

# The Barriers to Accessing Employment for South Sudanese Women in London

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## Executive Summary

This research looked at the barriers to accessing employment to South Sudanese Women in Camden, London in 2011. It explored the support system available to them like CV preparation and the level of uptake, and any obstacles the faced. The research identified a number of South Sudanese with various skills levels, including university graduates, who have not been able to find any meaningful employment.

The reasons for being unemployed varied from language skills, most of them have studied in Arabic, the official language in Sudan; the difficulties of their foreign qualifications not being recognised in their host countries; the lack of awareness of the levels of help available locally with things like CV preparation and interview techniques; difficulties with child care.

The research made the following recommendations:

- Free ESOL opportunities are availed to all to improve their job prospects;
- Access waiver fees be considered for those seeking to improve their skills;
- Mentoring programmes led by women who are lucky enough to be in the job market, and; help with childcare be made readily available.

## Chapter 1: Scope of Research

### (i) Central aim

This study aims to highlight the barriers faced by South Sudanese women when trying to access jobs opportunities. In particular this study will explore the support system available to South Sudanese women to secure employment, including CV workshops, access to government grants for those interested in training and support scheme available through the Job Centre Plus. The study will then attempt to explore the barriers preventing South Sudanese women to accessing such services.

### (ii) About the Researcher

It is my desire as a South Sudanese woman myself to carry out this research and find out ways to better support women into work. It is my belief that employment is essential to improve their life and their family opportunities.

Although the South Sudanese community is not a big one, this is a very important issue as presently there is only one organisation in London working to address the needs of South Sudanese women specifically. In addition, I am currently studying psychology at City University which prompted me to undertake this research.

I am a South Sudanese single mother of two teenage children. I came to the United Kingdom as a refugee almost twenty years ago. My language of instruction in the Sudan has been Arabic. I had to learn English fresh on arrival here. I am sure, my employment opportunities suffered due to language difficulties. It is for this reason that I can identify with the subjects of this study.

### (iii) Literature review

There is lack of resources or studies about South Sudanese in the UK. This is why a large part of this study is based on empirical evidence obtained through interacting with the community and other South Sudanese women.

The civil war in the Sudan 1983-2005 saw a large of South Sudanese arriving in the United Kingdom as refugees. Some of them were settled in and around Camden. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) the number of Sudanese in Greater London is around **10,000-25,000** including South Sudanese. There is no official statistics on South Sudanese population in London as most South Sudanese did not register with the Sudanese embassy upon arrival. This is mostly due to the fact South Sudanese left Sudan as a result of civil war against their Sudanese counterpart .(page14&15),**IOM Mapping Exercise, Sudan 2008**.<sup>1</sup>

Among the South Sudanese refugees population in London there are a significant number of women who are university graduates and also there are those who possess different qualification and those who have none. There are also simple housewives with varying degrees of education ranging from illiteracy to school certificates holders.

According to research carried out by **Aliya El Agib (2005-2006) in Community Advocacy and Representation Reports**.(page25,26,27),<sup>2</sup> the Sudanese professional women who arrived in the UK with university degrees and experience as civil servants had found it hard to secure employment in their field of specialisation for a number of reasons.

The difficulties they faced include having varying degrees of fluency in English. Some of them are fluent, while others are less fluent. The official language in the Sudan is Arabic, though English is the official language in the South Sudan. **Aliya El Agib's (2005-2006)**

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<sup>1</sup> IOM mapping exercise(2008)

<sup>2</sup> El Agib, A Community Advocacy and Representation Report (2005/06).

research is comprehensive in the sense that her research included all Sudanese women in London: I therefore assumed that South Sudanese women are included in the research because South Sudan was still part of Sudan before 9<sup>th</sup> July 2011, when the people of South Sudan voted overwhelmingly for South Sudan to become an independent state.

The Sudanese women from both North and South Sudan are unemployed or out of work despite the fact they are university graduates with lots of experience in their field of expertise, yet they find it hard to market or sell their experience in UK job markets.

The target group of Aliya Eliyab's research (2005/2006) entitled *Community Advocacy* was the highly skilled and experienced Sudanese women who failed to get employment in the UK job market. She argued that the more years these women spend without being employed, the more they become isolated, marginalised, depressed and feeling worthlessness. She urged that in order to adopt a fluid integrated programme of action they often had to merge their personal ambition with the reality of job market in the UK. Importantly, she asked the target group to identify their needs themselves. The research facilitated the process presenting it in a formal way.

