

THE NEEDS OF ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN IN READING

AND HOW WELL THESE NEEDS ARE MET BY THE READING
COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reading Community Learning Centre (RCLC) is a charity that helps ethnic minority women and their families who live in Reading. Their stated aims are to reach out and empower isolated and vulnerable women to grow their skills, confidence, welfare, inclusion, social status and independence. They do this through learning, support and friendship. Most of the women are migrants who speak little or no English, and who value the women-only environment. As this report will highlight, the RCLC provides valuable opportunities for ethnic minority women to gain education and helps them bridge the gap between their own culture and mainstream British cultures by providing classes (particularly the opportunity to learn English) and also by offering a space for cross-cultural social connection. Clients range from long-term British nationals to refugees and asylum seekers; and from the highly educated to those who never had an opportunity of a formal education in their homeland.

This study reviewed how well RCLC is meeting the needs of Reading's ethnic minority women. The particular questions under review were:

- Does RCLC's meet a genuine need not covered elsewhere in Reading?
- Does RCLC succeed in providing for the most vulnerable of all ethnic minority women?
- Is RCLC going about the task in an optimal way?

Answers to these questions were drawn from:

- Questionnaire-based interviews with 114 ethnic minority women (over 70% from outside of RCLC);
- Interviews with representatives of seven organisations serving vulnerable communities in Reading;
- Focus group feedback;
- Academic literature - especially looking at the various domains of 'integration' and the things that help it forward or hold it back. Integration (the goal) is seen as involving successful participation in the areas of employment, housing, education, health, social ties (with the wider community as well as within the individual's ethnic group), language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability, and taking on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Doing well in all of these areas is desirable.

Findings:

1 Reading Community Learning Centre (RCLC) is meeting a genuine need that is not provided for by other organisations in Reading.

- English language learning and developing social ties (especially cross cultural social ties) were both found to be important needs of ethnic minority women.
- Many lacked alternative opportunities to develop these.

- Women with language skills and who had social ties were a lot better off in other ways also (happier, more confident, better integrated, less likely to report problems).
- English language and social ties were found to be mutually reinforcing, so the fact that RCLC addresses both together is of added value.
- Other organisations also feel these services are of value, filling a gap in Reading's provision of services to ethnic minority women and meeting needs in a way that other forms of integration (such as workplace integration) cannot meet.

2 The clientele of RCLC appears to match the profile of particularly vulnerable women

RCLC's clientele is predominantly from the Arab world and South Asia. It includes some representation from China and the Far East and just a little from Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe or South America. The research revealed that different ethnicities tend to struggle with different forms of integration, and it would appear that RCLC is targeting the ethnicities most in need of its particular services:

- Arab Muslim women and South Asian women were particularly vulnerable in terms of distance from the work place and lack of knowledge about mainstream British cultures. They had few cross-cultural connections and (apart from Indians and Pakistanis) they struggled with the language.
- Women from the China and the Far East struggled with language and cross-cultural interaction, but were better integrated in the workplace.
- Sub-Saharan African women faced many problems, but not so much in the area of language and group connection, which is the speciality of RCLC.
- Regarding other forms of vulnerability:
- Comparing women inside of RCLC to women outside of RCLC, no evidence was found to suggest that RCLC had missed any particularly vulnerable group.
- RCLC clients were particularly vulnerable in terms of their social and workplace integration, and their knowledge of the English language.
- Highly educated women were not necessarily better integrated.
- Women whose families had money did not necessarily have the freedom to spend this money on themselves.
- Educated and monied persons should not therefore be excluded from RCLC services.
- Although priority may rightly be given to new arrivals in Britain, an important number of women remain marginalised even after many years in Britain, and should not be automatically excluded.

3 Is RCLC going about the task in an optimal way?

Strengths which are found to increase RCLC's impact and/or the accessibility of RCLC services to ethnic minority women:

- A friendly (confidence building) multi-cultural environment;
- Low cost/free services (important to over 80% of women interviewed, especially since investments in women's knowledge and skills is not necessarily a priority for struggling families);
- Women only (important to half those interviewed, and much more than half for Muslim and South Asian groups);
- Various levels of English and courses other than English;
- Crèche to allow women with small children to participate in classes (important to the majority of women);
- Daytime classes (Arab and South Asian women were particularly reluctant to venture out late);
- Central location (easy to get to – important as many women find transport problematic);
- Accumulation of knowledge and experience by RCLC along with a good reputation. RCLC is also networked with other charities which helps with signposting women onwards.
- The volunteering opportunities RCLC offers can help women take further steps of integration.

Areas which RCLC could develop further:

- More attention/sharper focus given to cultural orientation. It is known that social integration with mainstream cultures involves learning the language, physically meeting people and cultural orientation which aids understanding. Perhaps make more use of mainstream British volunteers for specific presentations?

- There was also enthusiasm for cultural orientation expressed by RCLC clients, who had not mentioned/understood this as being a key feature of what RCLC does.
- Develop and highlight further ways in which clients can map their potential personal future paths from RCLC into other areas of integration appropriate to their circumstances.
- External organisations in particular wanted to know what the plan is post-RCLC. Are women being helped to articulate and then progress towards their personal goals? (This is important also for wellbeing);
- Improve collaboration with other organisations (complement one another rather than duplicating effort, communicate and collaborate also on funding and on giving women a voice);
- Despite positive external assessments of the quality of their learning opportunities, RCLC should continue to enhance the quality and professionalism of its' service provision and be mindful of the demand from some learners for progression to accredited learning.¹

Points on publicity:

- Word of mouth (personal recommendation) and repeat publicity are essential.
- Keep other organisations working in the sector updated.
- Consider a name change or the addition of a strapline such that it is clearer who RCLC's services are for, and what it offers.
- Choose the wording of flyers carefully to avoid framing clients as 'needy'. Avoid stigma.
- The ethnicity of the outreach worker affects receptiveness to the services. Could more use be made of existing RCLC learners if organised?

A fuller summary of this report may be found in Section 6 under 'Summary and conclusions'.

¹ New Directions and WEA provide accredited courses so it is not the intention of RCLC to change its current provision.

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1. CONTEXT, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

Context

Reading Community Learning Centre (RCLC) is a charity that helps ethnic minority women and their families who live in Reading. Their stated aims are to reach out and empower isolated and vulnerable women to grow their skills, confidence, welfare, inclusion, social status and independence. They do this through learning, support and friendship. Most of the women are migrants who speak little or no English, and who value the women-only environment.

RCLC provides:

- Free and informal non-accredited classes in English conversation, reading and writing, IT, sewing, health, beauty/confidence building, employability and arts;
- Volunteer opportunities for ethnic minority women in-house;
- Tailored information, advice and guidance;
- An Ofsted accredited crèche so women can access their services and not struggle with childcare.

RCLC attracts 300 learners each year from around 24 countries. Most courses have waiting lists of around 15 women.

Reading Community Learning Centre (RCLC) commissioned this independent 'needs assessment' in order to verify whether its services are genuinely what ethnic minority women need (examining the needs of ethnic minority women who do, and do not, currently use the centre), and whether those services are being provided in a way that ethnic minority women can easily engage with. By comparing the needs and preferences of ethnic minority women to the services that RCLC provides, it could be seen whether RCLC's service provision is on target. The evidence of this report may also be of interest to other stakeholders and funders.

The research questions

There were three main research questions:

- 1 What do ethnic minority women outside RCLC networks need in order to grow their skills, confidence, welfare, inclusion, social status and independence?**

This information is useful to:

- a) Check that RCLC is targeting its activities correctly
- b) Check who the most vulnerable/needy/unhappy groups are in Reading, so as to direct publicity towards these groups.
- c) Discover what key points attract Reading ethnic minority women, so as to know how to design publicity and how to provide services in an appropriate way.

- 2 How do other stakeholders and service providers perceive RCLC?**

This information is useful because:

- a) Other service providers may have useful insights into the needs of ethnic minority women concerning skills, confidence, welfare, inclusion, social status and independence.
- b) Other service providers will have opinions on the value of RCLC services: the extent to which those services are unique and not provided by other organisations, and the extent to which they complement the work of other organisations.
- c) The information will help RCLC to understand how it can best network with and complement the work of other organisations, and its key 'selling' points. It helps to reveal RCLC's place within Reading's voluntary sector.

- 3 What do ethnic minority women inside RCLC networks say they need to 'grow their skills, confidence, welfare, inclusion, social status and independence', and what do they think of RCLC?**

This information evidences whether:

- a) RCLC meets expressed needs regarding growing skills, confidence, welfare, inclusion, social status and independence.
- b) Whether RCLC is meeting these needs in the right way? (e.g. being women only or providing crèche – are these things important? Are other factors more important?)

In short, we want to know whether RCLC is meeting a real need that is not met elsewhere in Reading, we want to know if it is reaching the most vulnerable ethnic minority women, and we want to know if it is going about the task in the right way.

Structure of report

The report starts with the methodology for this research; how we went about getting answers to the above questions. Then, based on the findings of this research, we report on the needs of ethnic minority women in Reading in relation to RCLC's provision..

RCLC's aim of helping ethnic minority women grow their skills, confidence, welfare, inclusion, social status and independence may also be seen as helping them to integrate more fully into mainstream British cultures. We therefore started by examining other studies of what is needed for such 'integration' to be successful. This helps us to be clear about the overarching outcomes that various organisations are working towards, before honing in on RCLC's particular contribution to the whole. We also look at what other organisations in Reading say about the needs of ethnic minority women and how RCLC fits into the picture. After this, we go on to look at what women inside and outside of RCLC networks said they need, and compare these needs to RCLC provision. From this data, we can draw conclusions about whether RCLC is meeting the right needs in the right way, and put forwards any recommendations for improvement.



2. METHODOLOGY

Multiple strands of data were gathered for this report:

Academic Literature

Firstly, we refer to the academic literature to critically explore how the 'successful' integration of ethnic minority communities might be defined and understood in the UK context. Each of its various aspects are outlined. This framework can be used as a basis for understanding the particular contribution of RCLC.

Other organisations working with ethnic minority communities in Reading

Secondly, we consulted other organisations in Reading which work with ethnic minority families and communities. This was to see how RCLC's provision fits into the wider provision for this sector of the population, and to gain insights into what others regard to be priorities and best practice approaches.

RCLC mapped out their links with other organisations and selected 10 of them for interview. Out of these, seven agreed to participate (being summer holidays when this part of the research was carried out, not all personnel were available).

The interviews were carried out by two University of Reading students employed for a summer internship. The interviews were based around set but open-ended questions. At the beginning, these interviews lasted 20-30 minutes, but as refinements were made and experience gained, the interview time went down to 15-20 minutes. Good ethical practice (regarding permissions and data protection etc.) was observed throughout.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the interns, who subsequently pulled out a list of key points for each interview question.

Ethnic minority women

The third source of information was data collected from ethnic minority women both inside and outside of RCLC networks using a participatory methodology. The way this part of the research was carried out was deliberately designed to involve current RCLC learners as co-producers of the research. Thus, they not only answered questions, they were also involved in the process of building the questionnaire, which went through many revisions in response to discussion (not only to ensure the questions would throw up useful information, but also to ensure that the questions could be easily understood and were not overly intrusive).

RCLC learners and staff were also involved in the process of disseminating the questionnaire, following training by University of Reading researchers. This was highly effective since ethnic minority women in the community felt comfortable talking to people from within their communities (both interviewer and interviewee were more relaxed). Because of the rapport between interviewer and interviewee, conversations were begun which sometimes turned into in-depth interviews, all of which the interviewer also recorded,

enriching our analysis. Disseminating the surveys through ethnic minority women was also beneficial where interviewer and interviewee spoke the same language. Indeed, some of the surveys had to be translated by the interviewer in order to gather responses.

Furthermore, interviewer feedback groups were held to promote discussion of the findings and to pick up on reoccurring themes. Focus group discussion provided extra insight into some of the responses. The data gathered therefore had both quantitative and qualitative elements. The survey responses gave clear yes/no answers to questions which could be analysed using rigorous quantitative techniques, whilst the discussion groups and interviews provided more understanding of the reasoning behind the responses.

114 individual interviews were carried out altogether, 32 within RCLC (a sample biased towards the more advanced English language learners who could manage the questionnaire) and 82 outside. A range of women were interviewed, from British born ethnic minorities to refugees and asylum seekers. These surveys asked about the circumstances of ethnic minority women, their ambitions, the barriers to progress they face, and some questions about their interest in the sort of services that RCLC provides. The surveys were carried out in places in which ethnic minority women gather, including places of worship, community groups and learning centres. The surveys were conducted face-to-face, one ethnic minority woman to another, although in some cases the interviewee preferred to take the questionnaire and fill it in by themselves.

RCLC records

The final source of information, though used sparingly, was RCLC records. These were used sparingly since the aim was to collect new and independent information. However, there was some value in putting some of our findings into the context of the pre-recorded information.



3. LITERATURE REVIEW: A FRAMEWORK OF 'INTEGRATION' AS APPLICABLE TO MINORITIES

The integration of ethnic minority communities into host societies has become a dominant theme in national domestic policy throughout Europe and immigrant-receiving societies are increasingly emphasizing the need for migrants to 'integrate' into mainstream life (Nagel and Staeheli, 2008). 'Integration', however, is a widely contested socio-political process and many integration policies have been rightly criticised for placing the onus of successful intercultural relations on the members of minority community groups to adopt the cultural practices of host societies (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010). The term 'cultural integration' implies that there is a unitary 'culture' into which a person from another culture can become 'integrated' (see Anjum et al, 2018). However, no culture is monolithic or unitary – and nor are cultures fixed and unchanging (Storry and Childs, 2016). There are a variety of British 'cultures' or subcultures which may differ in many ways – for example, by class, by ethnicity, by age, by place (city, town or rural area), or by nationality (English, Welsh, Scottish, Caribbean, Asian). Nevertheless, these different subcultures will share many ways of behaving and beliefs about how people ought to behave which we might therefore describe as 'mainstream' British cultural attributes. Thus in this report we understand integration as a two-way process in which members of the host society, in all their diversity, and minority groups display mutual accommodation and strive for intercultural connections that are of benefit to everyone (Ager and Strang, 2008) and we have used the term 'mainstream British cultures' to signal the variety and changeability of 'British culture'.

Ager and Strang (2004; 2008) have attempted to define what the 'successful' integration of ethnic minorities might look like. The UK Home Office Immigration Research and Statistical Service commissioned their research in 2004, and the framework has been of subsequent influence on national and regional policy. We do not suggest that integration is a particular goal of RCLC, a task for Reading's migrant communities alone or that the participants in this study should be expected to 'conform' to a particular way of life or set of cultural norms (McPherson, 2010). However, it is helpful to have this framework in mind before considering where ethnic minority women in Reading see themselves within this picture, and whether and how RCLC is contributing to these broader debates around integration. To Ager and Strang's framework we also add notes from a wide ranging literature review on the social integration of migrants in Europe, including the work carried out by Spencer and Cooper in 2006 which was commissioned by the OECD to explore the political, social, economic and institutional factors influencing processes of integration.

