

Evaluating a well-women project with women from Somalia and Afghanistan



Commissioned by Manchester City Art Gallery
and Manchester Museum

Zeinab Mohamed, June 2003

Evaluation of Well Woman Project At Manchester Museum and Manchester Art Gallery

Section A. Project information

1. Introduction

Today, there are different conflicts going on around the world that are forcing people to leave their homes, families and belongings. Refugees may end up in different parts of their own countries, or a refugee camp in a neighbouring country, or those who can afford to may seek safety in one of the countries in the West. The United Kingdom is one of the favourite destinations that a refugee may want to come to, because of imperialist/colonial ties, language, or a family member who is already in the country, or a perception that the UK is a fair place.¹

On arrival into the U.K. their needs are basic: food, shelter and safety. That need becomes more complex through the reality and challenges of pursuing life and settlement in the UK. Refugees and asylum seekers are from, and form, diverse communities with different cultures and languages making it difficult to address their needs in a uniform way.

Refugees and asylum seekers share the isolation and barriers to services with other isolated minority ethnic groups in the UK, and vulnerable white people, but their needs are even more acute because of the experience of war, the loss that they have been through. Their needs are often over-shadowed by the needs of other more established ethnic minority or vulnerable white communities and this creates gaps in the service provision for refugee communities.

The asylum seeking and refugee women face more isolation than their counterparts, because of gender, culture i.e. religion and the way they were brought up, and communication barriers. Many women are responsible for bringing up children on their own, because their husbands are missing, dead or elsewhere. This puts a tremendous amount of stress onto women. Culturally, many of them have not been expected to take that responsibility in the past and this puts individuals into difficult situations with many of them suffering in isolation.

The project being evaluated aimed to provide a safe environment for the women and to explore health using different channels. This work has been developed out of work with the Somali community in Manchester². This project is the third in a series of projects organised by Manchester and Salford

¹ Home Office 2002. *Understanding the decision-making of asylum seekers*. Research Study 243, July. HMSO: London

² Mohamed Z, Lovel H, Moran R., 2002. *Somali Health Needs Assessment: A review of primary health care provision to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Manchester*. School of Primary Care University of Manchester.

Universities in collaboration with the Manchester Museum and Manchester City Art Gallery.

2. Aims, Objectives and Intended Outcomes of the Project

2.1. The overall aims of this project (November 2002 – March 2003) were to:

- Encourage the well being of refugee women and women in isolated communities using Manchester's cultural and learning institutions
- Network and develop sustainable cultural community participation and skills.

2.2. The intention was to achieve these aims through the following objectives:

- Develop healthy living skills involving food, nutrition, physical and mental well being with the longer-term aim of building sustainable neighbourhoods.
- Develop basic literacy skills.
- Widen the participation and use of Manchester's cultural and learning institutions, specifically Manchester Museum and Manchester Art Gallery.
- Produce a programme of events using artists and health workers to create a positive identity within the Manchester area.
- Produce an 'end product' in line with the participants experience and the programme requirements. (Possible photographic/video documentation, illustrated food/recipe book, exhibition of art/craft.)

2.3. The intended outcomes of the project were:

- 2.3.1. Generate interest in the museum and art gallery among Somalian, Afghan and Bengali/South Asian women.
- 2.3.2. Increase knowledge of healthy living skills and strategies to sustain a healthy lifestyle.
- 2.3.3. Create a visual record of the project covering art and health workshop sessions, photographic and video.
- 2.3.4. Improve English language skills especially in description and Instruction.
- 2.3.5. Enhance knowledge and experience of accessing Manchester Art Gallery and Manchester Museum.

Section B: The Evaluation

1. Limits of the Evaluation

The limitations imposed by budget and time constraints, and the complexities of this pilot, innovative project has meant that the evaluation has concentrated

upon the extent to which the target population perceives intended outcomes 2 and 5 to have been achieved.

2. Evaluation Methods

Over the life of the project up to 20 from women Afghanistan and Somalia attended sessions at different times.

With the purpose of establishing what the women involved were hoping to gain from their participation in the project, two focus group discussions were organised according to language group: one for the Somali women and the other for the Afghan women.

