entertainment shared their views for this study. Three already employed Bangladeshi and Pakistani women; the fourth expressed a commitment to improving diversity, but recognised an underrepresentation of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in their workplace.

Employers cited low “brand awareness” among Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities as a barrier to access. They acknowledged that reliance on referrals, networks and LinkedIn limits diversity, excluding those outside

these circles. Many also lacked ties with local community organisations, missing opportunities to connect with local talent.

We don't have good connections into the Bangladesh community or the Pakistani community ... There's nothing that specifically we're doing ... to build those connections or to think about that. We try to kind of diversify our recruitment pipeline ... But I think that's like a big area for us to improve on. And I do think we kind of straddled tech and marketing and ... it's a very homogeneous group of people ... How can we collectively as an industry try to fix that kind of pipeline of brilliant people coming from different communities?

— *Employer, marketing software company*

Employers identified several challenges their companies and sectors face to support Bangladeshi and Pakistani women's career progression, including non-inclusive workplace cultures that don't accommodate religious or cultural needs – such as dress codes, prayer times, or observance of Ramadan. Exclusionary networking practices, such as after-hours events involving alcohol, were also identified as limiting opportunities for informal networking with senior staff. Additionally, a lack of senior role models and unclear progression pathways were seen as major obstacles to reaching career milestones.

Employers noted that appraisal processes can be biased, with managers valuing “team fit” over actual performance, which is often influenced by cultural biases. Tight deadlines also lead companies to hire externally rather than invest in developing existing staff, limiting progression opportunities for all, especially Bangladeshi and Pakistani women.

We will have appraisal coming up. We'll have two points during the year. So, we're thinking about what and how our people are going to be rated in terms of their performance. They're going to be elements of human bias present when it comes to their talent reviews and their ratings. We're seeing this already in the stats and what's coming up, and we've even done a deep dive into the demographics of the people and who are getting the higher ratings and for what reasons, and what the commentary behind it [is] as well. So, there's a lot more I think behind the scenes that needs to be done.

— *Employer, marketing software company*

8.1 What are employers already doing to address these challenges?

The employers interviewed did not report on any particular programme, policy or practice they engaged in specifically for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women. However, they highlighted organisational approaches to

foster diversity and inclusion, including:

- engaging in outreach programmes to reach out to schools and universities with diverse student bodies
- providing paid internships to diversify the pool of applicants
- allowing for flexible working and making reasonable adjustments
- providing training, and encouraging employers to attend – enhancing skill development and career progression
- establishing employees' resource groups centred around shared lived experiences, to build community
- establishing inclusive workplace cultures; and promoting networking and career development opportunities that are inclusive.

We sort of try and flip it on its head a little bit and say, like: what do you actually need to thrive? ... How can we help people to have the sort of autonomy over their role to be able to design their experience of work for whatever they've got going on, whatever commitments those are and just think actually, you know what, if you can have that kind of ... if you can increase the level of flexibility that you offer people?

— *Employer, advertising agency*

These findings also show the need for more skills-based hiring practices that prioritise a candidate's abilities and potential over traditional measures, such as grades or prior experience. Additionally, initiatives to provide mentorship and expand access to professional networks for underrepresented groups should be implemented within educational and community settings. Such measures would not only level the playing field but also help dismantle the structural inequities that currently restrict access to certain sectors and career paths.

— *Salomé Smith, community researcher*

9. Conclusion and recommendations

9.1 Recommendations

Interviews and a policy workshop informed key recommendations for employers, local authorities and the GLA, with additional input from GLA officers to develop specific proposals for national government.