Ager and Strang identify 10 domains which matter to integration,

each discrete and yet all interlinked and complementary to one another. A summary of these 10 domains can be seen in Figure 1. It is clear that increasing levels of achievement and access in each of these domains is desirable for all members of society, not just ethnic minorities, but as framework for understanding integration, the model is useful.

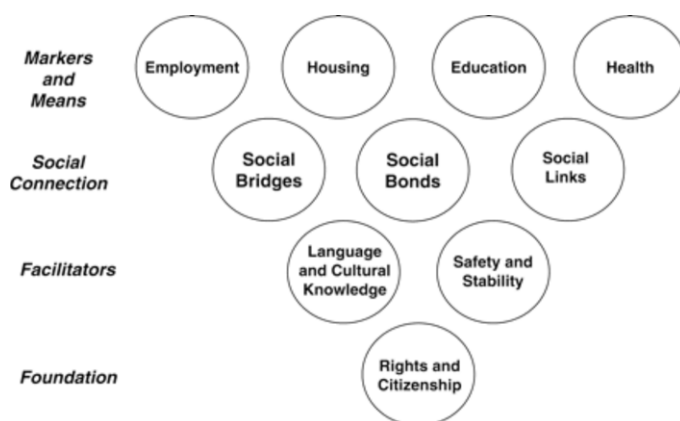


Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework Defining Core Domains of Integration. Source: Ager and Strang 2008

Along the top are measurable means of achieving welfare and resilience covering the domains of employment, housing, education and health. The next set of domains include various forms of social connection. Then two facilitators to everything else: 'language with cultural knowledge' plus 'safety and stability'. Finally, and foundationally, the domain of rights and citizenship. All of these domains contribute directly to welfare and a sense of security. They also interlink with one another, such that success in one depends on progress being made in another. Where people are secure in each of these areas, they can be said to be 'successfully integrated'. We will consider each of these briefly in turn.

Employment is a means to economic independence, self-reliance and self-esteem. It can also help isolated people from ethnic minority communities learn about the beliefs and behaviours of members of mainstream British cultures.

Housing is important to feel 'at home'. Insecure tenancies or frequent relocation can be extremely detrimental to the feeling of security and also to a person's establishment in social networks. Housing is closely linked to the domain of safety and stability. Ethnic minorities are disproportionately located in areas with poor quality housing and higher levels of deprivation, which contributes to insecurity and lack of wellbeing.

Education is linked to employment, and also to social networking. Employment opportunities may be limited if the foreign qualifications of ethnic minorities are not recognized in the UK. The second generation is also disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of education, which has to do with the more deprived areas in which they live. These things have ongoing negative implications for their sense of deprivation and exclusion; lack of choice and also discrimination may lead them to stick together and shun integration (Spencer and Cooper 2006). Indeed, many second-generation migrants identify with their parent's home country and faith, and these factors can contribute to a sense of 'separateness'.

Health problems are compounded by language barriers, which can restrict access to health services, leaving ethnic minorities disproportionately disadvantaged and misinformed about health and health services. Spencer and Cooper note how locations experienced in welcoming migrants tend to become better equipped with structures that improve access to services. Health affects everything else, and mental health is often a reflection of the state of everything else. Mental health (or to put it in more positive terms: wellbeing) is intimately linked with thriving. Whilst wellbeing is partly influenced by external conditions, its status also influences those conditions, since positive mental health increases a person's resilience to those conditions and their ability to overcome them (Friedli 2009; Skills for Care 2016). However, because of problems of isolation, mental health often gets worse after arrival in the host country (Spencer and Cooper 2006)

Social connections can be divided into three distinct domains. Social bridges are the relationships an ethnic minority person has with people in other ethnic groups; social bonds are the relationships a person has within their own ethnic group; and social links are the relationships a person has with state structures. Each of these are important in their own way:

Social bridges open up access to opportunities for progress and integration in the UK. But besides helping people forward in practical ways, social bridges also impact wellbeing directly. For example, the friendliness of local people is intimately associated with the sense of wellbeing reported by ethnic minorities. Charities provide structures through which people from different social networks are able to meet, and therefore have an important role to play in helping ethnic minorities to link with the mainstream population. Indeed, Spencer and Cooper (2006) find that initiatives for integration coming only from the welfare state can foster a sense of dependency, whilst voluntary and community initiatives do not. Thus, charities that cross cultural boundaries are extremely important in helping ethnic minorities to overcome a sense of 'separateness' and take steps towards integration. More needs to be done however, since ethnic minorities are generally under-represented in group activities.

Social bonds are close, in-group relational ties. Where these ties are supportive, they improve quality of life, reducing poor mental health (stress and depression). Faith is often an important unifying factor that leads to increases in levels of networking. There have been some concerns that strong social bonds

can prevent people integrating with mainstream culture, but evidence suggests that although lack of wider integration can be a problem, the root cause is not necessarily social bonds; strong social ties in one area do not exclude the possibility of having strong ties in another. Solid social bonds can empower people to launch social bridges and links, with the strength in numbers giving voice to ethnic minorities; even political voice (Maxwell 2012). However, 'ethnic minorities' are not a homogenous group, and the 'voice' provided is not necessarily representative of all. Because of the diversity of the migrant population and poor levels of funding and organisation, it can be the more committed or outspoken leaders, perhaps those united along faith lines, who tend to end up in leadership positions (Spencer and Cooper 2006). Thus care needs to be taken to understand the needs of individuals, not assuming that some speak for all. Important though social bonds may be, it is important that all domains of integration are addressed in order to avoid society fracturing along ethnicised social and economic lines.

Social links are between the person and state structures. These links are important for gaining access to health, education and housing. Making these links more accessible, for example, through the provision of interpreters, can be of importance. Spencer and Cooper (2006) emphasise how building social ties is a two-way process (Anjum et al, 2016). There needs to be a willingness on the part of ethnic minority communities to participate, and also a willingness of persons from the 'mainstream' culture to accommodate the particular language and cultural needs of ethnic minorities. This applies to the provision of state services as well as to networking within the informal and charitable sector.

Language and cultural knowledge can constitute a barrier to integration which must be overcome before much advance can be made in the other domains of integration. Almost everything depends on language. Ager and Strang say that it is "consistently identified as central to the integration process." However, it is not enough to simply provide language classes. They must be provided in a way that can be accessed by people from very different cultures, and carried out in ways that introduce the migrant to broader aspects of UK culture. Lack of understanding of the host culture can be isolating, which is alienating and damages mental health. Thus, Spencer and Cooper say that combining language tuition with social orientation, and tailoring all of this to the cultural sensibilities of the ethnic minorities is of importance.

Safety and Stability has already been mentioned under housing. Feeling safe and happy in one's housing, with no expectation of having to move on is foundational to putting down roots and engaging positively with one's wider environment.

Legal rights and citizenship are a pre-requisite of integration, but not a sufficient condition for this in themselves. There is also a need for a personal assimilation of the rights and responsibilities that go with citizenship. This begs the question of what exactly our 'national values' are: culture being in a continuous state of flux. Not a simple subject, but certainly there is a necessity for respect and for full and equal engagement across all members of a society. Demonstrating that we have far to go is the fact that ethnic minorities, and ethnic minority women in particular, are much less likely to engage in civic activities like voting than the mainstream population (Spencer and Cooper 2006). The role of women in the home is also a matter of hot debate as ethnic minority women get to know UK culture.

All of these elements matter, but for wellbeing (good mental health) Ager and Strang find that the friendliness of the host population is paramount, then satisfaction with housing conditions, then social bonds, then other social interaction, then language knowledge (which also helps social interaction) and after all these, activities not directly related to socializing. It would seem that health problems or harassment and intimidation, whilst both important factors in themselves, have less impact on wellbeing than all of these.

The Handbook on Integration (European Commission 2010) suggests that organisations working for the effective integration of minorities ask themselves the following questions: does your work improve wellbeing long term? Does it lead to a convergence of outcomes for all members of a diverse society? Does it facilitate active participation? Does it increase skills and competences? Does it facilitate institutional openness and cultural change? We can apply all these issues and questions to the work of RCLC, to see how effective a programme it is.

The following sections therefore go on to consider what other organisations say about RCLC in the context of perceived need, and then what ethnic minority women say, both inside and outside of RCLC. Our conclusions pull the findings together and consider the question of whether RCLC meets needs that are not met elsewhere, whether it is targeting the right groups, and whether it is doing this in the right way.



4. OPINION OF SEVEN ORGANISATIONS WORKING WITH VULNERABLE PEOPLE IN READING

RCLC collaborates with many other organisations in order to deliver its programme. Besides funding collaborations, signposting between one organisation and another can enable ethnic minority women to get the best services available for their particular needs. RCLC staff listed up 73 different organisations in Reading that they knew of whose work touched on the needs of ethnic minority women in one way or another. RCLC keeps in regular or semi-regular touch with about 40 of these and had strong ties with eight.

Representatives from seven organisations were interviewed: three which were closely linked to RCLC, three which were loosely linked, and one with no active connection at all. These interviews offered insights into the barriers facing ethnic minority women; they revealed how other organisations view RCLC provision; and they explored how the work of different service providers in Reading might fit together. The organisations included:

- Reading Voluntary Action (who recruit and train volunteers to support Reading's voluntary and community sector).
- Mother Tongue (a multi-ethnic counselling and listening service.²)
- Berkshire Women's Aid (against domestic abuse).
- New Directions (a learning and employment service).
- Reading Refugee Support Group (supporting refugees).
- Elevate Berkshire (a careers advice and support service).
- Reading Borough Council (local government services).

It can be seen that only two of these organisations are dedicated exclusively to ethnic minorities, although their services all link in to the overall provision.

4.1 Needs/problems/barriers faced by ethnic minority women

Each organisation representative was asked what needs and problems are faced by ethnic minority women in Reading, either as new arrivals or as settled communities. They were also asked what barriers exist to getting those needs met. Responses can be grouped under the following headings:

Isolation: Making contact with other people is hard, particularly when language skills are limited. This ultimately hinders cultural integration and the formation of new social networks and friendships with the move to a new land. Getting about can be a problem, and many women do not even know what opportunities are available to them.

Cultural Barriers and childcare: Women are often expected to remain at home and their integration is not necessarily prioritised in ethnic minority families. Some family environments may even be oppressive to women. There is a lot of resistance to women making decisions that are counter-cultural. Childcare duties can also limit other options open to women. Some women don't feel able to support their children in school.

Costs: Costs limit integration (e.g. paying for English lessons). The benefit system may be difficult to access because of having to fill out forms and because of the rules.

Accessing help: Not knowing where to get help is one problem, but even if women know where to get help, this is not always available straight away. Some women are pushed from one organisation to another without result. Sometimes help is available, but not in a way that women can access (due to cost, cultural barriers or childcare).

Racism: Mixing with local people is also hindered because of lack of openness on the side of the mainstream population. Stigma and perceived cultural issues can be a barrier. Employers need to become more open about taking on poor English speakers for example.

Mental health/wellbeing: The problem of emotional barriers/fears/anxieties were highlighted, partly as a result of the above, but also affecting with knock on effects to how well a woman can overcome these barriers.

Pretty much everyone interviewed talked of language and isolation as key problems for ethnic minority women, which is exactly the need that RCLC seeks to provide for.



² At the time of the interviews, Mother Tongue was also providing an interpreting service. The charity closed in March 2018.

4.2 Gaps in Reading's provision

Next, representatives of the various organisations were asked what the gaps there are in Reading's provision for ethnic minority women. Answers mirrored the barriers listed above to some extent but focussed in on inclusivity and accessibility.

The exclusivity of many community groups makes cross cultural mixing difficult - spaces are needed where meaningful cross-cultural relationships can be formed. Providing a place to get exercise (which is also good for mental health and for social interaction) could help. Work also needs to be done with members of mainstream British cultures and with employers to become more open. Providing translation services where essential (but not to replace learning English!) and providing crèche facilities could also increase accessibility. Some women need help with filling in forms in order to access services. Free and also accredited English and other courses could help, especially where qualifications from one's home country are not recognised.

Funding for programmes aiming to fill these gaps is tight. A better collaboration between service providers could help to avoid duplication and could be useful in obtaining funding.

4.3 Opinion of RCLC's work

Regarding RCLC, the organisation representatives were asked what comes to mind when they think of RCLC. They were also asked to describe the barriers that RCLC addresses, and the typical profile of RCLC clients. Finally, they were asked about the strengths and weaknesses of RCLC provision. All this was in order to find out what image RCLC has in the minds of others.

All but one of the organisations (the one least collaborated with) had some idea of what RCLC does but were sometimes sketchy on the details. Not everyone was aware that the focus was particularly on ethnic minority women. One thought that RCLC served people out of employment for example; another, single parent families. Those who knew most answered the question on what RCLC does by focussing equally on the provision of courses (for upskilling and also to aid integration) and the provision of supportive and confidence building social networks. The question was raised of whether the name 'Reading Community Learning Centre' gives a sufficiently clear indication of what the organisation is about, especially in terms of its specialist provision for ethnic minority women.

The social/emotional support RCLC provides was appreciated by most of the interviewees, although the value of emotional support if divorced from progress in other areas of integration was not universally appreciated. Whilst social and emotional wellbeing is of value in its own right, evidence of progression from RCLC into more formal structures (mainstream education, volunteering and employment) is desirable. There were some concerns that RCLC is so nice to be at that women do not want to progress onwards. Questions were raised as to how 'focussed' RCLC staff are on moving women forward in their integration.

Most organisations valued the accessibility of RCLC services to ethnic minority women. Its accessibility was seen to be increased

by having free courses, a women-only environment, various levels of English, a comfortable and welcoming environment and provision for small children. Its inclusive, multi-cultural ethos and its willingness to adapt courses to the needs of the current clients was also seen as a strength. The question was raised, however, as to whether there is scope for increasing professionalism in the delivery of courses.³

RCLC has built up a lot of trust, both with its clients and the wider service sector. Some groups in the wider sector thought that RCLC has built up a lot of experience with and understanding of their client group. Having the trust of clients who feel safe and supported at RCLC is important for learning, ease of cross-cultural interaction, confidence building and mental wellbeing. Having the trust of other organisations is important in order for them to signpost their women to its services. Other organisations also appreciated how RCLC signposted women on to other organisations who could assist them in their integration. This leads however to an area in which it was thought that RCLC could do better – keeping other organisations up to date with information that they can then pass on to their clients.