A list of prompt, open-ended questions (Appendix 1) was drawn up by the lead evaluator (Zeinab Mohamed), in consultation with the University of Salford supervisor (Dr Moran). The Somali discussion took place in one of the houses of the women while the Afghan discussion took place in the Manchester Museum. The lead evaluator facilitated the Somali focus group and supported the second evaluator, an Afghan woman (Nadia Akram), who led the Afghan focus group discussion. Both focus groups were conducted in the respective language of the women participating, simultaneously recorded on audiotapes, transcribed in the mother tongue and then back translated into English by the focus group facilitators.

The transcriptions were textually analysed by the lead evaluator and included discussion with her co-evaluator and supervisor. This analysis formed the basis of a semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix 2) that probed for deeper information about the women's perspectives about each of the intended outcomes.

Of the original 20, 8 women formed a core of regular attendees. The interviews were conducted with these 8 women

Characteristics of the participants

- All of the women who participated in the project were from Refugee and Asylum Seeking communities
- All of the women who participated in the project lived in Greater Manchester, specifically Ardwick, Longsight, Rusholme, Moss Side and Salford.
- The participants included mothers, grandmothers and young women
- All participants shared an extremely limited capacity to speak in the English language
- All participants shared the perspective that it was necessary for them to improve their English linguistic skills in order for them to be able to survive in the UK
- The age range was between 16 and 55 years.

Age range	Number of women
16-25	2
26-35	3
36-45	1
46-55	2

- Formal educational attainment was variable with all the Afghan women having completed their formal education to higher levels than all the Somali women

Education level	Somalia	Afghanistan
No schooling	2	
Primary	1	
Secondary	1	
Further education		1
Higher education		3

- Attendance at language classes and site of class (Community or college setting) in Manchester was variable

		Nationality	
		Somali	Afghan
ESOL Class Attendance	Community	4	-
	College		3
No Class			1

- Two women (Afghan) said that they attended college in order to improve their abilities to communicate in English
- All the women except one (Afghan) said that they had been to the Museum before. In contrast, the beginning of the project constituted their first visit to any Art Gallery

Women of different nationalities and ages



3. Evaluation Results

3.1. Focus Groups

3.1.1. Intended Outcome: *Improvement in communicating in English*

All interview respondents perceived themselves to have expanded their vocabulary of English words during the course of the project.

“I have more confidence to communicate in English.”

“I can practice English.”

“It has helped to improve my language.”

“It helps to use English, rather than using my own language.”

“More friends mean more practice in speaking the English language... language is getting better.”

They accounted for this improvement as arising from:

- Meeting with other women, including on the project. This regular social gathering and making friends with other women who are participating in the project created opportunities to communicate in English that would not have been possible otherwise. They think that this improves their spoken language more than sitting at home or joining an E.S.O.L class where very limited spoken English is practiced.
- The environment within which the project took place. There were a number of staff from different agencies providing support to the women and all communication with the staff was in English. Their presence and involvement created opportunities for the women to develop their confidence to communicate in English. The relationships that formed between the women and the staff encouraged the women to use English as a form of communication.

3.1.2. Intended Outcome: *To develop healthy living skills involving food, nutrition, physical and mental well being with the long term aim of building sustainable neighbourhoods*

Healthy Living Skills

All the women expected to learn something that that could improve their quality of life like learning English, eating and cooking healthy foods, and enjoying the advantages of physical activity.

Some of the women observed that this project has been more exciting than the previous ones because it was all about improving their quality of life and covered so many different topics.

All the women said that they try to be healthy. However, in a way the whole concept of being healthy can be a confusing one: while women may do a lot of walking for example, they do not necessarily consider this activity to be about maintaining or developing their health, it is simply a part of their lives.

Food and Nutrition

Women described their difficulties in buying the right food because of lack of knowledge.

All the women in the Afghan focus group said that they know about the effects of food in our body, but they did not develop any explanations for how they know about this. In part, it may be accounted for by their generally higher formal education attainment levels.

In contrast, the women from the Somali focus group gave different reactions to the question about the effects of food. One of them stated that this was the first time that she had heard a statement to the effect that **food can harm your body**:

“This is the first time that I’ve ever heard this question because I only know that food gives you energy, like carbohydrates etc. I don’t know the side effects.”

Two other Somali women said that they did not know anything at all about the harmful effects of food. One of them said that food increases your weight and one of them said that many fats and sweets make you ill.

All the women from the Somali focus group said that they now eat **less fat** and **less sugar**. One of the Somali women now eats more fruits and another eats **less salt**.