9.1.1 Recommendations for employers

- **Work with community partners and local authorities to invest in targeted community and school outreach programmes** to build awareness of the companies, industries and careers that Bangladeshi and Pakistani women could aspire to.
- **Diversify and tackle bias in their own recruitment processes** through localised and skills-based approaches to recruitment, and by: recognising international qualifications; not ruling out sponsorship; providing information sessions to explain what is required of applicants; running blind recruitment; and diversifying interview panels.
- **Offer and value flexible working, to ensure women can balance work and family life** and are not excluded from employment and progression opportunities.
- **Support Bangladeshi and Pakistani women's career progression within their organisations** by training line managers to conduct developmental appraisals; broadening appraisals to include feedback from colleagues; providing training opportunities and internal mentorship schemes; establishing clear policies and procedures on progression routes; and sponsoring employees to take qualifications and/or study.
- **Create workplace cultures that value and practice inclusion** by:
 - critically assessing the EDI policies and bias training already offered
 - company-wide training to challenge stereotypes
 - considering undertaking the Good Work Standard free accreditation programme offered by the GLA
 - ensuring workers can understand the terms and conditions of their contract
 - recognising and raising employees' awareness of cultural and religious holidays
 - providing diversity and making accommodations in networking and socialising events
 - ensuring religious accommodations through, for example, guaranteed time off for celebrations and adequate facilities for prayer.
- **Develop and implement EDI monitoring and reporting good practice** by:
 - regularly monitoring differences in pay, progression and performance rating
 - tracking diversity by analysing employees' characteristics
 - conducting anonymous employee surveys or focus groups
 - establishing transparent systems for reporting complaints and harassment
 - producing reports on ethnicity and gender pay gaps, and giving employees the right to know the outcomes of these
 - creating workable action plans to address gaps and other disparities.

9.1.2 Recommendations for local authorities and the GLA

- **Assess how well existing employment and skills provision benefits Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London; and work towards developing inclusive provision** by setting up a task force, or commissioning research at a London-wide or local level.
- **Diversify employer engagement as part of local authorities' employment and skills provision**, to involve employers not only from SMEs, but also from large organisations across the core growth sectors of London, namely: the green economy; the creative and cultural industry; the digital and technology sector; health; and hospitality.
- **Encourage employers across sectors to enhance the access and progression of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women** within their organisations by providing employers with the evidence base as to why diverse and inclusive businesses have higher financial returns, are more innovative, and have greater employee engagement and wellbeing; and by establishing awards and public celebrations acknowledging and recognising employers' good practices concerning EDI, particularly for underrepresented groups,

including Bangladeshi and Pakistani women.

- **Act as brokers facilitating connection, relationship building and partnership working** among employers, education providers and community organisations supporting Bangladeshi and Pakistani women. This may involve building on existing programmes or creating opportunities for employers and senior leaders to connect with Bangladeshi and Pakistani women; actively promoting existing outreach, employment, training, and internship programmes by employers among Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities; and signposting Bangladeshi and Pakistani women and employers to immigration legal advice.
- **Expand knowledge of existing training and childcare provision among Bangladeshi and Pakistani women** by creating or expanding outreach programmes in schools, community organisations and mosques to raise awareness of formal early childhood education and care arrangements; available employability programmes that women are eligible for; and other adult learning opportunities.

The women I interviewed wanted to provide equally for their families and build their own individual identity as they wanted equal respect from society. For them, good work meant a sense of security, respect and recognition of their identity in the workplace ...

Free [adult] education is essential for women's access to the labour market because it provides the foundation for skill development, economic independence, and empowerment. It enables women to break through gender barriers and contribute to economic growth in addition to setting the example for their children and future generations.