Collaboration between the different organisations could improve overall provision for ethnic minority women. Organisations need to collaborate more on service provision - aiding women in moving from one organisation to another depending on individual need. They might also collaborate instead of competing for funding. Joint funding bids could be a way forward. Collaboration will also provide a wider platform from which to get concerns heard/give women a voice.

³ RCLC notes in response to this that the quality of learning opportunities is externally observed, assessed and approved by New Directions



4.4 Key take-away points

Overall, it may be seen that RCLC's provision is addressing some of the most important needs perceived to exist amongst ethnic minority women. Its contribution to social networking as well as the language skills gained are generally perceived to be empowering and confidence building. Its multi-cultural character is also seen as positive for integration.

The way that RCLC carries out its work is also perceived positively, as effective in making its services accessible to this particular clientele. The crèche, the low-cost classes, the warm and welcoming atmosphere and even the women only environment were all highlighted as strengths.

RCLC is mostly perceived as an experienced and trustworthy organisation. However, there were just a few areas in which other organisations had concerns. Some of these may require only that RCLC demonstrates/publicises its progress more clearly, but other areas may require working on:

- RCLC should keep other organisations up to date with its services so that these other organisations can signpost women on. Word of mouth recommendation is essential, and other organisations are generally willing to offer this, but do not necessarily have the information at their fingertips.
- The name of RCLC does not provide a prompt regarding who the group is for
- Other organisations working in the sector see further scope for communication and collaboration in order to avoid duplication of effort, and also for obtaining funding and giving ethnic minority women a voice. Other organisations are an important resource for RCLC to signpost their clients on to;
- Other organisations are concerned to see that the gap is being bridged between different cultures and mainstream living. Language learning is clearly helpful in this regard, but what about social contact? Although RCLC is a multi-cultural organisation, provision of contact with the mainstream culture is of particular value.
- RCLC needs to demonstrate/communicate its professionalism in the delivery of courses.
- RCLC needs to demonstrate/communicate its intentionality about moving women forwards into other areas of integration. Women should not be staying with RCLC indefinitely;⁴
- Moving women on into accredited courses is important, especially for those whose existing qualifications are not recognized in the UK.

⁴ RCLC notes in response to this that its current policies allow a woman to continue with the same course for no more than two terms. After this the woman must move on to another course or into external courses. They may not stay indefinitely.



5. OPINION OF ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN

5.1 Profile of all the participants interviewed (along with the profile of RCLC women taken from internal records)

Where the participants are from

114 ethnic minority women were interviewed for this report. Just over a quarter of these were current RCLC clients, and the rest (the majority) were ethnic minority women encountered in places of worship (mosque, temple, church), in places of education (WEA,⁵ Reading College) and in other community support groups (a multi-cultural parent and toddler group run by a church, plus various country-of-origin-specific groups).

Just over half of those interviewed were Muslim women, reached through the mosque, through the community support groups or through RCLC. The majority of these were of Arab⁶ descent (almost 23% of all interviewees), also some from South Asia⁷ (13%) and some from Sub-Saharan Africa (18% although the sample from Sub-Saharan Africa had only two-thirds confirmed Muslims; the religion of the remainder being unspecified).

18% of all persons interviewed were from the Far East, mainly China but also a few further East still (Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines). The religion of these persons is not known, although some of the Chinese interviewed were connected with through a church setting.

24% of all persons interviewed were from South Asian countries which were not predominantly Muslim. The majority of these persons were Nepalese (interviewed at a gathering of Nepalese), although there were also some Indians of Hindu, Sikh and (one) Christian background.

The remaining four persons (less than 4%) were from Europe or South America.

RCLC's internal records show that in Spring 2018, its 100 learners spoke 24 different languages and were from 26 countries. South Asian and Arab countries were particularly well represented. Some women came from China and the Far East, and rather fewer from Sub-Saharan Africa, Continental Europe or South America. The sample of RCLC clients who were interviewed for this study reflect RCLC's wider profile, although the sample was biased in favour of learners with stronger English who could manage the questionnaire.

5 Worker's Educational Association

6 The 'Arab' group includes North Africa and the Middle East as far as Afghanistan

7 Predominantly Pakistani

Length of time in Britain and language skills

Almost 30% of all persons interviewed had been in Britain for 5 years or less, and almost 90% had lived in Britain for less than 20 years. Just 4% were born in Britain of ethnic minority parents.

More than 50% of all persons interviewed rated their English skills as three or less on a scale of one to five. 9% said that their confidence in speaking or reading and writing English was 'very little or none' (the lowest rating out of five). There tended to be slightly more confidence in managing written English than spoken English, suggesting an educated population facing a lack of social interaction with English speakers (an interpretation borne out by further exploration as recorded below).

The profile of these respondents suggests that this research was successful in reaching women in the situations that RCLC wanted more information about.

RCLC's clientele tended to have been an even shorter time in the UK than the majority. Internal data suggests that 63% of RCLC's spring 2018 learners had not been in the UK for more than three years.

Age, education and occupation

Over a third of all ethnic minority women interviewed were educated to degree level or above, mostly in their home countries (it could up to 46%, but the more conservative estimate is made based on the assumption that those who did not respond to the question were not so highly educated). Around 20% of respondents had completed some form of formal education in the UK. Although such a large proportion of the women we spoke to were highly educated, we also captured some responses from women with very little or no education. At least 10% of respondents had never got further than primary education (not including those who left the question blank), and almost half of these had had no formal education at all. The persons interviewed from Nepal were particularly extreme in terms of including both highly educated women and women who were not at all educated. Arabs tended to be the group with the greatest proportion of degree educated women. Those from Sub-Saharan Africa tended to be the least likely to have a degree, although they all had at least secondary school education.

RCLC's internal records reflect a similar picture. 29% of its 2018 learners had a degree from their home country, but most have no UK qualifications or are at an entry level in ESOL.

Most persons interviewed (59%) were in the age bracket 30-45 years. This was also the predominant age of RCLC clients. 26% were older than that although less than 6% had passed 65 years (retirement age). 15% were younger although only a couple of persons were under the age of 21.

34% of respondents were currently in a paid job at the time of the interview, and 56% had had a job at some point in the UK. This leaves 44% of the women interviewed who had never had a paid job in the UK and 36% who had never had paid work in their life. Not that women were not working, 81% reported duties of care in terms of looking after family members (even into their old age). 46% of the women interviewed were also currently or recently engaged in some form of study. This is a high percentage although not surprising since about 46% of the women interviewed were interviewed at RCLC, WEA or Reading College – all organisations engaged in teaching. Only two women out of all those interviewed had no care duties, no job and were not studying either.

Besides care duties, work and study, 65% of respondents mentioned attending groups, and 42% mentioned volunteering, or at least helping out in the groups they attend. These proportions are in keeping with the mainstream population (Citizenship Survey data suggesting that 59% of persons in English and Wales take part in a group, and 40% help with the functioning of those groups).⁸ Our survey participants are not entirely representative of ethnic minority women in general, since ethnic minorities are usually less well represented in groups than the mainstream population (Spencer and Cooper 2006). The figures make sense however, since most of these interviews were carried out in the context of a group activity, and since Muslims (well represented in this survey) tend to organise themselves based on their faith to a higher degree than other minority religions (Spencer and Cooper 2006).

RCLC's internal records showed that 80% of their Spring 2018 learners were not in paid work and the rest worked part time (plus one or two who were retired clients). 33% were in receipt of benefits, 13% were refugees, and 1% asylum seekers.

5.2 Dreams for the future and barriers to progress

When asked an open question about 'what you would like to achieve for yourself within five years?' the most common response had to do with improving one's English. 44% of persons giving a response mentioned this. The second most frequently mentioned dream was work related (41% mentioned wanting a paid job or work experience or wanting a better job than the one they have. Several mentioned a particular career path desired). 38% respondents further mentioned other quality of life related dreams including (predominantly) upskilling, but also to do with gaining confidence with life in the UK and improving living standards. For six of the respondents the language and job dreams were overlapping; "I want to improve my English so that I can get a job," although the majority of respondents were focussing on only one thing.

From this it can be seen how important language is to ethnic minority women in their sense of progress. Amongst the listed barriers to progress are discussed in a later question, language was counted as the key barrier, equal with (just more important than) monetary constraints. Everyone (100% of respondents) who rated their own English on the lowest scale said it was a big problem,

⁸ Citizenship Survey data can be accessed from the UK Data Archives: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/www.communities.gov.uk/communities/research/citizenshipsurvey/>

dropping in even stages to no one thinking it was a problem when their English was excellent. Providing English classes is therefore meeting an important felt need amongst ethnic minority women. This, together with aspirations for a job in the future are clear priorities in the minds of ethnic minority women, and, together with upskilling more generally, perhaps provide the means of accessing the other quality of life related dreams mentioned.

Besides considering the aspirations of our respondents, it is also interesting to note that around a quarter of all the ethnic minority women interviewed did not mention any dreams or ambitions. These women were more likely to have worked in the UK (80% of them) and to be able to manage their own affairs than those mentioning an ambition.⁹ It is possible that women who do not face pressing barriers to progress in the domains of language and job found it harder to come up with a simple answer for the 'what would you like to achieve for yourself?' question. However, comparing working women who expressed no goal to working women who did express a goal, those without ambition had significantly lower levels of life satisfaction. Likewise, the non-working women without an expressed ambition also tended to score lower on the life satisfaction scale. From this, it may be seen that helping women to consider and express what they want and helping them to map out the steps they need to get there may be to be an important way of helping these women to thrive in Britain. Women from Sub-Saharan Africa were the least likely of all women to express an ambition.¹⁰

Some women are already enormously ambitious and motivated, despite the problems they face. One example is a Somalian participant who, in her home country, had been working at a charity in aid of women. She had been in the UK for a year and was working in a care home, besides learning English at WEA (Workers Education Association). She was hoping to learn Arabic as well because she wanted to teach the Quran at the local Mosque. She also had a son who had finished school and did not want to go on to higher education – she was keen to see him launched into the world of work. Due to economic difficulties, she was looking for lower cost English courses.

Another case study was fed back about the new arrival of Arab refugee families in Britain from one of RCLC learner researchers. Some of these families found the organised Arab community groups to be very helpful in providing orientation to life in Britain. Within this group, the refugees could build relationships with others of a similar culture and get settled in. Even translation services were available through these groups. One extended family who had been in Britain for around a year said that they were very happy at first, but this only lasted a few months before problems started to appear. Most of these problems had to do with language and with managing life in Britain. Now all of this family are attending English courses. The young people are not happy or progressing well with their courses at college, at least partly because the classes are very large

⁹ They are also less likely to mention barriers to progress – which makes sense - if there is no sense of wanting to achieve, there will be no barriers either! They are also more likely to have shifted for themselves rather than getting help from others.

¹⁰ Whether or not women mentioned ambitions had nothing to do with age, nor with length of time lived in the UK, nor with family care commitments, nor with whether or not they attended groups or volunteered.

Potential Barrier	Problem	How people rated this barrier (chose to tick somewhere in between)	Little or no problem
Not knowing the English language well enough	32%	11%	57%
Lack of money	31%	9%	60%
Lack of confidence	25%	14%	61%
Looking after family/family duties	27%	8%	65%
Not knowing how to do things in this country	26.5%	8.5%	65%
Not having support from family and friends	15%	6%	79%
Health problems	11.5%	3%	85.5%

Table 1: The percentage of ethnic minority women rating potential barriers to progress as problematic

and busy. The women are enjoying their classes however and hope to gain a skill in parallel to the English learning. Eventually, they would like to work in their own business and to help support their families, ideally cooking at home and selling the product. There are problems however with getting the right paperwork and accessing the market. It is the men who were seen to be under the most pressure in the household, since the man is looked up to as the provider and as the head of the house. Men need to improve their language and deal with a huge amount of paperwork as well as obtain an income. In their home country, these men would often have run their own businesses, but such skills are not necessarily easy to transfer, especially with all the British paper work involved that the men cannot yet understand. Not being able to work and earn a living is a huge strain on them. They are trying to work things out with the local council, charities and neighbours, and are not satisfied with the outcomes. For example, when it comes to neighbours they are used, in their home countries, to a culture of welcome and relationship-building which is not so typical in the UK (A family living in a village actually had better experiences than those living in town).

It was emphasised by the community researcher that reported this case study that 'integration' depends on the English community offering a welcome just as much as it depends on the efforts of ethnic minority groups to 'fit it'. In one of our research meetings we discussed the fact that rather than being a two-way relationship highlighted in Chapter 3, the responsibility for social integration is often placed on migrant families in the UK. British society can be isolating and unwelcoming, particularly in the current political climate. The extended family of refugees that was the subject of this case study are doing fine, but were expecting a better lifestyle than the one they got, especially having heard stories from relatives in other European countries where benefits are higher and the provision for new arrivals more abundant.

These stories of ambitions, efforts and barriers brings us to the issue of what hinders women from achieving their wishes. A series of things that potentially make it difficult for women to achieve their wishes were listed, and women were asked to say whether or not each issue was a problem for them. Table 1 summarises the responses.

The problem most frequently mentioned was not knowing the English language well enough, closely followed by lack of money. Almost one third of participants interviewed responded that these factors were limiting. Looking after family, not knowing how to do things in this country, and lack of confidence were also restrictive, with around a quarter of respondents feeling limited in these areas. Lack of support from family and friends, and ill health were the least of the barriers. Almost 80% of persons felt they had the support of family and friends, and over 85% had little or no problem with health. 19% of the respondents said that none of these barriers were an issue, and nor could they think of any other particular barriers to progress.

5.3 Barriers to progress by category

English Language

Language was the most common barrier reported, mentioned to a greater or lesser degree, by 43% of the ethnic minority women interviewed. The less confident a person was in speaking, reading and writing, the more likely they were to see this as a barrier to their life in the UK. The problem became progressively less, on average, as women spent longer and longer in the UK, which is just as it should be. Having said that, for some women problems with the English language are persistent. Quite a lot of women who had been in the UK for many years were still not confident in the English language.

Amongst ethnic minority women who had been in the UK for more than 20 years (12 persons), the average self-rated reading and writing skills were 3.67 out of maximum five. Three out of 12 persons rated their reading and writing skills as being just above the lowest possible score. Average speaking skills were 3.92 out of five. Only four persons out of the 12 rated their spoken English as excellent after more than 20 years in the UK (and three of these four were actually born in the UK). A quarter of the persons who had lived in the UK for more than 20 years were saying that language barriers still hinder their progress. 40% of those who had lived in the UK for 8 years or less said language hindered their progress. 50% of those who had lived in the UK less than a year struggled.