Physical and Mental Well-Being

In response to the question, “What do you do to be healthy?” none of the Somali women mentioned physical activity. This contrasts with the Afghan women, all of whom mentioned physical activity like walking, dancing and doing housework as a way of being healthy. One of the Afghan women combined this activity with trying to eat the right food.

Performing Physical Activity



Eating Healthy Food



Building sustainable neighbourhoods

Women expressed the view that meeting different people from different cultures with whom they share the city is a very good way of learning about other communities' cultures.

Sharing cultures



3.1.3. Intended Outcome: To widen the participation and use of Manchester's cultural and learning institutions, specifically Manchester Museum and Manchester Art Gallery.

Taking up the opportunity to visit different parts of the Art Gallery and the Museum and to see what the institutions can offer to communities created first hand experience and appreciation of the different artefacts available. Seeing things from their own countries inspired a sense of belonging within the women. They mentioned their enjoyment and appreciation of seeing and learning things that they would not have seen or learned otherwise. They also commented on the staff: by explaining and reading the information about displays for the women, the staff were perceived to be very supportive.

'I've learnt many things about the displays in the museum and I got Information from the staff in the museum. It was a wonderful experience.'

'Seeing the mummies in the museum was a wonderful experience.'

When asked if their attitude has changed towards the museum as a result of the project, some mentioned that they would continue coming to the museum, they would bring their children and their friends because of their experience and the enjoyment that they had:

“I’ve learned many different things I didn’t know about the museum. Now I can take people to the museum especially my children.”

“When you heard [about] things and when you see, it isn’t the same. Seeing inside the museum increased my knowledge about different things.”

Viewing the Mummies



All of the women said that this is their first time to be in a gallery but that they think that their attitude towards the use of the art gallery will change: they will use it.

“It was my first time that I have ever been to Art Gallery and it is going to change my attitude towards the Art Gallery because I have a lot from the art, which I have never seen before.”

3.1.3.1. Additional outcomes

- Coming to the museum provided the opportunity of coming out the house and visiting places they wouldn’t have otherwise visit, like Tatton Park. This also gave the opportunity to walk in the park.
- The women’s day at the town hall to celebrate with other women from all over Manchester and to learn and appreciate other cultures was very enjoyable.
- They enjoyed the opportunities of:
 - Handling a video camera
 - Take pictures using a camera
 - Practicing dancing
 - Writing poems using themes related to health and food

Handling video camera



3.1.4. Evaluation results: Questionnaire

3.1.4.1. New things learned during the project

Response	n	Somali	Afghan
How to stay generally healthy	1	1	
Healthy diet	4	4	
Cooking	2		2
Dancing	1		1
Singing	1		1
Yoga and exercises	2	2	
Communicating in English	1	1	
New English words	1	1	
Art (drawing, writing)	1		1
Poems	1		1
Using camera	2		2
Taking photos	3		3
Connecting with other people	1		1
Making friends	1	1	

3.1.4.2. Attitudes towards the art gallery. As a place to:

Responses	n	Somali	Afghan
Bring friends	1		1
Participate in English classes	1		
Improve my skills in art	1		
Change my thoughts about art	1		
Experience different art objects	2	1	1
Benefit my children	1	1	
Improve my learning opportunities	1	1	
Continue to come	1		

3.1.4.3. Attitudes towards the museum

All said their attitude towards the museum has changed

- It is a place to:

Responses	N	Somali	Afghan
Find opportunities for further education	1	1	
Experience different museum objects	1	1	
Bring friends	1	1	
Enjoy learning opportunities	1	1	
Improve skills in art	1	1	
Continue to come to	3	2	1
Be stimulated (“It’s a very interesting place”)	1		1
Bring my children	2	1	1

Arts skills session



3.1.4.4. Improved learning about how to stay healthy

All said yes

Responses	n	Somali	Afghan
Healthy Diet	4	3	1
Physical activity	5	3	2
Risks associated with the consumption Of fat and body weight	1	1	
How to cook vegetables	1		1
Dieting	1		1
Cooking healthy food	1		1
Provide healthy diet for my family	1	1	
More careful of what I eat and cook	1	1	
Eat less salt	2	1	1

3.1.4.5. Started any new physical activity

Seven of the women stated that they have started physical activity to promote their health and well-being

Responses	n	Somali	Afghan
Walk more instead of taking the bus	1	1	
Go to swim every week	2	2	
Exercise	2	1	1
Doing sports	2		2

