

# THE NEEDS OF ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN IN READING: AND HOW WELL THESE NEEDS ARE MET BY THE READING COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRE

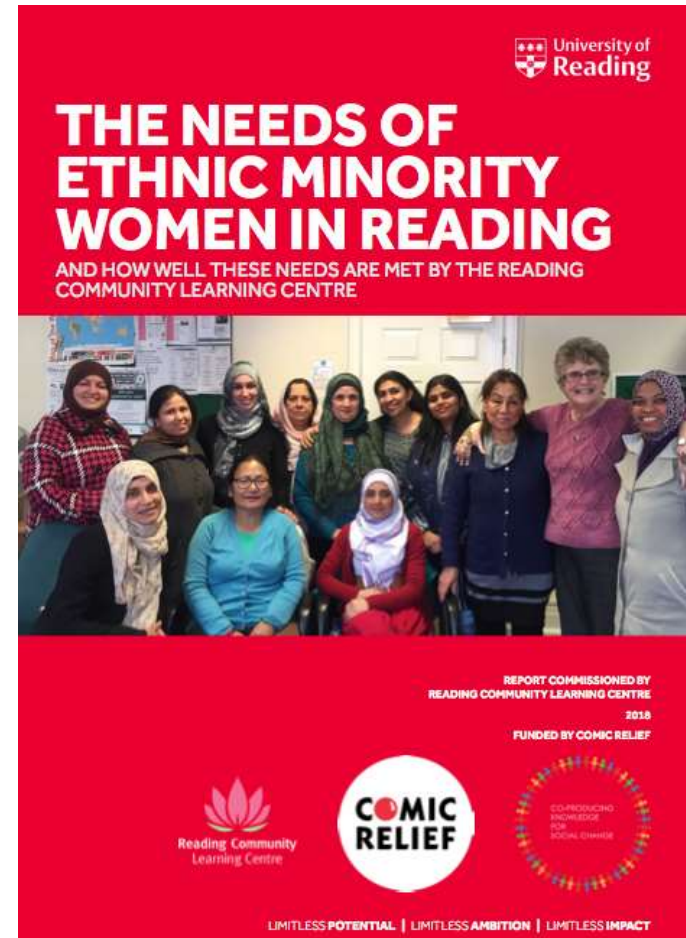


Sally Lloyd-Evans and Lorna Zischka,  
Participation Lab, University of Reading  
[s.lloyd-evans@reading.ac.uk](mailto:s.lloyd-evans@reading.ac.uk)



# INTRODUCTION: REPORT CONTEXT

- Reading Community Learning Centre:
  - **Aims** to reach out and empower vulnerable ethnic minority women to grow their skills, confidence, welfare, inclusion, social status and independence:
    - Learning, support and friendship
    - English classes; IT; beauty; sewing; employability, health (no cost)
    - Ofsted accredited creche
    - 300 learners annually from around 26 countries



# OUR BRIEF: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- Does RCLC meet a genuine need not covered elsewhere in Reading? Focus on understanding unmet needs – “*who are we not helping?*”
- Does RCLC succeed to provide for the most vulnerable of all ethnic minority women?
- Is RCLC going about the task in an optimal way?





# CO-PRODUCTION AND OUR RESEARCH JOURNEY

Participatory approach/co-production:

- RCLC staff and volunteers
- University staff and student interns
- Learners as researchers
- Support from stakeholders and organisations, including RBC and Whitley Researchers

- **Research Questions:**

- What do ethnic minority women outside RCLC networks need?
- How do other stakeholder and service providers perceive RCLC?
- What do women inside RCLC say they need to grow their skills, confidence, welfare, inclusion, social status and independence?

# OUR METHODOLOGY

- Questionnaire-based interviews with 114 black and ethnic minority women (over 70% from outside of RCLC); diverse sample; interviews in mother tongue;
  - everyday lives and circumstances
  - ambitions and hopes
  - barriers and concerns
  - social networks, connections
  - well being
- Interviews with organisations serving vulnerable communities;
- Focus group feedback;
- RCLC records/academic literature



## Our Sample:

Around 30% lived in Britain for 5 years or less

Almost 90% for less than 20 years

# WIDER CONTEXT (2017/18)

- **Wider Context:**
  - Austerity and cuts
  - ‘Social Integration’ (language/ social connections)
  - Integrated Communities’: stronger and united communities (Green Paper, 2018)



# REPORT FINDINGS

# Main questions:

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

# Answers drawn from:

- Questionnaire-based interviews with 114 ethnic minority women (over 70% from outside of RCLC);
- interviews with representatives of 7 organisations serving vulnerable communities in Reading;
- Focus group feedback;
- Academic literature - especially looking at how integration is defined, what things help it forward and what holds it back. Integration is seen as successful participation 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. Doing well in *all* of these areas is desirable. It is also important to recognize that integration is not a one-way process to a fixed point. Both minority groups and the host society are culturally diverse and constantly adapting. Integration requires *both* sides to strive for mutually beneficial connections.



# KEY POINT: RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

- Cross cultural relationships matter
- They don't just 'happen'
- 'Groups' are an important meeting place
- Groups not always accessible to ethnic minority women – it takes a special effort to meet people half way
- The *way* something is done matters as much as *what* is done.

# Do RCLC's classes and friendship-building opportunities meet a genuine need not covered elsewhere in Reading?

- English language and developing social ties (esp. cross cultural social ties) were both found to be important needs of ethnic minority women. Women who had these 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 - doing both together adds value.
- Many women lacked alternative opportunities to develop their language skills and cross-cultural connections. Similar services exist, but not quite in the same form, and this alters their accessibility.
- Other organisations also feel RCLC meets a need and fills a gap.

# Does RCLC succeed to provide for the most vulnerable of all ethnic minority women?

- Arab Muslim women and South Asian women were particularly vulnerable and faced high barriers to integration
- Women from China and the Far East struggled with language and cross-cultural interaction, but were better integrated in the workplace.
- Sub-Saharan Africans have many problems, but not so much in the area of language and group connection, which is the speciality of RCLC

- Highly educated women are not necessarily better integrated.
- Women whose families had money did not necessarily have the freedom to spend this money on themselves.
- Although priority may rightly be given to new arrivals in Britain, and important number of women remain marginalised even after many years in Britain.
- Comparing women inside of RCLC to women outside of RCLC, we find no evidence that RCLC has 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.

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

## RCLC strengths:

- A friendly (confidence building) multi-cultural environment;
- Low cost/free services (important to over 80% of women interviewed);
- Women only (important to half those interviewed);
- Various levels of English and courses other than English;
- Creche to allow women with small children to participate in classes;
- Daytime classes (Arab and South Asian women were particularly reluctant to venture out late);
- Central location (easy to get to);
- 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 in which RCLC needs to demonstrate progress:

- More attention/sharper focus given to cultural orientation.
- Become more intentional about helping clients to map their personal progression paths from RCLC into other areas of integration appropriate to their circumstances.

For example, clients wanted a job and they want professional and accredited courses, but all for free. The best (and realistic) option for individuals within their personal and environmental constraints must be discussed.

Dilemma when it comes to length of time with RCLC: continuity of relationships vs progression.

- Improve collaboration with other organisations (complement one another rather than duplicating effort, communicate and collaborate also on funding and on giving women a voice);

# Points to remark on publicity:

- Word of mouth (personal recommendation) and repeat publicity 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 clients if organised?