The high number of women still having problems with English after years in the UK demonstrates how difficult it can be for ethnic minority women to get to know the English language. This is not a simple problem to solve. In a focus group discussion, some of the women were explaining how they simply did not have the opportunity to practice English. Lessons at RCLC, two hours a week, were about the only English conversation they ever had with anyone.¹¹ A vicious cycle was in evidence with language barriers hindering integration, and lack of integration hindering learning the language. This vicious cycle is also reflected in the survey data. Just over half the women interviewed had not shared food or drink (connected informally) with someone outside of their own ethnic group recently. Persons who had not connected with others in this way were much more likely to say that they faced language barriers. Opportunities to get to know English speakers are clearly not available to everyone, so making contact at RCLC (RCLC also hosts mainstream British volunteers) is an important service. Because of this conversational element, Important English skills are gained not only in the English classes offered by RCLC, but also through the other courses that RCLC offers. The platform to meet and connect is meeting a need (more on connections in a later section).

More educated participants were less likely to have problems with the language. People from the far East (the majority of whom were Chinese) were the most likely to report language barriers. Arab Muslim women and a group of older Nepalese women also had difficulties. People from sub-Saharan Africa or from India and Pakistan were much less likely to cite language barriers as a big problem. People facing language barriers were also more likely to talk about problems connected to confidence. The two are linked, and confidence is addressed below.

¹¹ RCLC notes that a grant from the Controlling Migration Fund now allows RCLC to offer all students four hours a week of English classes until early 2019.

Health and confidence

Problems with confidence (mentioned by 39% of those interviewed) were more common than problems with physical health (faced to a greater or lesser degree by 14% of those interviewed), although a crisis of confidence can often end up affecting physical health also (Steptoe et al. 2005; Diener and Biswas-Diener 2008).

Women who had never had a paid job were significantly more likely to report barriers in terms of confidence, just as lack of language skills was related to confidence barriers. Also, those who only met women from their own ethnic group were significantly more likely to report confidence barriers compared to those who also met women from different ethnic groups to themselves. Women who attended groups or meetings were significantly less likely to report confidence barriers than women who did not. Perhaps the lack of integration in all these ways damages self-confidence, but also a lack of self-confidence can prevent people from daring to branch out into the unknown. Group meetings help women to do things and meet people outside of their usual circle of experience, potentially marking an easy and important first step to integration.

It was interesting to find that the least confident and the least healthy of all ethnic groups were South Asians (Muslims and non-Muslims alike). The link between poor health and low confidence was not unexpected, but since language is not such a barrier to some members of this group, it suggests that other restrictions to self-confidence are in play such as a low priority being put on women's needs in the home (a point picked up later also in the inability/unwillingness of women to spend money on themselves). It was also notable that these confidence related barriers to progress were not significantly linked to lower levels of life satisfaction or less optimism regarding the future. Although some of the drivers were the same, there appeared to be a distinct difference between issues of confidence and issues of life satisfaction/optimism.



Looking after family

Although 81% of women of all ages reported duties of care in terms of looking after family members, only 27% of all women suggested that these duties were an important problem or limited them in achieving their other wishes. In other words, looking after family or other family duties are not seen as a big problem or limiting by most ethnic minority women. However, for a third of all those interviewed (still an important proportion) looking after family represents at least some trade off with other things they would like to do. Arab women were particularly likely to cite family care as a barrier to achieving their other ambitions.

Some of these women volunteered the information that they missed having people they can trust around who they can leave their child with. Some said they felt tired and never free. They talked of the pressures on them of never being able to leave their children and do other activities. They had dreams, but the dreams were on hold. This can also be confidence sapping, leading to a vicious circle of increasing isolation; a problem graphically described by one university educated new mother who no longer felt confident enough to attend even a toddlers group on her own. The link between confidence and feeling restricted by family care was not statistically significant however, suggesting that family care is not necessarily problematic in this way.

Younger women tended to feel more restricted by duties of care than older women, which is perhaps related to the age of their children and also to the greater ambition they have to work. (Having said that, feeling the restrictions of family is not correlated at all to whether or not a woman is working or ever has worked – working or not working does not change one's attitude towards family care, and neither is it related with statistical significance to whether or not a woman has a role of care in the first place).

Since the majority of ethnic minority women have a role of care whether they find it restrictive or not and whether they work or not, then efforts need to be made to find ways of enabling them to do other things that they want to do around this role, since the role will not just go away. For example, RCLC offers a crèche for women with small children who want to take classes, and over 57% of respondents reported this as being an important feature for them if they were to attend classes.

Women could clearly work as well as juggle care duties (citing barriers based on care had nothing to do with whether or not a woman was currently working). They could also juggle care duties and attend groups and meetings. They could even volunteer alongside their care duties. Indeed, women with duties of care were more likely to attend groups or meetings than those without duties of care, (although they were not more likely to volunteer). Since women mentioning limitations based on care duties had nothing to do with group attendance, this suggests that it is possible to arrange meetings compatible with the needs of ethnic minority women with care duties

Knowing how to do things

65% of women had no issue with knowing how to do things in Britain, and 26% said that it was an important limiting factor. The numbers finding 'how to do things' limiting is less than expected, given the cultural barriers already noted, the language problems, the lack of confidence and the lack of workplace integration. Perhaps the services in Reading are doing quite well in meeting the needs of ethnic minority women (providing translation services etc.). The quarter of ethnic minority women finding 'how to do things' limiting is still important however. Some women went on to talk about how urgently they needed better English in order to negotiate the health-care system or for helping their child in school or simply to be more confident in dealing with daily life. Even though information is available on the internet, it is inaccessible (even to find) without the language.

The importance of English in overcoming this barrier is seen in the finding that women with less language skills were more likely to say that 'knowing how to do things' was limiting. Women who had no experience of the workplace (whatever the country) also found it harder to know how to go about doing things in Britain. These various ways of integration clearly link together, such that language skill, having spent longer in Britain, workplace experience, being in a group or being connected to people across social boundaries were all linked to people finding it easier to work out what to do.

Those who reported not knowing how to do things needed other people to help them out, and so 'not knowing how to do things' was linked to the 'being helped' variable.

Social connections and accessing support

Feeling a lack of support from family and friends was an important barrier for only 15% of the women interviewed, implying that most ethnic minority women are part of supportive family and friend networks. Having said this, a lot of women still expressed that they felt lonely, suggesting that even though family are not unsupportive, family cannot meet all the needs for connection. Indeed, our interviewers found that some of the ethnic minority women were only too glad to have the opportunity to talk to someone, even just for filling in a survey. As one interviewer put it, expressing their emotions to someone can be helpful to relieving worry or even for finding solutions to worries.

We know from the literature review that social connections are an important part of integration and that this is a two-way process. In our survey, we specifically asked about a person's informal connections with other women – whether and with whom they shared food and drink recently. 11% of women reported not having shared food or drink with other women recently at all. 40% had shared food or drink, but the last three persons they shared with were all of the same ethnic group. 49% had shared food or drink also with persons of a different ethnic group to themselves. We also asked women about the groups they attended to find that 65% were connecting in groups and meetings.

People connecting informally with other persons (whether inside or outside of their own ethnic group) tended to express higher levels of

life satisfaction than those who were not connected, and also higher levels of confidence. Likewise, people who attended groups or meetings also expressed higher levels of life satisfaction than those who did not. Studying or working did not have as great an impact on life satisfaction as group attendance did – the supportive nature of the community group relationships was clearly more significant. Indeed, people attending groups were much more likely to be in positive informal relationships as well (sharing food and drink with other women), but the same link between being in work and positive informal relationships cannot be found. This shows how important community groups are for helping women to make connections. People who had never worked in a paid job however were less likely to attend groups than those who had worked at some point in their lives. Their lack of integration is reflected in multiple areas, and it could be the case that being part of a group is a step into more formalised interactions that could eventually set people on the path to a paid job.

Those who had not connected with anyone were more likely to cite barriers to progress than those who did connect. Moreover, those who only connected within their own ethnic group were far more likely to cite barriers to progress than those who connected across ethnic boundaries. Social connections, formal or informal (being or having been in a job was also related to reduced problems) is clearly significant to overcoming problems, and even if an ethnic minority woman has not yet made it to the workplace, community groups and connections can already help them build resilience to other barriers they may face. Those who did not attend groups or meetings were twice as likely to cite barriers to progress as those who did attend meetings.

The longer participants had lived in the UK, the more likely they were to feel connected with other women which is good. However, there was no statistically significant correlation between length of time in Britain and cross-cultural connections between women, suggesting that cultural integration will not just 'happen' with more time. Proactive steps are required to increase integration in this area.

So, who is connected and who is not? Women from all ethnic groups were connected with someone to a similar degree. However Arab Muslims and the Chinese were the least likely to have connected across ethnic groups. The group of older Nepalese women were also weak in their connections across ethnic groups. Taken as a whole however, age made no difference to how connected people were. Education did not make a difference to whether or not people connected with others, but did make a difference to connection across ethnic social boundaries. Women with lower levels of general education, as well as women with lower levels of English language skills were much less likely to have close, informal connections with women from a different ethnic group than their own. The fact that many Arab women were highly educated and yet still not connecting across social groups shows that increased education on its own is not enough, however. Cultural barriers can also prevent mixing across ethnic groups. The women we interviewed from Sub-Saharan Africa were the most likely of all ethnicities to be attending groups or meetings.

Just a few women were asked about the levels of trust they felt towards neighbours (trust being linked to thriving), and also here it could be seen that trust was closely linked to social networks and to feeling supported by those around.

63% of respondents said they had been helped with the difficulties they faced, but not everyone who had not been helped felt isolated. Some even volunteered the information that they knew where to get help if necessary but did not actually need any! The biggest source of help was friends and family. Of those helped at all, 63% cited family and 63% friends.

Even if people were working, the work place is the least likely place for people to access help. Only 25% of those having worked in the UK and having received help at all had accessed help via the workplace (but since nearly half the respondents had never worked in the UK, the numbers accessing support via the workplace was much smaller). Workplace integration may be an important goal, but there are other important domains of integration which 'working' does not necessarily cover.

42% of women accessing help overall had accessed help via a religious organisation or a charity, help being accessed from religious organisations almost as frequently as from dedicated charities. Moreover, help had been accessed from organisations like charities or religious organisations to the same degree that it had been accessed via a government service (such as school, a doctor, the council, jobcentre, library etc.). Voluntary and community groups (both religious organisations and charities) are clearly doing a good job for ethnic minority women alongside government provision. As was mentioned in the literature review, being able to turn to non-government organisations instead of only to the government is important for the sense of independence felt by ethnic minorities. Having different channels of help is also important because different people access different organisations when in need – only about half the women spoke of accessing help from voluntary and community groups and government services for example.

Not all women said exactly which organisation helped them, but the information volunteered by a few is of interest. Regarding government services, the most commonly mentioned source of help was the doctor, followed by council services. Amongst voluntary and community organisations, the most commonly mentioned source of help was the church (despite the fact that just over half the women interviewed were Muslims). RCLC, the mosque, the temple, the Red Cross and Reading College also got mentioned.



Money worries

Lack of money was another most frequently mentioned problem for ethnic minority women.¹² 31% said lack of money was limiting and a further 9% indicated some concerns. The remaining 60% said this was little or no problem. The frequency of having monetary problems was not linked to how long a person had been in the UK (or even if a person had been born in the UK), and nor was it linked to age – this is clearly not a problem that goes away with time. It was not linked to how well women spoke the English language either. It was not even linked to whether or not the ethnic minority woman had a job, or had ever had a job, suggesting that the women are not the main breadwinners. Cash problems were not linked to a woman having care duties, although they were linked to the feeling that care for family was problematic, suggesting that the burden of family care is greater when cash constraints are an issue.

Women from sub-Saharan Africa were twice as likely to cite money related barriers than anyone else, whilst women from Southern Asia and also from Europe/South America were the least likely to mention monetary barriers. The lack of correlation between monetary barriers and various indicators of integration suggest that monetary problems are not all linked to problems of integration. However, the marked difference when it comes to the experiences of sub-Saharan African women suggests that money is still an issue of importance that requires further research.

An overwhelming 85% of women said that low cost or free lessons were important features of RCLC provision (more on this later). This suggests that with or without money, investing in women is not a priority for ethnic minority families. Women's integration is therefore particularly likely to suffer when shortage of money is a problem.

Other barriers to progress

When asked the question in a pilot survey (so not all women were asked this) around 25% of respondents said that transport was a barrier. This did not necessarily mean they were unable to use a bus, but problems getting around were clearly felt to be restrictive to a greater or lesser degree. We know from research carried out amongst Whitley residents that people without cars feel limited in what they can do and where they can go, having a big impact on their engagement with wider society (Local Trust 2015). Having to change buses makes it much less likely that a trip will be even attempted. As far as RCLC's work is concerned then, their central location is an important factor, as the best bus services are all going directly into the town centre, with no changes required. Indeed, 92% of respondents (and all women were asked this question) said that RCLC's present location is easy for them to get to.

People were also asked to name any other barriers to achieving their wishes that they could think of. Getting official documentation was an issue for a few people (this was also expensive). Just a few (Muslims) also mentioned worry about what other people might say and do (fear). They talked of their insecurity regarding how welcome they are amongst the British people and how people are not open to

their culture. They believed they are/would be discriminated against in the workplace even if their English was good. They felt that suitable jobs would therefore be hard for them to find. Being too busy was mentioned by a couple of persons, especially where they had small children to manage.

Some mentioned the joblessness of husbands (the main provider for the household) as a barrier to achieving their own wishes. This was connected with money worries and was especially acute where there were children to provide for. The joblessness of men was not only an issue of income however; it was also a problem having unhappy and stressed menfolk hanging around the house. A couple of people also mentioned wanting help in finding jobs for themselves. This is in keeping with the job-related desires previously mentioned, and is discussed in a separate section below.

Although not everyone was asked the question, all but one non-working woman, when asked, felt that they lacked the necessary skills for work. We discuss this further in the next section.



¹² RCLC noted that 31% of their learners in the Spring Term were in receipt of welfare benefits.

5.4 Status in terms of work, study and life-satisfaction

Work related ambitions

96% of respondents not currently in a job and under the age of 46 said that they would like to have paid work in the future. (People approaching retirement age were less interested in getting a job, but even including women up to the age of 66 years, 86% of all women wanted a job in the future.) There is a clear demand for integration in the job market, and yet ethnic minority women are often far away (culturally, socially and practically) from being in a position to take up paid work.

Most people said they wanted a job when asked and 41% of the women expressed job related ambitions without being prompted. Women with cross cultural connections and women with good English skills were significantly more likely to volunteer information about job related dreams; this was true of young women in their twenties also.

Where the option was available in pilot surveys, every woman except one ticked the feeling that they lacked skills for work, and saw this as a major barrier to their own progression. This is besides the language barrier, which was also seen as a significant problem. 'Lack of skills' was cited despite the fact that over a third of those interviewed had been University educated. Approaching the whole issue of job market integration is clearly a barrier. Women need to recognize their own potential and to understand the expectations of the workplace better. People also wanted professional courses, and accredited courses – women clearly need direction into how to access these and upskill for employment. However, they also wanted/needed everything for free. They (and their families also) need to come to terms with the value of investing in women, taking RCLC provision as just the first step, and having a clearer idea of progression. The volunteer option that RCLC offers could be helpful in helping people to know their own potential, and to understand how the workplace works. All this reinforces the need expressed in the literature for cultural orientation (adjusting expectations of how to get on in Britain) as well as language skills (Spencer and Cooper 2006; Ager and Strang 2008).