— *Saman T. Khan, community researcher*

9.1.3 Recommendations for national government

- **Develop a national training programme for Jobcentre Plus staff in intercultural competency, and build community partnerships to deliver tailored employment advice** that is culturally sensitive – especially in highly diverse areas such as London. In regions with large Bangladeshi and Pakistani populations, partnerships with local faith and community organisations can help deliver services in trusted spaces and strengthen community relationships. Local authorities can play a key role in facilitating and sustaining these partnerships.
- **Increase provision of culturally sensitive, affordable childcare.** To support the workforce participation of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, childcare must be accessible, affordable, and culturally appropriate. The Department for Education should embed cultural diversity training into early years frameworks for childcare providers. Childcare services should be located in areas with high Bangladeshi and Pakistani populations; and local authorities should work with mosques, schools and community groups to improve awareness and access.
- **Support women re-entering the workforce.** The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should offer targeted programmes, apprenticeships and training for women at different life stages, including migrant women with unrecognised qualifications or those returning from career breaks. These initiatives should include community-based English language training, work experience, and flexible learning to help women re-enter and thrive in the workforce.
- **Make local Get Britain Working plans more inclusive of those with protected characteristics** by actively supporting employers to adopt inclusive hiring and retention practices and establish a culture of

inclusivity. Employers should monitor gender, ethnicity and disability pay gaps; address discrimination; and create progression pathways for underrepresented women. The GLA aims to support this through developing an Inclusive Talent Strategy that helps every Londoner into good work, to progress their career and grow the economy.

- **Devolve skills and employment budgets** to local level via mayoral authorities to enable coordinated, flexible, and employer-led skills and employment services and allocation of funding to communities that need it most. Partnerships with community groups and employers can promote outreach, training (including ESOL), and internships to help women build the skills needed to access new careers.
- **Develop a process for recognising and translating international qualifications in the UK labour market**, by raising awareness of services, provided by the UK National Information Centre, to recognise international qualifications. The DWP should consider providing financial support through existing discretionary funding, such as the Flexible Support Fund, to cover application costs for low-income migrants. Jobcentre Plus staff should be trained to guide jobseekers through this process.
- **Mitigate the intersectional impact of immigration reforms on migrant women's employment**, by introducing targeted policies that support skills development and reduce barriers for businesses to employ migrant women – particularly in key sectors experiencing staff shortages. This would increase Bangladeshi and Pakistani women's participation and progression in the UK labour market, and boost economic growth.

9.2 Conclusion

This research explores the lived experiences of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in London's labour market, revealing the barriers they face, and the opportunities needed for greater inclusion in good work. Too often, cultural factors are overstated as an explanation for economic inactivity, rather than recognising structural issues such as employer bias, discrimination, and the lack of inclusive workplace policies.

This study challenges these narratives, highlighting how they obscure the skills and aspirations of these women and reinforce their exclusion from meaningful employment.

A key strength of the research is its participatory approach. Seven community researchers with lived experience shaped this study, ensuring authenticity and amplifying the voices of those most affected. They uncovered recurring themes: discrimination, cultural expectations, limited flexible working, and a lack of career support. Despite this, they also found resilience and ambition.

By involving community researchers, this study ensured its recommendations were grounded in lived experience, showing how co-production can lead to more inclusive and effective outcomes.

To create lasting change, local authorities, employers and policymakers must act on these findings. Addressing systemic barriers is essential to building a labour market that reflects the diversity and potential of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women. Their voices must continue to shape policy, ensuring not just inclusion, but the opportunity to thrive.

Employers, policymakers, and community organisations must work together to remove barriers and create opportunities for (British) Pakistani and Bangladeshi women to thrive.

Recognising international qualifications, fostering inclusive workplaces, expanding childcare support, and providing career progression opportunities are just some of the steps needed ...

Addressing these challenges is not just about fairness – it is about unlocking the potential of a diverse and talented workforce to build a more inclusive and equitable society. As someone who has listened to their stories first-hand, I am convinced that these changes are not only possible but necessary for a better future.

— *Uroosa Syed, community researcher*

10. Appendix A: Advisory Board

NIESR, in collaboration with the GLA, established a diverse advisory board to guide strategy; support community outreach; strengthen our participatory approach; and boost engagement from employers and policymakers. It included two groups with distinct focuses: the Theory and Methods group to guide the team's methodological approach; and the Policy and Practice group to oversee stakeholder representation and engagement with the research.