Walk in the park



3.1.4.6. Changed anything about your life style?

All said yes

Responses	n	Somali	Afghan
Aiming to reduce my weight, reason for going swimming	1	1	
Coming out of the house, Social contact with others	2	1	1
Doing exercises	1	1	
Reduced intake of sugar, salt and fats	2	2	
Using more balanced diet	1	1	
The project changed my cooking style			
Helped me to be more active and healthy	1		1
My thoughts more than my life style	1		1
Cooking style	2		2
Understanding about my health	1	1	

Yoga session



But one respondent observed:

“Helped my communication ability. Before the project [I] was always at home, but now I can go somewhere, I see people, I talk to people. The project [has] help[ed] to change my thoughts more than my life style.”

Learning English



3.1.4.7. Helped understanding about the relationship between your body and the food you eat

All said yes

Response	n	Somali	Afghan
Understood that more of fats, sugar and salt are not good for our health	3	3	
Importance of food for my body	1		1
What the healthy foods are	1	1	
Importance of proteins to our body	1	1	
Importance of milk to children	1	1	
The importance of fruits and vegetables to our body and the number of portions per day	1	1	
Daily intake of proteins, carbohydrates and fats	1	1	
Understand the importance of food to my body (1		1
How to get more vitamins from the food that I eat	1		1
What to eat	1		1
How to cook vegetables	1		

3.1.4.8. Was there anything good about the sessions?

Response	n	Somali	Afghan
Helping to communicate in English	2	1	1
The exercise	1	1	
Yoga	1	1	
Drawing	1		1
Taking pictures	1		1
Cooking together	1		
Visiting Tatton Park with other women and children	1		1
Going out of the house	1		1
Helped women about different things	1		1
Cooking with other women	1		1

3.1.4.9. Was there anything bad about the sessions?

- Time was short (only one participant)

3.1.4.10. Any changes wanted?

- Allocating specific times inside the project for learning English
- More well-being sessions/information about well-being
- 1 art topic rather than different topics
- More women to join
- Development of strategies for accessing further education
- Learning skills that can improve the quality of our lives

Overall, the women felt that the project provided a safe environment to develop friendships and regain their confidence so that they could be contributors to their newly adopted country.

All the women would be interested in joining a similar project in the future.

Section C. Concluding Discussion

Refugees and asylum seekers usually live in the most deprived and crime ridden areas of the country, which don't provide many opportunities for development for any individual living there. This placement within the poorest places also creates resentment and acts of racially motivated hatred between the host and the refugee communities. It is clear that there is a need for the refugees and asylum seekers to break their isolation and integrate in to the society by making friends and taking up employment. This is not an easy task, but it requires the commitment of both the refugee and asylum seeking communities and the members of the host society. From this evaluation we can see that projects such as this may enable communities to break down some of the barriers that exist between them.

At first, the two groups of women who were brought together to participate in the project had nothing in common: they were nervous; the whole thing seemed traumatic; they didn't know the people; the building was new to them; and each group sat in one corner. During the life of the project there has been acknowledgement of each other, appreciation of culture and togetherness and friendships have been established in between the groups as well as between the staff and the participants.

Language ability is a key component for immigrants to settle and seek employment in the UK. We have found that women who participated in the project feel that they have gained confidence in speaking English and learn more English words. It has been also demonstrated that the project provided a unique opportunity to practice English. It was expected from the members to have conversations with each other and question any new art object that they may not understand. This created a platform of ownership of the whole process. It was not a traditional learning setting, but a chance for enquiry, development of friendship, and understanding of cultures. This is a starting point in integration.

Refugees usually suffer poor health due to their situation of poverty, and lack of information to access services available to them. Women benefited from gaining skills to look after their health and well being. In addition, this project has demonstrated that through exploring different channels of communication, isolated communities in the country can be reached to improve their quality of life. The women clearly stated that they will continue to come to the Art Gallery as well as the Museum and to be used as a source of leisure and a venue for learning. This compliments the widening participation policy of the cultural learning institutions, both the Art Gallery and the Museum has a responsibility to work with all the communities to encourage life long learning and promote cross cultural integration. There is a need for similar projects to tackle poverty and social exclusion and to bring together individuals from the host newly arrived communities: together they can work towards personal development as well as social integration, harmony, tolerance and greater capacities to appreciate and enjoy each other's cultures.