As previously mentioned in the profile of persons surveyed, 34% of all our survey respondents had paid jobs at the time of the interview, and 56% had had a job at some point in the UK. This leaves 44% of the women interviewed who had never had a paid job in the UK and 36% who had never had paid work in their life.

The high number of women who have never had paid work at all is interesting, given how highly qualified many of these women were. Even exclusively amongst people with University qualifications, 37% (an even greater percentage) had never had a paid job, not even in their home countries. This suggests that the barriers to working are more than an issue of not being well enough settled into UK life. It is not that these women are used to working but do not yet have the language skills etc. to transfer their work life to the UK. It could be cultural barriers, connected to the role of women in the home, that stop educated women from getting into paid work. Indeed,

amongst Muslim women interviewed from Arab and Asian Islamic countries, 67% had never had paid work. This is despite the fact that this group is disproportionately well educated (61% have university education), and despite the fact that the majority of these women interviewed had already reached their thirties and forties. In the literature review, Spencer and Cooper (2006) highlighted tensions over the role of women, and these were reflected in our findings that so many women saw themselves unfitted for work even when they wanted it.

So then, learning English and getting skilled up is an important but not a sufficient condition to get people integrated into job markets – there are also cultural barriers which stop ethnic minority women from working. There is a correlation between having got into the job market and length of time lived in the UK, suggesting that the expectation that women will do paid work – an expectation which has increased notably in Britain in the last 40 years, does influence women over time, but the process might perhaps be speeded up if social integration can be fostered. For example, women were significantly more likely to express job related ambitions (without prompts) if their English was better and if they had positive informal connections cross cultures. Knowing English and having cross cultural social ties were also related to the likelihood of actually having a job. Orientation in British culture may therefore help.

But women in UK jobs are not necessarily as socially connected as we might expect, however. For example, only around half of the working women interviewed said that the last three women they ate and drank with included women from a different ethnic group; the other half had only connected with people from their own ethnic group (29%) or else had not connected with other women at all recently (20%). Although we did not ask the working women what jobs they did, we did pick up that a few of them had jobs which were 'in-house' (for example, working as religious instructors for their own ethnic group). As was mentioned elsewhere, having a job is not the only important indicator of inclusion and integration into UK society.



Study

46% of the ethnic minority women interviewed were studying (which is as expected since, 44% of the surveys were carried out at groups involved in education. 60% of those not currently working were studying, but 27% of those with a job were studying as well.

The majority of women were studying English, some with charitable organisations and some in Reading College. Islamic study was also quite frequent. Other upskilling was also taking place here and there, but far more with charitable organisations (for free) than through formal education channels (and this despite clear demand for formal courses and the expressed need for upskilling). Again, this could relate to investment in women not being a priority for ethnic minority families, and also amongst the women themselves. This may especially be the case since being educated was not necessarily related to being in a job, so there is no direct financial return to the outlay. Cultural issues may be involved to do with expectations of women's work in the home. Some interviews were carried out amongst women doing a pre-access courses at Reading College however, which should eventually help these women move on to doing a degree in the UK.

Life Satisfaction and confidence in the future

Life satisfaction is an important reflection of integration as well as an important asset in the process of integration. 34% of all women interviewed said, in response to the question, 'how satisfied are you with your life overall' that they were completely satisfied (scoring 7 on a scale of 1-7). This is somewhat higher than the number of people opting for the top levels of satisfaction generally in the UK. However, there are also more people opting for the lowest levels of life satisfaction than is more generally the case in the UK. Clearly the experience of ethnic minority women is quite polarized.¹³ It would seem from looking at life satisfaction and length of time lived in the UK that in the first year of arrival, ethnic minority women are mostly satisfied. This satisfaction subsequently declines (perhaps after the 'honeymoon period' is over) and only begins to pick up again after about five years in Britain.

An important factor affecting one's experience is social connection. People connected to others (either in groups and meetings, informally, or through their family and friend networks) reported higher levels of life satisfaction than those who were not connected. Likewise, people who gave to charity (also indicative of positive relations towards others) tended to have higher levels of life satisfaction than those who did not. This is all as expected, since positive social connections are known to be closely linked to mental wellbeing. People who had worked in the UK at some point tended to be more satisfied than those who had not. Studying made no difference (again this is expected – education is not usually associated with life-satisfaction in itself, only its consequences are).

Money worries were associated with people being less satisfied. So was not knowing how to do things in Britain. Barriers like language did not significantly make people less satisfied with their life however (perhaps people felt they can improve).

13 Comparative figures for the mainstream population are taken from 'Understanding Society' data <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>

The ethnic group a person belongs to is also associated with variations in life satisfaction. We had responses on happiness from only 3 people from Europe or South America, and these were not satisfied with their life. After these, mean life-satisfaction from the various groups (in ascending order) was as follows:

- Muslims from Asia (14): 5.07
- Arab Muslims (23): 5.13
- Women from the Far East (19): 5.47
- Asians from countries not predominantly Muslim (mostly Nepalese) (25): 5.52
- Sub-Saharan Africans (mostly Muslim) (19): 5.95

The life satisfaction reported by women from Sub-Saharan Africa was significantly higher than the life-satisfaction of Muslim women from Asia and the Middle East..

79% of ethnic minority women interviewed were positive about their future – anticipating that things would get better over time. Focus group feedback suggested that women felt it important to keep optimistic. 20% felt that things would stay the same or were not sure. Only one person said she anticipated things getting worse. One of the key drivers behind thoughts on the future appeared to be length of time in Britain. The new arrivals were more expectant that things would improve, perhaps because they faced more barriers that they could anticipate overcoming. Indeed, in one focus group it was suggested that with improved English, most other problems could be resolved. People with poor health and people who expressed a problem with not having the support of family and friends in Britain however felt somewhat gloomier about their future. It was not obvious what other drivers significantly affected thoughts about the future – age, education, ethnic group, whether or not people were studying, other potential barriers including language skills and money – none of these things made a difference. An optimistic outlook regarding the future was intimately related with life satisfaction.

The social and cultural environment in which a person is set is clearly important to wellbeing, and mental health is key to integration in other ways also. This implies that the work RCLC does in linking people up is important to a successful integration process.

5.5 Preferences with regard to RCLC's learning environment

Knowledge of and interest in RCLC

63% of the women interviewed had already heard of RCLC, which is a high proportion given that only 35% of those interviewed were direct RCLC contacts.¹⁴ This suggests that RCLC is reasonably well known amongst women in the locations where interviews were carried out. 50% of women interviewed had also attended an RCLC course. RCLC was best known amongst Arab Muslims, and least well known amongst people from sub-Saharan Africa (also Europeans and S. Americans did not know so much about RCLC, although

14 28% were current RCLC attendees and 7% were from an organisation sharing the premises.

these were only a very small sample). Many women who had not heard of RCLC said they did not know of where else they could learn English.

89% of respondents said they would want to attend RCLC classes.¹⁵ The keenness to attend was reflected in the fact that one of our interviewers fell into a strategy of getting people to answer the questionnaire by introducing the possibility of doing courses. Ethnic minority women found this such an attractive option that they were keen to hear more and to engage with the survey. This does mean that the sample selection is biased in favour of women interested in courses, but the very fact that this strategy worked suggests a strong interest. Even some of those saying they did not want a course themselves, said that their mother (or someone else they knew) would be interested and still wanted more information.

98% of women interviewed who had already taken an RCLC class wanted another one, which is a positive advertisement for RCLC. Even amongst people who had never attended a class however, 79% of respondents were keen. Those who had heard about RCLC prior to the interview (even though they had not attended a class) were more receptive to classes than others, which shows the importance of generalised and repeat publicity when introducing a new service. Nearly all women who actually come to RCLC courses came on the recommendation of a friend or advisor, showing also the importance of personal recommendation. Despite the current demand for courses, RCLC commissioned this research to ensure that their network is reaching the most vulnerable.

Which courses

When asking the women who were interested in courses which courses interested them (out of the courses that RCLC offers) English conversation followed by English language came out on top, selected by 49% and 47% of women respectively. Sewing was also popular with 42% of women expressing interest. Health; also beauty and confidence building came next, with 32% and 30% of women showing interest in these courses. IT had slightly less votes although still more than a quarter of the women interested in courses were interested in that one.

Although English courses are the flagship of RCLC provision, the alternative classes it offers are not unimportant since in around half the cases a woman would come to a course like beauty and confidence building when they would not come to an English speaking or writing course, and attending a cross cultural group can help foster new friendships, build confidence and provide valuable emotional support that all important steps towards social and economic inclusion. For example, it was noted that women who had attended RCLC classes before were particularly interested in the English classes, whereas outsiders were most attracted by the sewing class. This is despite the fact that the English skills of women attending RCLC were not significantly poorer than those who had never attended an RCLC course (although they were more likely to say that poor English was a barrier to them). It is clear from talking

¹⁵ 15% of persons did not answer this question either way, but this group were surely not all against attending because half of the non-respondents were currently attending RCLC classes.

to the ethnic minority women as well as to RCLC staff that women have the opportunity to improve their English in all courses, not just in the dedicated English classes.

Focus group discussions suggest that clients also want English classes a lot more frequently, as two hours of English conversation a week is not enough. RCLC recognises this, but funding for more spaces is not always available.

Although RCLC courses are much in demand, and although clients reported the classes as being helpful in learning English, the study experience was not consistently rated highly by previous clients. It was more the organisation as a whole (its friendliness and efforts to help, and the contact it provides with other people) that was strongly and consistently appreciated and enjoyed. Having looked closer into this we found that women were keen to get professional courses and formal qualifications: When women were given the opportunity to suggest other courses they could do, by far the majority of suggestions were based around more advanced classes, including professional courses providing skills to get a job. It was the case that the sample of RCLC clients we interviewed was biased towards the more advanced learners, which may explain some of this demand for more advanced classes. Demand was also seen when a sub-group of 30 women were asked whether they would want a formal qualification from the course they attend. Only 20% of respondents did not find this important, meaning that an overwhelming majority found gaining formal qualifications important or at least attractive.

RCLC is not expecting to provide formal qualifications for free; it rather sees itself as the first step in a ladder. However, given the demand, RCLC needs to signpost women on into the kind of courses they want, providing information about how these can be funded and increasing understanding of why it could worth making the investment, or what alternative routes into employment can be found.¹⁶ RCLC clients were, on the whole, positive about RCLC's role in directing them to other places where help can be received or progression made. However, funding is an important reason why women cannot meet their desire for more professional courses.

Besides professional courses, other courses ethnic minority women were interested in included (in order of mentions):¹⁷

- cooking and health eating,
- yoga/dance and fitness (including swimming for women)
- childcare courses
- maths classes
- jobhunting help
- Arabic class

¹⁶ RCLC comments that in the interests of 'signposting', all learners receive IAG (Information Advice and Guidance) termly from the tutor and also from the National Careers Service who make one-to-one appointments based at RCLC.

¹⁷ RCLC comments that WEA (a learning organisation that shares premises with RCLC) runs healthy eating and childcare courses. RCLC began running employability courses and workshops in 2016/17. It also runs exercise classes when funding allows.

Accessing courses (how services are provided)

A sensitive question was asked about how easy it is for women to get family approval to attend classes. Despite the sensitivity of the question, and despite the fact that nearly half the women interviewed were already taking classes, over a quarter of the respondents did not think this was easy. This might be expected to reflect the tensions often cited regarding the woman's role in the home. However, barriers did not seem to be higher for one ethnic group than another, nor to people who wanted women only provision compared to people who did not mind about this. People already studying or who had previously worked were just as likely to cite potential problems for women getting approval as people not studying. Instead, what was significantly correlated with approval was money worries. Clearly (and very importantly) if monetary barriers are at all an issue in the home, investment in women is quick to suffer.

92% of women said it was easy for them to travel to Reading town centre, suggesting that RCLC is well located. This is important, since many ethnic minority women feel that getting about is a barrier to progress for them. Looking at the current clients of RCLC, ethnic minority women are clearly travelling in from quite a distance. Besides women living in the town centre, Tilehurst and Lower Earley were well represented in the clientele for example. RCLC records show that the majority of its current (Spring 2018) learners are from Abbey, Battle, Katesgrove, Park, Minster, Norcot Wards and Whitley.

RCLC knows that providing a service is not enough. The way the service is provided is also important in enabling women to access that service. For this reason, we asked the women about various features of a study environment that they found to be important.

The most important feature of the course was that it should be free/low cost. 81% of women found this to be important, and only 15% said it was unimportant. The level of importance attached to cost was significantly correlated to the feeling that money is a constraint to progress. However even some women who did not feel monetary constraints were saying that the low cost of the course was important to them, highlighting the issue, perhaps, of not having the freedom to invest in their own interests. For example, 100% of South Asian Muslim women said that the courses would need to be free, even though this group was less likely than average to cite money as a significant barrier to progress. The fact that RCLC provision is free is clearly essential to its accessibility for ethnic minority women. Free provision is an important first step, although seeing/introducing progression from this mindset would be desirable to enable women to move along the pathway to integration. This will not be quick or easy and is not entirely dependent on the women themselves. The length of time an ethnic minority woman has lived in the UK for example makes no statistically significant difference to how likely she is to say free courses are very important, so it is unrealistic to expect RCLC to have a big impact in this area, even with cultural orientation.

The next most important issue had to do with meeting friends at the course, which highlights once again the felt need for social

connection. And we have seen from the previous correlations that these social connections are not just a cosy feel-good thing – they are an essential basis for every aspect of thriving and integration, and the services provided in this regard are to be valued. 73% of women recognised this importance. Most important to them was meeting friends of any description, although a few were particularly keen to have the opportunity to meet British people. Meeting people across social boundaries is important to thriving and integration, yet we know from the feedback about getting English conversation practice that getting into conversation with the British is not so easy. The RCLC British volunteers therefore have an important role.

We asked people whether having someone who speaks their language and can translate for them mattered to them. This was much less of an issue – 70% of women said this was not important, implying that they were not exclusive in their friendship groups and were willing to mix with others if people would mix with them. Those who did want translation were almost exclusively those scoring the very lowest in speaking ability. Having someone speak your language can be a real help in a crisis, but it can also make it easier not to bother learning English. One RCLC client said in a focus group that having translation might be necessary in a doctor's surgery, but not here. Here it is OK to make mistakes! The fact that RCLC does not make a special effort in this regard and rather makes English the shared classroom language (although multiple languages are spoken at the centre) is clearly not a barrier to attendance.

