

In February 2019 projects within the BAB programme came together with other organisations working with older people in the city to learn more about reaching and engaging older Somali women in Bristol. Research suggests that BME groups may be at particular risk of loneliness and isolation, and as such it is important that those working with older people have the skills and knowledge to inclusively engage with Somali communities.

The two workshops were run by the Midnimo Women's Group, a self-organised local community group formed in 2017 for Somali women.

This Learning Digest presents the learning, discussions and ideas from these workshops. It is hoped that these ideas will be a useful starting point for other organisations and community groups wishing to reach, engage and include older Somali women in Bristol.



Bristol's Somali population

- The Somali community is one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Bristol and Somali is also one of the most common languages spoken¹.
- People within Bristol's Somali community come from a range of different geographical areas, including Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Yemen and Kenya.
- There are a number of Somali community organisations in Bristol, for example the Somali Resource Centre, Bristol Somali Forum and the Southmead Somali Association.
- The Midnimo Women's Group focuses on Somali women, particularly those living in the wards of Lawrence Hill and Easton. They have a group for older women, a group for younger women and a monthly awareness meeting where they discuss different issues related to the local area and Somali culture.



Understanding the context: possible barriers faced by older Somali women

Language

Older Somali women in Bristol often have low levels of English. This can be a significant barrier to engaging with activities and groups, as they may not speak the same language as the other people there. They reported that ESOL classes (English for Speakers of Other Languages) can sometimes be hard to find and are not always at the appropriate level.

Somali is an oral language that was passed down between generations; the written language was only developed in the 1970s. As such, older Somali women may also find it difficult to read and write in Somali.

Members of the younger Somali generation who were born in the UK may not be fluent in Somali. This can sometimes mean it is difficult for older generations to communicate with them and tell them the traditional folk stories, which are oral stories spoken in Somali.

¹ Bristol City Council: The Population of Bristol (December 2018)

Health

Some health conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and vitamin D deficiency are common among Somali Communities.

There is also high levels of stigma surrounding mental health and a lack of familiarity with conditions such as dementia.

Gender and religion

Islam is the most common religion within the Somali community. Connected to this religious element, activities for men and women tend to be separate.

The Midnimo Women's Group found that organisations often consulted with Somali men's groups in Bristol but did not always consult with Somali women's groups as frequently.

Family dynamics

It is common for older Somali women in Bristol to live in their son's house, with an expectation that they will look after the grandchildren while the parents are at work. They are respected and yet may not have the same status as head of the household that they would have had if they lived in Somalia. This may affect their identity within the family.

There may be differences in culture between generations, for example between older Somali women who moved to the UK and between grandchildren who were born here. This may cause some family tensions, for example around what the grandchildren wish to do, wear or say.

Living in a busy household can highlight the interplay between loneliness and isolation; older Somali women may have high levels of social contact with the people who they live with, and yet still feel lonely.

Transport

As with other communities in Bristol, the older Somali women reported that transport was a barrier to accessing activities. This included mobility difficulties and low levels of confidence.

Language barriers can make transport even more difficult to navigate, for example knowing what bus to get and how to do this.

Weather

The differences in weather and climate between Bristol and Somalia can mean that fewer older Somali women want to engage with activities and groups in the winter months. If an activity takes place on a cold day, it is likely that a smaller number of older Somali women will wish to attend.

Common traditional activities

Swimming is a traditional activity for Somali communities because there are many beaches, lakes and rivers in Somalia. For the current generation of older Somali people, swimming was strongly encouraged when they were growing up with an emphasis on the health benefits.

Drumming is also a very common activity among older Somali women, and will often be included in different events and gatherings. Some older Somali women may find it difficult to continue drumming for example due to arthritis, but may enjoy listening to it and watching others.

Face-to-face contact

Older Somali women in Bristol may have low levels of face-to-face contact with other women. It is more likely that they will speak on the phone. This means it can be difficult to meet **new** people and make new friends.

The Midnimo Women's Group found that there were few places in Bristol where older Somali women gathered; the group instead had to find other ways to reach and engage these women (see below).



Ideas for reaching and engaging older Somali women

The Midnimo Women's Group found that there were few places in Bristol where older Somali women gathered; individuals instead tended to go directly from A to B. They tried lots of other ways to reach and engage older Somali women and found the following to work well:

- **Door knocking.** Remember that a Somali woman may take longer to answer the door because she may be covering herself with a hijab first.
- At the **school gates** when they may be picking up their grandchildren.
- Through groups, activities and organisations for **Somali men** – asking the men to pass information to their partner, mother or other family member.
- **Word of mouth**, for example asking others to bring along their neighbour.
- **Faith** groups, mosques and Eid celebration events.
- Promotion through **health professionals** such as GPs, diabetic nurses or pharmacies that do home-delivery.
- Through sports centres which offer **women-only activity** options, for example women-only swimming sessions.
- In local Somali **shops**, or places that sell Somali **food**.
- Through reaching out to the **younger community** to pass information on to their parents or grandparents.

When speaking to the older Somali women, the Midnimo Women's Group found it worked well to emphasise the **health benefits** of getting out of the house and engaging with groups and activities instead of staying indoors, for example presenting it as an opportunity for movement.

Choosing and preparing a venue

The Midnimo Women's Group chose a local venue that was well known in the area so that the women could find it easily. They made sure it was a venue that had facilities for prayers and that the room was warm enough for the women.

They also ensured there was a jug in the bathroom which the women could use to clean themselves after using the toilet, in line with Islamic toilet etiquette. They set up one corner of the venue to look like a traditional Somali living room in order to create an informal comfortable atmosphere for the women.



Further information

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