10.1 Theory and Methods group members

- Professor Katharine Charsley (University of Bristol)
- Associate Professor Francesco Della Puppa (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia)
- Associate Professor Humera Iqbal (University College London)
- Professor Eleonore Kofman (Middlesex University)
- Professor Mohammad Morad (Shahjalal University of Science & Technology)
- Yamini Cinamon Nair (Senior Research and Statistical Analyst, City Intelligence, GLA)
- Dr Alex Patrick (Middlesex University)
- Associate Professor Jasber Singh (Coventry University)

10.2 Policy and Practice group members

- Heena Khaled (Events and Engagement manager, British Future; Co-founder, Advancing Voices of Women Against Islamophobia)
- Atikur Rahman (Centre Manager, Wapping Bangladesh Association)
- Lara Johnstone (Community Engagement Team, GLA)
- Asma Shah (Mayor's EDI Advisory Group; CEO, You Make It)
- Jeremy Crook (Chief Executive, Action for Race Equality)
- Neelam Rose (Advocacy Officer Muslim Women's Network UK)
- Dr Suriyah Bi (SOAS)
- Arooba Hameed (Community researcher)
- Hassaan Jamil Anwari (Researcher, Runnymede)

11. Appendix B: Methodology

11.1 Community Research Fellowship

NIESR launched a Community Research Fellowship to involve Bangladeshi and Pakistani women as community researchers, recognising their lived experience and community expertise. This participatory approach, rooted in feminist and decolonial methodologies (Smith, 1999)[Reference:35](#); Fine and Torre, 2021), aimed to ensure the research was empowering, and shaped by those most affected. Guided by the Mayor of London's Good Work Standard, the Fellowship offered:

- fair pay above the London Living Wage
- flexible hours to accommodate personal commitments
- research training, networking, and dissemination opportunities
- ongoing mentoring and career support, including certificates and references.

11.1.1 Recruitment and co-production

Between June and July 2024, NIESR recruited seven London-based women of Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage as community researchers, through a widely shared job description and flyer. These researchers – selected from 58 applicants – signed contracts with NIESR and received training in research methods, ethics and safeguarding.

Community researchers were actively involved in all stages of this study – from co-designing research tools and conducting interviews, to contributing to analysis and dissemination. Ongoing support included weekly meetings, debriefs and one-to-one guidance. This helped to build trust, address power dynamics, and ensure fair working conditions throughout the project.

11.1.2 Challenges

- **Funding:** Limited resources meant community researchers had few paid hours, mostly focused on training, interviews and dissemination. Only one paid day was allocated for data analysis, limiting their involvement in that phase.
- **Time:** Participatory research required regular meetings, tailored training, and individual feedback; this was challenging within fixed timelines and limited funding.
- **Positionality:** While the NIESR and WIN teams were diverse, none were Bangladeshi, Pakistani or Muslim. This led to cultural oversights (e.g., scheduling during Ramadan). We addressed this by fostering “cultural humility” (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998)[Reference:36](#) and actively involving community researchers in key decisions.

11.2 Data collection

11.2.1 Interviews with Pakistani and Bangladeshi women

Participants were recruited via community researchers' personal networks, social media, community groups, advisory board, and outreach at Wapping Bangladesh Association.

A co-produced sampling framework ensured diversity across six variables: employment, education, life stage, religion, migration and language. Participants completed a form (or had it completed for them) to support this.

Between August and October 2024, 32 interviews were conducted in various settings (homes, public spaces, online) by the community researchers. Interviews averaged 60 minutes; they were recorded with consent, and professionally transcribed and translated where needed. Participants received a £25 shopping voucher in appreciation.