The issue of language and cultural connection is not irrelevant however, as can be observed in the fact that having RCLC outreach workers of a particular ethnic group significantly increases attendance from that particular group. People do tend to feel more comfortable with those they share language and culture with. Likewise, some Arab women talked about how important the Arab community groups were to them. These 'bonding' friendships help a person feel supported. From this 'safe place', these women were keen to branch out into wider ranging social connections as their circumstances permitted. The Muslim community are said to be well organised in terms of providing community groups compared to other minority religions (Spencer and Cooper 2006). In order to probe further into the question of whether Reading women were willing to venture outside of their own cultural group, we asked a sub-group of about 30 women, current attendees of RCLC, whether they would prefer to have their own religion represented in the leadership of an educational centre. It turned out that this was not important to the majority of the women, although around 20% found this important or at least attractive. Again, we see that although most women are happy to branch out, cultural compatibility is at least an issue, if not an essential feature of the work. For example, half of the ethnic minority women interviewed at least preferred if not definitely required a woman-only environment. Muslim women were especially keen on this, although not exclusively; non-Muslim women from South Asia (but not from China and the far East) also preferred a woman-only environment. There was a strong correlation between never having had a job

(also never having worked in the UK) and wanting a women-only environment.

Closely following the issue of meeting up with friends, having a crèche available was a highly desirable feature of RCLC's provision. 57% of women found the crèche important, and a further 5% preferred this. Given their role of care, women may not be able to access services without this. RCLC's internal records show that 22% of its Spring 2018 learners use the crèche, and would find it hard if not impossible to attend without it.

The times that RCLC works is also an advantage for most women interviewed. A daytime group, particularly within school hours, was the most desired time for courses. 10am was the favourite time of all, with 65% of women preferring this time slot. After 3pm demand drops off to less than 5% of women. Working women might find evenings necessary, but this is not the target group and most women clearly have other responsibilities in the evening or do not want to go out at that time. Arab and South Asian women were particularly unwilling to go out in the evening.

5.6 Profile of people attending RCLC versus those who did not, and perceptions of RCLC work

We looked at the profile of people attending RCLC and compare to those who did not. This is in order to assess whether RCLC is indeed reaching the most vulnerable and least integrated women who are RCLC's particular target group. RCLC has waiting lists of 5-10 people per course, and people who have done one course usually want to do another. However, RCLC still wanted to check that those who come, and who bring their friends, are the people who are most in need. Traditionally RCLC has served those with very little English and who are also disadvantaged generally (being poor and often poorly educated even in their own language) but an increasing proportion of attendees are now highly qualified. The question is whether these are still an appropriate group to be serving.

RCLC clients were, on average, more likely to feel that language is a barrier to them than the other ethnic minority women interviewed, and they rated their own writing skills slightly worse, although in speaking, RCLC clients and other ethnic minority women rated their own skills at a similar level.¹⁸

RCLC did not have many clients of sub-Saharan African descent in our sample. Sub-Saharan Africans were significantly more likely to face money related barriers than other ethnic groups, and were less likely to articulate a vision for themselves. However, in terms of language and social connections they were more advantaged than other ethnic minorities, and therefore less in need of the particular services that RCLC specialises in.

RCLC clients are less likely than other women to be attendees of groups and meetings, and less likely to be in a job than the other women interviewed. Their life satisfaction scores were also lower than those of other women.

¹⁸ Having said this, only the best English speakers at RCLC were interviewed for this study, suggesting that the wider language skills of RCLC clients were on average lower than the language skills of those who were interviewed outside of RCLC.

These findings all suggest that RCLC is meeting the needs of a particularly vulnerable group, even though some of these women are highly educated. Educated women still face significant barriers to integration; for example, there is no evidence to suggest that women with higher levels of education are more likely to be working, more likely to be part of a group or more likely to be connected informally.¹⁹ Even the very few European clients of RCLC (who are not the target group since they are closer culturally to the mainstream population) are still a potential asset to the mix, since they help clients from Asian and middle Eastern countries to relate across cultures.

In order to find out whether RCLC is providing the right services, ethnic minority women who had attended RCLC were asked what RCLC exists for. This was a 'blank box' question – no prompts were given. The most common answer had to do with 'learning,' which is as it should be. Interestingly, the second most common response had to do with 'providing help to women in need'. The charitable nature of RCLC was clearly coming through, which could (this was not researched) represent a stigma barrier to some women, who must necessarily perceive themselves as 'needy' in order to attend. The third most frequent response was 'helping women build friendships'; another important role of RCLC. The friendliness of the RCLC environment was frequently remarked and appreciated in this context. The 'provision of advice and direction' was mentioned by just one or two women, as was 'confidence building,' 'helping women to engage in society' and 'opportunities for voluntary work'.

The fact that the provision of advice and direction or cultural orientation (understanding life in Britain) got only a few mentions suggests that there is more that RCLC could do more to bring these features into focus.²⁰ Care may also need to be taken to avoid coming across as a 'charity for needy women' and rather as a provider of services in the interests of all ethnic minority women in Reading. Words need to be chosen carefully when making RCLC known to ethnic minority women, avoiding terms that are only relevant to potential funders.

5.7 Conclusions that may be drawn from the survey of ethnic minority women

Language is an important barrier to integration that RCLC addresses. It was the top issue expressed by the ethnic minority women interviewed. It also affects confidence and is linked to the ability to get along in every other way.

This research showed that poor social connections and problems with the English language are intimately related and reinforce one another as a barrier to integration. A vicious cycle can be observed, in which a lack of integration means that people do not learn the English language, and not learning the English language leads to a lack of integration and social inclusion that negatively impact on levels of confidence, skills, independence and well being. This is a

¹⁹ Higher levels of education are not linked to being connected with other women informally (sharing food and drink), although amongst those who are connected in this way, women with higher levels of education are more likely to connect cross culturally.

²⁰ RCLC reports that visits and general discussions to do with UK culture are embedded into all English classes.

persistent problem such that even after many years, many of the women we spoke with still feel a sense of disconnection with wider UK society.

Amongst those living in the UK less than a year, 50% said language was a barrier to progress. After 8 years, this figure had only gone down a little; 40% saying language was a problem. Even after 20 years, a quarter of the women interviewed were still saying that language is a barrier. Likewise, there was no statistically significant correlation between length of time in Britain and cross-cultural connection. Clearly this social integration does not just 'happen'. The work of RCLC therefore assists integration on two important fronts: reducing the barrier of poor English and also providing cross cultural social connection which can help foster soft skills, such as confidence and independence, that help them increase their social status and access welfare services.

Social integration is not just an optional nicety, but it is foundational to mental wellbeing and to all other forms of integration, including the long process of getting ethnic minority women into a place where, if they wish to, they can launch into work, both paid and voluntary. For example, it was clear from the data on ethnic minority women in work that the English language was one essential barrier which must be overcome before women feel ready for the workplace, and yet knowledge of the English language was not a sufficient condition in itself. There are also cultural barriers which stop women working if they choose to – 67% of Arab and Asian Muslim women for example had never worked, not even in their home countries, and this despite many of them having reached middle age and having a degree. However, people with cross cultural connections were significantly more likely to express dreams related to getting a job. Likewise, women attending groups were significantly less likely to cite barriers which prevent them from achieving their ambitions. Many women do not know what they can offer to the work place and feel completely unprepared for integration in this way, but confidence building is related to social integration of every form.

It follows that to promote integration and connectedness, it is necessary to tackle language barriers and social integration. Social integration may be further sub-divided into two aspects: physically meeting people, and also cultural orientation. This makes three aspects of integration altogether into which RCLC has the potential to make a difference:

- Language instruction
- Provision of a meeting place for social networking
- Orientation into the mainstream culture.

Language and networking with other people is foundational to progress in most other things. RCLC receives positive feedback from clients in these areas and have made them a consistent priority. The friendly atmosphere of RCLC is essential to encouraging women of low confidence to take these first steps to integration. But moving on from these first steps, cultural orientation is an issue which is reflected in the marked differences between women of different ethnic minorities, and the reported

struggles in relating to majority ethnic communities in Reading. Some women in a focus group directly expressed, even without prompts, that they would like to receive more orientation on UK culture. As discussed in Chapter 3, we are not suggesting that RCLC clients should be expected to transform their cultural identities or adopt new cultural practices in order to 'integrate', but we have identified a need for more opportunities for the mutual sharing of experiences with diverse groups of women and their families. From the lack of feedback on RCLC assistance in this area, it would seem that it would be worth RCLC digging into this area of demand a little more, to find out whether it needs to bring its current discussions of UK culture into sharper focus, or whether there are particular new areas its clients want to explore.

How RCLC goes about fulfilling these three roles (language instruction, social networking, and cultural orientation) is also important. Providing services is of no use if needy persons are unable to access them. Discussion with ethnic minority women both inside and outside of RCLC threw up consistent conditions under which ethnic minority women would attend. Important to these women (important meaning that at least half the persons, often more, felt very strongly about these issues) were:

- Free or very low-cost lessons
- Classes during school hours
- Central location (easy to get to)
- Crèche provision
- Women only environment
- Having a variety of classes (not just English)

All these conditions are met by RCLC. Most women have duties of care which do not necessarily have to hinder them, provided that structures are put into place to accommodate their needs. Low cost was of particular importance: investing in women is clearly not a priority for struggling ethnic minority households (indeed, family opposition to attendance was closely correlated to financial pressures) and so to introduce rules about paying would place this already disadvantaged sector of the population at even more of a disadvantage. This may be why many women are not paying for professional and accredited courses, even though the demand for these is extremely high. There is a clear mismatch between the ambitions of ethnic minority women and what they are actually able to achieve given their circumstances (for example, almost all women under retirement age wanted to have paid work one day, and yet many of them did not have this experience). RCLC cannot meet the strongly expressed demand for professional and accredited courses, but it is the first step of a ladder, and efforts to signpost women forwards are of value.²¹

21 RCLC reports its collaboration with WEA and New Directions in signposting women to other courses, although many learners are not eligible to free courses.

Regarding which ethnic groups are most in need, different groups have different priorities:

- The least connected women were Arab Muslims and women from China and the Far East.
- Arab Muslims were also least likely to have ever worked in the UK, and most likely to cite family care/duties as restrictive.
- Arab Muslims, women from the Far East, and women from Nepal, were most likely to cite language as a problem.
- Arab and South Asian Muslims were the least satisfied with their lives..
- South Asian women, whether Muslim or not, were the most likely of all women to cite barriers in terms of low confidence or poor health. They were also most likely to require courses to be free, suggesting that they value themselves/are valued particularly poorly when it comes to spending household income.
- Sub Saharan Africans were the least likely to be degree educated, the most likely to have money worries, and the least likely to express an ambition. However, they were more likely (along with people from the Far East and Europe) to be or have been in the UK workplace and/or to be part of groups or meetings. The English language was not such a barrier to this group. They are also least likely to cite barriers in terms of health or confidence, and they express themselves more positively on the life satisfaction scale.

These findings indicate that RCLC is right to accommodate even well-educated women, since their barriers to integration are still significant. Likewise, even though some of these women may not be poor, they may not necessarily have the freedom to spend money on themselves, and therefore still benefit from the low-cost character of RCLC services. Moreover, it is clear that RCLC, in providing language services and social connection, is meeting an important need. The way that the services are provided makes those services accessible. It could also be seen that RCLC is catering for generally felt needs amongst its target group, and not just catering for a few niche needs.

However, RCLC provision is only a small step in a long process of integration and cannot fulfil all the demands or ambitions expressed by ethnic minority women. For example, besides learning English and connecting with others, women wanted more professional and accredited courses, they wanted to get into a job, and they wanted to improve their quality of life. From the steps with RCLC, women need clearer direction into the next steps.

RCLC already knows from its own feedback reports (and feedback from other organisations tells the same story (e.g. BBO 2017)) that people are happier the more individually tailored a service is to their own needs. Dividing classes by ability and providing one-to-one planning for progression are therefore be important features of RCLC provision which are worth strengthening. Progress plans could also be integrated into the class exercises – helping women to articulate their final goals, encouraging each woman to map out what steps they personally need to take to get there, identifying

barriers to progress together and discussing options for getting around these barriers. Even the process of talking about such things can be helpful to the process of integration. It was seen from the survey data that women who were able to express dreams and ambitions tended to be more satisfied with their lives than those who could not. Causality is not proven (does planning help you thrive or do thriving people make plans) but either way, the process of digging into personal ambitions and barriers will either help women to see a way forwards or will help to uncover areas in which women need extra support.

According to RCLC's internal records, around 22% of RCLC clients presently progress onward to mainstream education, volunteering or employment. Getting more intentional about progression and mapping the route forwards may increase this percentage. RCLC has a great deal of experience working successfully with ethnic minority women and is aware of the barriers they face. This makes the organisation well placed to work through these progression issues with their clients. The volunteering branch of RCLC may be a valuable part of this process. The opportunity for ethnic minorities to volunteer (either with RCLC directly or assisted by RCLC and the charities it collaborates with to find positions with other charities) already offers a way for progression along the path of integration. Many women have the ambition for workplace integration, so understanding how British organisations work and understanding one's own potential through volunteering can aid progress in this direction. The British volunteers to RCLC also enrich the programme, giving cross cultural contact and being available for one-to-one conversation. Could volunteer speakers be brought in to talk specifically about various aspects of British culture?

Most women joined RCLC on the personal recommendation of another woman or an advisor.²² Word of mouth recommendation is essential. Based on the positive experience of working with current clients to take out surveys, mobilising clients to spread the word in new places could be a way forward. People tend to come based on the ethnicity of people reaching out to them, so being strategic about who does the outreach could help when targeting particularly vulnerable groups. Current attendees report that RCLC is an organisation for 'needy women,' which is not an attractive profile. The wording of publicity needs to be chosen carefully to target the correct audience without introducing stigma. Currently 26 different countries are represented at RCLC.

RCLC services are in high demand with many women on waiting lists, and almost all former clients wanting further classes. RCLC staff affirm that it takes at least four hours per week to make progress in English, but funding is not currently sufficient to meet demand.

²² One (French) RCLC client said she was lucky to come across RCLC via a personal recommendation because her google search had not revealed it. Is a more appropriate website needed? Or is this not the priority way of reaching people? (People familiar with searching up UK websites may not be the target group).

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The main aim of RCLC is to forward the integration of ethnic minority women through language learning and social connection in order to enhance skills, confidence, welfare, inclusion, social status and independence. Some clients are new arrivals in Britain (including refugees and asylum seekers) whilst others have lived in Britain for many years. RCLC commissioned this independent evaluation of its services in order to find out (1) whether its programme meets a genuine need that is not covered elsewhere in Reading; (2) to see whether it is succeeding to provide for the most vulnerable of all ethnic minority women; and (3) to check whether it is going about the task in an optimal way.

In order to find answers to these questions, 114 ethnic minority women both inside and outside of RCLC were interviewed. The interviews were partly based on a set questionnaire and partly constituted a free-flowing conversation. Most of the interviews were carried out individually, although some group discussions were included. Because we collected answers to set questions as well as processing discussion data, quantitative and qualitative techniques could both be used in the evaluation of the data. The methods used to collect the data were to some extent participatory, meaning that RCLC learners from different ethnic backgrounds were involved right from the design stage of the questionnaire, they were integral to the data collection process, and they took some part in analysing the data and shaping the conclusions.

Besides the ethnic minority women, seven experienced service providers from other organisations in Reading were also interviewed, adding their opinions on the research questions. On occasion, RCLC records were drawn on to clarify an issue or to put the data into context. The findings were also placed into the context of the wider academic literature, which provided a framework for understanding the concept of 'integration' and how its various domains fit together. Integration, the goal, encompasses thriving in the domains of employment, housing, education, health, social ties (with the wider community as well as within the family), language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability, and taking on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. None of these areas should be lacking.

It was encouraging to find that data collected from ethnic minority women and the opinions of various organisations working in the sector broadly agree. This not only provides some assurance that our findings are on the right track; it also reflects positively on the perceptiveness of organisations serving in the sector.



6.1 Is RCLC addressing a genuine need that is not covered elsewhere in Reading?

Important needs addressed

English language: The opportunity to learn English at RCLC is meeting the most important expressed need of the ethnic minority women interviewed. Women remarked on how language barriers restrain them in multiple ways, and the data also revealed that fluency in the language was associated with every other measured domain of integration into mainstream British society. In the academic literature also, language barriers are consistently identified as central to the integration process (Ager and Strang 2008). Language is essential to help bridge the gap between different cultures and mainstream living.

Social ties: Positive social connections are the mark of thriving, resilient communities, and making connections across cultural boundaries are important to avoid the fracturing of society along cultural lines. The academic literature emphasises that social ties are important in themselves (being intimately related to positive mental health) as well as being important because of the benefits they bring (connected people finding it easier to integrate in other ways also). Good mental health is an important reflection of a person's circumstances and yet it also has knock on consequences to that status, because with reduced mental health, people have less resilience to engage with society and overcome their barriers to integration (Friedli 2009; Skills for Care 2016). The linkages between social connection, life-satisfaction (related to good mental health) and progress in other domains of integration was also evident in our own survey results. For example, many women we interviewed said they felt ill-equipped and unprepared for workplace integration, even though they desired it. However, it was found that social connections of every form (informal and through groups, towards one's own ethnic group and also cross-cultural) were all closely related to confidence. Moreover, women with cross-cultural connections were significantly more likely to express unprompted dreams related to paid work, and women attending groups were significantly less likely to cite barriers which prevent them from achieving their ambitions. Attending groups is clearly a way of meeting people and doing things outside of one's usual circle of experience, building confidence and making this an easy first step to integration.

Language skills and social ties interact: Language skills and cross-cultural social connections are intimately connected, with lack of social integration (or vulnerable women isolating themselves) barring language practice, and lack of language skill barring social integration, leading to persistence in poor integration with the mainstream culture over time. RCLC's dual approach, providing English practice and cross-cultural social connection is therefore an effective way to tackle the problem.

Although workplace integration is desirable (and desired by almost 90% of the working age women we talked to), it was a far off and inaccessible dream for many of the women we interviewed. 72% of the Arab Muslim women we interviewed for example had never had a paid job, not even in their home countries, and this despite many of them having reached middle age and having a degree. Compare these to women from the Far East (who suffered just as much as Arab women from language barriers) and we find only 15% had never worked. Cultural barriers clearly exist beyond the issue of language barriers, which exposure to mainstream British culture and working with women through specific issues may help to alleviate (at least, Asian Muslims were more likely to find their way into the workplace the longer they had lived in Britain although improved English was not clearly related to how long they had lived in Britain).

However, getting into the paid job market should not be mistaken for the ultimate goal of integration – Ager and Strang’s integration framework suggested that there are many domains of integration, and every domain is important. Likewise, our survey revealed that the workplace is not one’s primary source of help and social support, not even for working women. The role of community groups (charities and religious organisations) is much more important in this regard, and have an essential role in facilitating cross cultural connections. According to Spencer and Cooper (2006), community groups are also important because they do not foster a sense of dependency in the minds of ethnic minorities, as can be the case when help is accessed through government services.

The language learning and social connections accessed by RCLC clients, including the opportunity to interact with persons outside of their own ethnic group, is perceived by other organisations in Reading to be empowering and confidence-building for ethnic minority women. These things, along with learning new skills and taking active part in something outside of home activity are all things which meet the European Commission’s idea of what organisations involved in promoting integration should be achieving (European Commission 2010).

Filling a gap in Reading’s provision

The major gaps identified by other organisations in Reading’s provision for ethnic minority women were inclusivity and accessibility. There needs to be more places where cross-cultural relationships can be formed, and the way these services are provided needs to be carefully thought out such that ethnic minority women who are already marginalised are not excluded from accessing its services altogether because of the way the service is set up. Funding for such provision is also lacking. It may be seen that RCLC is providing a service that attempts to fill the particular gaps that have been identified in Reading’s provision.

As for other organisations working in this area, many organisations working in Reading could be identified which touch on the interests of ethnic minority women, but very few could be found that specialise in this group and are specifically tailored to their needs. Some covered the needs of particular ethnicities but were not cross

cultural. Some were for women but not focused on the needs of ethnic minorities. Some were for ethnic minorities but not focussed on the needs of women. There are also other organisations offering low-cost language learning or creative activities combined with friendship (especially church organisations) but the particular combination of factors provided by RCLC (women only, a variety of day-time classes, the Ofsted accredited crèche) plus the trusted status that this charity has built up over time with other organisations is unique. The demand for RCLC classes is in any case greater than the financial capacity to meet it, with waiting lists for many of the classes.

Overall, it may be seen that RCLC is addressing one of the most important needs perceived to exist amongst ethnic minority women, and it is filling a gap in Reading’s provision. How effectively it was seen to be working is summarised in section 6.3. But first we consider whether RCLC is succeeding to reach the right target group.

6.2 Is RCLC reaching the most vulnerable?

RCLC has traditionally served those with very little English who are also disadvantaged generally (being poor and often poorly educated), but now RCLC is finding that an increasing proportion of its clients are highly qualified. Many of the clients are also returnees - wanting to progress to the improvers class having started off as beginners. RCLC wanted to know whether serving this particular group of clients is priority, or whether there are persons in greater need who they should be focussing on.

Priorities by barriers faced

First of all, it could be seen from the analysis of needs/barriers both inside and outside of RCLC’s clientele that RCLC is catering for generally felt needs amongst ethnic minority women, it was not just catering for a few niche needs of its clients. The barriers faced were similar, and also the demands for the way that services should be provided were similar (free, crèche, women only, day-time classes etc.); requirements were similar whether client or non-client of RCLC.

Clients of RCLC appeared to be a particularly vulnerable group however in that they were further from the job market than other women interviewed, they were less likely to say they took part in groups and meetings, when asked what was important to them about a course, they were more likely to cite ‘friendship’, and their life-satisfaction scores were lower. RCLC clients were also more likely than other women interviewed to say that language was a barrier to their progress, and (taking bias into account in that we only interviewed the best English speakers in RCLC) they were more likely to struggle with the language itself.

Priorities by ethnic group, by education and by wealth

By ethnic group, it was found that Arab Muslims (strongly represented in RCLC) were particularly vulnerable in terms of poor social connections, lack of integration in the job market, the feeling that family care duties are restrictive, language barriers and low levels of life satisfaction. This is despite their high levels of

education. Indeed, there was no evidence to suggest that women with higher levels of education are more likely to be working, more likely to be part of a group or more likely to have informal friendship ties. It is important to note here that some of the women participating in this research were refugees and their experiences of war had understandably impacted on their well being and experience of settling in the UK. These findings indicate that RCLC is right to accommodate even well-educated women, since their barriers to the modes of integration that RCLC specialises in are particularly high.

Nepalese women had big problems with the language, although women from India and Pakistan, less so. The life satisfaction scores of South Asian Muslims were low. South Asian women generally (whether Muslim or not), were the most likely of all women to cite barriers in terms of low confidence or poor health. They were also most likely to require courses to be free, suggesting that they 'value' themselves/are valued particularly poorly when it comes to spending household income. It can be seen from this that even though some of RCLC's clients may not be the poorest of the poor, they do not always have the freedom to spend money on themselves, and South Asians particularly benefit from the low-cost character of RCLC services.

Women from South Asia and the Arab world are particularly well represented in RCLC's clientele, and it may be seen that they particularly benefit from RCLC services, even where well-educated or relatively well-off.

Women from the Far East (including China) were also poorly connected and had big problems with the language. This group was however better integrated in the UK workplace. RCLC has some representation from these ethnic groups in its clientele.

RCLC did not have many clients from sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-Saharan Africans were the least likely to be degree educated, the most likely to have money worries, and the least likely to express an ambition. However, they were more likely (along with people from the Far East and Europe) to be or have been in the UK workplace and/or to be part of groups or meetings. The English language was not such a barrier to this group. They are also least likely to cite barriers in terms of health or confidence, and they express themselves more positively on the life satisfaction scale. Despite the important issues that Sub-Saharan African women face, they were more advantaged than other ethnic minorities in terms of language and social connections, and therefore less in need of the particular services that RCLC specialises in.

Priorities by time in Britain

Spencer and Cooper (2006) note that mental health often deteriorates on arrival in Britain because of isolation. This issue was also reflected in our survey data. Life satisfaction tended to be high when people first arrived in Britain, then declined, then, on average, began to pick up again after the five-year mark. It would seem then that women are particularly vulnerable in their early years in Britain, which makes this group a particular target for RCLC.

However, some women who have lived in Reading for many

years still have trouble with the English language and with social integration. For example, amongst those living in the UK less than a year, 50% said language was a barrier to progress. After 8 years, this figure had only gone down a little; 40% saying language was a problem. Even after 20 years, a quarter of the women interviewed were still saying that language is a barrier. And far as social integration is concerned, there was no statistically significant correlation between length of time in Britain and cross-cultural connection. Clearly social integration does not just 'happen', so the work that RCLC does in promoting the process for any women who is lagging in these areas is important.

Priorities by time in RCLC

Whilst it is clear that RCLC is reaching some particularly vulnerable people, there was some concern expressed by persons in one or two other organisations as to whether women are progressing from RCLC into further forms of integration. Clearly RCLC courses are in high demand, with 98% of those interviewed who had done one course expressing interest in other courses also. However, RCLC sees itself as the first step of a ladder, not a place to settle down in, so it is of value for RCLC to have clear integration targets that they want women to meet during their time as clients, and an exit strategy going forwards. This point is expanded on further in the final section.

6.3 Are RCLC services being offered in an optimal and accessible way?

The way that RCLC carries out its work is important in order to increase the accessibility of its services to its particular target group. Providing the right service is no use unless it is provided in a way that the target group can access it.

Services and approaches which were found to be necessary, and which RCLC does well:

Welcoming atmosphere and social interaction

A warm and welcoming atmosphere was considered to be an important feature of RCLC provision by clients and by other organisations working in the sector alike. The literature also suggests that a sense of welcome is one of the most important things associated with the wellbeing of ethnic minorities in a foreign culture (Ager and Strang 2008). This kind of friendliness is a powerful counterbalance to racist forces that may damage the confidence of ethnic minority women. It is also essential since integration does not depend exclusively on ethnic minorities – the welcome of the English community plays a role too. The welcome provided by RCLC was seen to be confidence building – important to women taking (risky) steps into a cross-cultural experience. (In general, the women in our survey who expressed confidence barriers tended to be women less likely to attend groups or meetings than average, less likely to know the language, and less likely to have cross cultural friendships). Where friendliness is shown, social interaction increases and therefore language skills can be gained, easing the way to integration. The mainstream British volunteers to RCLC certainly enrich the programme in this respect, providing cross-cultural contact and being available for one-to-one conversation.

Free

Free provision of classes was the most important requirement demanded of RCLC by ethnic minority women, with over 80% of women stating that this feature is very important to them. Low cost was generally recognized as important also by other organisations engaging with vulnerable persons in Reading. It would appear that investing in women was not a priority for struggling ethnic minority households (indeed, family opposition to attendance was closely correlated to financial pressures) and so to introduce rules about paying would place this already disadvantaged sector of the population at even more of a disadvantage.

Women only

Half of the ethnic minority women interviewed at least preferred if not definitely required a woman-only environment. This feature was also recognised and appreciated by other organisations as making the service more accessible to the chosen clientele. Muslim women were especially keen on this, although not exclusively; non-Muslim women from South Asia (but not from China and the far East) also preferred a woman only environment. Likewise, there was a strong correlation between not having (or never having had) a job and wanting a women-only environment (the three variables were all related). The fact that non-working women were reticent to mix with men also limits their work options.

Various levels of English and courses other than English

Women are much happier when services are tailored to their needs, so dividing classes by ability is important. The other courses are also an attractive feature since upskilling in any direction has positive repercussions to welfare and confidence-building, and English practice together with a multi-cultural social environment are features of all classes.

Crèche

Most women (over 80%) had duties of family care, with 27% women saying that these duties limited them in pursuing other things they wanted to do. Having duties of care had no significant association with women actually partaking in various activities however (work, groups, study) suggesting that it is possible to put structures in place (like a crèche) which can relieve these restrictions. The survey revealed that over 57% of women felt that the provision of a crèche by RCLC was important to their ability to attend, and a further 5% found the provision at least attractive.

Classes during school hours

A daytime group, particularly within school hours, was the most desired time for courses. 10am was the favourite time of all, and after 3pm demand dropped right off. RCLC's daytime provision of courses is therefore appropriate. Arab and South Asian women were particularly reluctant to venture out in the evening.

Central location (easy to get to)

92% of women said it was easy for them to travel to Reading town centre, suggesting that RCLC is well located. This is important, since many ethnic minority women expressed that getting about is problematic for them generally.

Other

Services which RCLC did not provide such as translation services or those of a religious nature were also not in strong demand from the ethnic minority women, suggesting that RCLC has got the right balance.

RCLC has built up a lot of experience working with ethnic minority women and is quite well respected by women interviewed from both inside and outside of the organisation.

The opportunity for ethnic minorities to volunteer within RCLC is valuable to the process of integration. Many women have the ambition to achieve workplace integration but little understanding of how British organisations work and of their own potential to contribute. Volunteering can aid understanding in this direction.

Areas in which RCLC could demonstrate more progress:

Besides all these positive points, some questions were raised which RCLC might do well to consider. Some points may already have been addressed and just need to be better publicised, but others may need to be worked on.