Table 11.1 - Key demographics of the 32 women interviewed

Characteristics	No. of participants
Interview language	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 26 English• 4 Bengali• 1 Sylheti• 1 Urdu
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Age range: 21-60• Average age 37.1
Country of birth	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• UK: 15• Bangladesh: 9• Pakistan: 8
Age upon arrival to the UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Born and raised in the UK: 15• Immigrated before their 5th birthday: 5• Immigrated before their 18th birthday: 1• Immigrated before their 25th birthday: 6• Immigrated before their 30th birthday: 2• Immigrated before their 40th birthday: 3
Length of time in the UK for migrant women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Range: 1 to 46 years• Average: 19
Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bangladeshi: 16• Pakistani: 16

Characteristics	No. of participants
Self-identified cultural/religious affiliations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslim: 30 • No religious affiliations: 1 • Unknown: 1
Wear the hijab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes: 18 • No: 14
Visa status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British citizens: 29 • Spousal visa 2 • Work visa: 1
Disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No: 22 • Yes: 3 • Prefer not to say: 4 • Unknown: 5
Currently in work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes: 23 • No: 9
Sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal: 3 • Tech sector: 1 • Education and childcare: 3 • Public sector administration/management: 6 • Finance: 3 • Health and social care: 3 • Student: 1 • Charitable sector: 3
Education level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary School: 6 • Undergraduate: 15 • Postgraduate: 4 • Masters: 7
Marital status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Married: 25 (of which 2 are separated) • Unmarried: 7
Number of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No children: 12 • One child: 5 • Two or more children: 15

Characteristics	No. of participants
Where they live	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East London: 21 • South London: 6 • North London: 2 • West London: 3

11.2.2 Employer interviews

NIESR interviewed four London-based employers to understand their views on the barriers and opportunities for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in the labour market. Discussions focussed on existing policies to support diversity and career progression and potential solutions to improve access to good work.

NIESR researchers conducted one focus group (three participants) and one individual interview, all with HR staff from large companies in advertising, consultancy, marketing software, and entertainment. Employers were recruited via WIN, trade unions, and professional networks.

Table 11.2 - Employer focus groups' participants

Participant demographic	Role/job title	Type of organisation	Size and location	Sector
Muslim, female	Learning and Development Adviser (HR)	Management consultancy business	Large, global, London	Digital and tech
British Bangladeshi, female	Diversity Equity and Inclusion Partner (HR)	Advertising agency	Large, global, London	Creative and cultural sector
White British male	Chief People Office (HR)	Marketing software company	Large, US and UK, with headquarter in London	Creative and cultural sector
British Pakistani, Female	Senior Director	Entertainment company	Large, global, London	Digital and tech

11.2.3 Policy Workshop

In January 2025, NIESR held a two-hour in-person policy workshop with 12 participants, including GLA staff, local authorities, community researchers, and VCS representatives, to refine draft recommendations, ensuring they were practical and actionable.

11.3 Analysis and ethics

NIESR used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021)[Reference:37](#) across all data sources, including interviews, focus groups, and fieldnotes. NIESR researchers developed a codebook from an initial data sample, which was refined throughout the process. Data was then grouped and analysed for key themes and patterns.

Ethical approval was granted by the NIESR Research Ethics Committee in June 2024. A Data Protection Impact Assessment was also approved. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with translated materials and verbal explanations provided where needed. All data was anonymised and handled in line with best practices (Social Research Association, 2021).

11.4 Limitations

- This study is based on a small, non-representative sample. Most migrant women interviewed were on spousal visas and in low-skilled jobs, while second-generation women were often graduates in skilled roles. Differences between groups were hard to isolate due to sample size and complexity.
- There are limited findings on the impact of health, housing, poverty, precarious work, and self-employment on interviewees due to sample and interview design.
- Recruitment challenges meant only four employers participated in focus groups, mostly HR professionals already committed to EDI. Notably, three were Muslim women, two of Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage, offering valuable insights.

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Greater London Authority
August 2025

Published by
Greater London Authority
City Hall
Kamal Chunchie Way
London E16 1ZE

enquiries 020 7983 4000
minicom 020 7983 4458

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