Cultural orientation and moving people on

We have noted that RCLC provides two linked services – language instruction (with upskilling generally) combined with social integration. Social integration may be further sub-divided into two aspects: physically meeting people, and also cultural orientation.

RCLC has certainly received positive feedback from clients and other organisations regarding the provision of a meeting place, but the issue of cultural orientation remains in question. From the lack of feedback on RCLC assistance in this area, it would seem that RCLC has scope to expand its provision of cultural orientation or at least to bring its current discussions of UK culture into sharper focus. Indeed, some women in a focus group directly expressed, even without prompts, that they would like to receive more orientation into British cultural attitudes and practices in all its diversity. Could more volunteer speakers be brought in to talk about specific aspects of British culture?

Ager and Strang (2008) also make clear that language learning is more likely to combat isolation when combined with cultural orientation. Cultural orientation might also help more women to progress from RCLC's 'first step' provision into more mainstream services (paid for education, other cross-cultural community groups, volunteering, even the workplace). Evidence of this progression from RCLC is something that other organisations were concerned to see. RCLC currently allows a maximum of two terms in any one class and then the client needs to progress - either to a higher level course internally, or to an external course or occupation. External organisations want to be assured that women have clear direction into potential next steps after RCLC.

Realistically, the cultural barriers that make RCLC's dedicated services necessary to marginalised ethnic minority women are not going to dramatically change because of a few orientation sessions, but this need not stop RCLC demonstrating its intention to help women progress in other areas of integration.

RCLC provision is an early step in a long process of social inclusion and integration and cannot fulfil all the demands or ambitions expressed by ethnic minority women. For example, besides learning English and connecting with others, women strongly demanded more professional and accredited courses, they wanted to get into a job, and they wanted to improve their quality of life. However, there was a large mismatch between these expressed ambitions of ethnic minority women and what they can actually achieve given their circumstances. For example, accredited courses need to be paid for and women do not (or cannot) spend so much money on themselves. Deliberately setting out to work these issues through with women would help them understand their options better and discover the best way to thrive in Britain within the bounds of their personal circumstances.

Progress plans could also be integrated into the class exercises – helping women to articulate their final goals and mapping out the steps to get there, identifying barriers and discussing options for getting around them. The survey data suggested that women who were able to express dreams and ambitions tended to be more satisfied with their lives than those who could not. Causality is not proven (does planning help a person thrive or do thriving people make plans) but either way, the process of digging into personal ambitions and barriers will either help women to see a way forwards or will help to uncover areas in which women need extra support.

According to RCLC records, around a quarter of RCLC clients moved onward to mainstream education, volunteering or employment in the previous year. Becoming clearer about cultural orientation and helping each woman to map their possible future paths may increase this percentage. RCLC has a great deal of experience working successfully with ethnic minority women and is aware of the barriers they face. This makes the organisation well placed to work through these progression issues with their clients.

Collaboration with other organisations

There could be scope for further communication and collaboration between charitable organisations to ensure that women get signposted to services that best advance their integration (organisations should be complementing one another to get the best for their clients instead of duplicating effort). For example, many women expressed an interest in fitness classes or in cooking (another good venue for building cross cultural relationships). RCLC could help their clients to find out where such classes exist, and even organise a joint excursion to the class.

Collaboration can also provide a wider platform from which to obtain funding and via which to give ethnic minority women more of a voice.

Other

Despite positive external assessments of the quality of their learning opportunities, RCLC should continue to enhance the quality and professionalism of its' service provision and be mindful of the demand from some learners for progression to accredited learning.

The multi-cultural provision of RCLC is appreciated, including the contact which is made (through volunteers) with women from diverse cultural backgrounds. Forging relationships between clients and people from mainstream British cultures was an issue that some organisations felt could be worked on further, perhaps through increased volunteering or new partnerships.

Points on publicity

Word of mouth recommendation is important - most women joined RCLC on the personal recommendation of another woman or an advisor. Repeat publicity is also of value - the survey results suggested that people were more receptive to the idea of taking courses with RCLC when they had heard of RCLC before, even if they had never attended.

RCLC could also keep other charities/organisations working in the sector informed (and stocked with leaflets) about RCLC's provision. The organisations we interviewed were willing to recommend RCLC to ethnic minority women but did not necessarily have clear information to hand.

RCLC might consider a name change or at least the addition of a strapline so as to be clearer who its services are for and what it offers.

Current attendees report that RCLC is an organisation for 'needy women,' which is not an attractive profile. The wording of publicity needs to be chosen more carefully to target the correct audience without introducing stigma.

Women appear to be more attracted to RCLC when the ethnicity of people reaching out to them is the same, so being strategic about who does the outreach could help when targeting particular ethnicities.

Finally, this whole research process was intended to be empowering to ethnic minority women in itself. It helped them to think about the barriers to integration that they face, and how they might overcome these. It was, in itself, an effective outreach and publicity process. Mobilising clients in similar ways to spread the word of RCLC into new places might be repeated.

APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF RAW SURVEY DATA

The question	% of 114 observations in total (though not all answered all questions)	
Where was the survey taken (where & place)	1=Chinese Community (partly in church)	11.50
	2=RCLC	28.32
	3=Muslim community groups (mostly Arab)*	10.62
	4=Gurudwara (only 4 persons)	3.54
	5=WEA (another learning centre on RCLC premises)	7.08
	6=Warehouse (Toddlers group)	17.70
	7=East African Muslim group	7.08
	8=Warehouse/Communicare (Nepalese group)	5.31
	9=Reading College	8.85
	*Berkshire Muslim Arab Community Association; Coronation Square Sudansese Community; Abu Bakr Mosque ** Bridge Hall Tilehurst (East African Community Association)	
British born (britborn)	0=born abroad	95.58
	1=British born (5 persons)	4.42
How long have you lived in Britain? (years) Categorised (liveuk)	0=Less than 1 year (4 persons)	3.54
	1=1-2 year	8.85
	2=3-5 years	16.81
	3=6-8 years	20.35
	4=9-12 years	19.47
	5=13-19 years	20.35
Confidence in speaking English (speak)	6=20+ years	10.62
	1=very little or none	9.43
	2	16.98
	3	29.25
	4	28.30
Confidence in reading and writing English (write)	5=excellent	16.04
	1=very little or none	9.26
	2	15.74
	3	25.93
	4	27.78
	5=excellent	21.30

Looking to the future, what would you like to achieve for yourself within 5 years? (dream)	44.41% mentioned improving their English as a key dream (englishd) 41.18% mentioned work related dreams (workd) 37.65% mentioned other quality of life related dreams including (predominantly) upskilling but also gaining confidence living in the UK and improving livings standards (qold)	
Ambition (mentioned something want to achieve vs left this blank)	0=nothing mentioned 1=mentioned a dream	25.44 74.56
Barriers: looking after family/family duties (bfam)	0=little or no problem 0.5 1=problem (limiting)	64.55 8.18 27.27
Barriers: health problems (bhealth)	0=little or no problem 0.5 1=problem (limiting)	85.58 2.88 11.54
Barriers: lack of confidence (bconfid)	0=little or no problem 0.5 1=problem (limiting)	61.32 14.15 24.53
Barriers: not knowing the English language well enough (beng)	0=little or no problem 0.5 1=problem (limiting)	57.27 10.91 31.82
Barriers: not knowing how to do things in this country (bhow)	0=little or no problem 0.5 1=problem (limiting)	65.09 8.49 26.42
Barriers: not having support from family and friends (bsupp)	0=little or no problem 0.5 1=problem (limiting)	78.70 6.48 14.81
Barriers: lack of money (bcash)	0=little or no problem 0.5 1=problem (limiting)	60.00 9.09 30.91
No barriers (bnone)	0=barriers exist 1=no barriers	81.25 18.75
Other barriers (bother)	Transport – Official documentation - Worry about what other people might say and do (fear) - Unsure of welcome amongst the British people - Help finding a job – Lack of skills for work – Want professional courses and accredited courses –Joblessness of husband (provider) - Joblessness linked to money worries also, esp. if family to provide for - not being able to leave the home - cultural orientation - Busy-ness, esp. for those with small children.	
Have you ever had help with the difficulties you face (helped)	0=no help 1=helped note, not everyone who was not helped felt isolated. Some said they knew where to get help but did not actually need help.	36.94 63.06

Who has helped you (if you were helped)	(hfam) family	63.24
	(hfriend) friends	63.08
	(hrelig) religious org	26.56
	(hwork) people from work	16.00
	(hgov) a government service	42.19
	(hcharity) group or charity	31.34
	(horg) help from religious org OR charity	42.42
	Regarding govt services, most commonly mentioned was doctor followed by council.	
Of organisations which helped, the most commonly mentioned was church (despite the fact that most women interviewed were Muslims). RCLC, the mosque, the temple, the Red cross and Reading College also got mentioned.		
Whether were helped by people at work IF worked at some point in the UK AND if was helped (hwork)	0=no, (though worked) worked	75.00
	1=yes, have been helped by work colleagues	25.00
	(including those who were not helped, only 12.73% of people who worked were helped out by work colleagues) (hwork1)	
Think of the last 3 women outside of your household that you shared food or drink with. Were any of them from a different ethnic group than yourself? (connect)	0=not shared food or drink	11.43
	1=all the same ethnic group	40.00
	2=1 or more from different group	48.57
	(xsocial) connect with people across cultures (48.57%)	
	(social) connect with people at all (88.57%)	
Do you currently work in a paid job (injob)	0=no	65.77
	1=yes, currently in a paid job	34.23
Ever had paid work in the uk (workeduk)	0=no	44.25
	1=yes	55.75
never had a paid job anywhere (neverworked)	0=worked	63.72
	1=neverworked	36.28
Of those NOT in a job	jobuk have had a job in the UK	37.68
	jobxuk have had a job abroad	26.23
	wantjob want paid work in future	80.00
Do you currently study? (study)	0=no	54.46
	1=yes, currently study	45.54
What courses, who provides them, how satisfied are you? (whatstudy)	Regarding satisfaction: 21 women answered additional questions about how satisfied they were with their study experience (on a scale of 1-7). The majority were satisfied, although those referring to courses outside of RCLC tended to answer more positively than those studying within RCLC. (4 out of 12 RCLC clients were less than satisfied).	
Do you look after family members (famcare)	0=no	19.23
	1=yes	80.77
Do you attend groups or meetings? (orgs)	0=no	34.55
	1=yes	65.45
	High as most surveys were taken at a group meeting	

Do you volunteer or help out in any groups? (vol)	0=no	58.33
	1=yes	41.67
Did you give to charity in the last month? (charit)	0=no	36.84
	1=yes	63.16
(Questions only asked in a pilot survey so only 19 responses)		
How satisfied are you with your life overall? (lfsato)	1=not at all satisfied	4.81
	2	1.92
	3	4.81
	4	8.65
	5	28.85
	6	17.31
	7=completely satisfied	33.65
Looking to the future, can you imagine things getting better or worse for you? (future)	1=worse (1 person)	0.91
	2=stay the same/don't know	20.00
	3=better	79.09
Did you hear of RCLC before today (knowrclc)	0=no	37.17
	1=yes	62.83
Have you ever attended an RCLC course? (attrclc)	0=no	50.00
	1=yes	50.00
Do you want to attend RCLC classes (wantclass)	0=no	11.34
	1=yes	88.66
	(15% did not answer)	
Which RCLC courses interest you (out of those who registered interest at all)	(cconv) English conversation	49.41
	(cwrite) English writing	46.99
	(chealth) Health	32.05
	(cbeau) beauty and confidence building	30.38
	(csew) sewing	41.98
	(cit IT) computers	26.58
Any other courses (cother) (out of those volunteering other ideas)	15 x More advanced classes and also professional courses providing skills to get job plus 2 x maths; 6 x Cooking and healthy eating x 6; 5 x Yoga/dance/fitness/swimming(!); 4 x Childcare; Jobhunting help and Arabic classes also mentioned	
Ease of getting family approval to attend classes (for women you know) (approv)	1=hard	16.19
	2=need questions answering/not sure	11.43
	3=easy	72.38
How easy or hard is it for you to travel to Reading town centre? (travel)	0=hard	8.00
	1=easy	92.00

If you were to join a course at Reading Community Learning Centre, how important to you are the following:

- someone speaks my language and can translate (trans)	0=not important	69.79
	0.5	4.17
	1=important	26.04
- I can meet with friends at the course (friend)	0=not important	26.53
	0.5	10.20
	1=important	63.27
- women only environment (wo)	0=not important	50.00
	0.5	5.10
	1=important	44.90
- crèche available (creche)	0=not important	37.50
	0.5	5.21
	1=important	57.29
- free/low cost lessons (free)	0=not important	15.15
	0.5	4.04
	1=important	80.81
- own religion represented in leadership (crelig) (question only asked of 31 women)	0=not important	77.42
	0.5	6.45
	1=important	16.13
- formal qualification wanted from the courses (cformqual) (question only asked of 30 women)	0=not important	20.00
	0.5	30.00
	1=important	50.00
When would be the best time for you to get to a course?	t8 (8am)	15.58
	t9 (9am)	47.25
	t10 (10am)	64.84
	t11 (11am)	59.34
	t12 (12 noon)	43.96
	t13 (1pm)	43.98
	t14 (2pm)	37.78
	t15 (3pm)	17.98
After 3pm demand drops off to less than 5% of persons. Working people might find evenings necessary, but they are not the target group and women clearly have other responsibilities in the evening or do not want to go out. A day time group, particularly within school hours is clearly desired.		
Age (age)	1=18-21 years	1.85
	2=22-29 years	12.96
	3=30-45 years	59.26
	4=46=65 years	20.37
	5=66+	5.56

Ethnic group (ethnic)	fareast (mostly from China, and data collected partly in a Christian gathering, but also countries in the Far East)	18.35
	asiaislam (Asian Muslims, majority Pakistani)	12.84
	arabislam (Muslims from North Africa and Middle East incl.Afghanistan)	22.94
	ssafrica (Sub-Saharan Africa, mainly Muslim respondents)	18.35
	axislam (Non-Muslim Asian countries, just over half from Nepal, also Hindu's and Sikhs from India, one Indian Christian and three Sri Lankans of unknown religion)	23.85
	ae (One South American and 3 Europeans)	3.67
highest level of schooling (edu)	0=no school	4.44
(excluding 21% who did not answer the question)	1=primary completed	5.56
	2=secondary	21.11
	3=post-secondary	23.33
	4=degree or over	45.56
Some UK education (educ)	0=home country	78.38
Country in which schooling was completed (eduwhere)	1=UK	21.62
survey taken of current client of RCLC (client)	0=no	72.81
	1=yes, current RCLC client	27.19

Space was made for further unstructured comments, as well as opportunity for free comment on various subjects throughout the questionnaire.

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