In her conclusion she said that the change would take a long time to achieve. The project's identification of the target group for adaptability should bode well for the Sudanese women concerned.

Another study was carried out by Hanan Babikir (2005/2006), in *Community Advocacy and Representation Reports* (page 9, 10, 11),<sup>3</sup> entitled "Is Racism behind Sudanese Women's Unemployment in Britain?" Her target group were Sudanese women graduate and policy makers in the UK including the members of parliament. She argued that Sudanese women were or is unemployed because their qualifications are not recognised

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<sup>3</sup> Babikir, H. *Community Advocacy & Representation Report*.

by British institution of Higher Education Council and therefore they feel discriminated against by the system in Britain.

Hanan Babikir's study also aimed at bringing the problems facing Sudanese women who are graduates in UK for attention of the Chair of ALL Party Group on Sudan for Advocacy on behalf of Sudanese women. She shared her findings with the Parliamentary Task Force on Equality/ Social Exclusion/ Racism, a body whose functions is to monitor and investigate grievances brought to its attention by any group felt excluded by mainstream society.

She urged her Sudanese women colleagues to take up or engaged in casual labour market as evidence of their availability to work irrespective of their qualifications.

Unlike Aliya and Hanan Bibikir's research, I have conducted this research among South Sudanese women only, and not the whole of Sudan, and at the Abbey Community Centre in Kilburn, London through questionnaires.

An interesting point from my research is that the job market in last 5 years has offered more opportunities for South Sudanese women than their fellow North Sudanese in term of employment. This analysis is supported by the reading of Trust for London Report on Poverty and Job Seekers Allowance in London <sup>4</sup>(2007- 2009).

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Macinnes,T. Parek,A, and Kenway P.

## (iv) Methodology

### **Research Methodology and Procedures**

Both qualitative and quantitative types of research were used to collect information. I did this in the form of both open and closed questionnaires and unstructured interviews. I used 3 methods: questionnaire, unstructured interview and case studies.

A questionnaire is a set or prepared questions designed to seek opinion or facts from individuals. The possible answers are set in the questionnaire and the respondent ticks the category that best describes the answer.

An unstructured interview is a research tool face to face where participants are allowed to speak freely around topics without a formal structure. Case studies are example of personal stories to illustrate a particular point.

I have chosen open-ended and closed-ended questionnaires over other method because it is less expensive and offer greater anonymity to the respondents. In addition, the open-ended questionnaire offers the respondent the freedom to write down the answers in their own words.

Unstructured interviews followed the questionnaire and I explored the life stories of 10 participants using this method. This was a useful technique as it allowed me to probe the issues and gain fuller answers, something that can be difficult in a questionnaire. It also allowed me to explore sensitive issues.

The case study was useful to give examples of specific experiences of women. As the aim of research is to identify the factors that impede South Sudanese women to access the employment opportunities, I think my choice of questionnaire as method for such purpose is appropriate for the simple reasons I have mentioned above.

### **Research Sample**

This study's focus is South Sudanese women for two reasons. First, Sudan is no more a unitary state after independent of South Sudan on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2011. Secondly, I have

access to many South Sudanese women through South Sudan Women's Skill Association at Kilburn centre London. Through the above mentioned association I was able to make contact with South Sudanese who are the subject of my study to find out the barriers hindering their access to services available to them to secure employment.

The total respondents are 53 women. 10 were interviewed and I extracted 10 case studies.

**Study design:**

The cross-sectional design study I have chosen as frame work of my research is based on simple fact that selection of my sample or method of investigation for research is the un-employability of South Sudanese women in Camden borough of London.

I think the cross- sectional design is appropriate for such research because it involves only one contact that is to say; the subject of investigation. In this case, it is a group of South Sudanese women.

**(v) Ethical considerations**

In order to ensure informed consent, I spent time with the research participants explaining the process and the benefits to the community. They were allowed to ask questions. Questionnaires do not require consent as filling in the survey is consenting to it. For the interviews, I explained the process and the nature of the questions and asked for their permission to take part. I asked the case study participants for permission.

The survey participants and interviewees were promised anonymity and given confidentiality. The raw data will be protected by being stored privately at my community organisation.

Before I started with distribution of questionnaires I briefed the respondents about the purpose of research. I informed them that their names are not needed on questionnaires but, they have to answer the questionnaires as honestly as they can.

## Chapter 2: Research Findings and Discussion

### (i) Educational Attainment

The purpose of this research is to identify the factors that hinder access to services (education, employment) for South Sudanese women. According to the feedback collected, only less than half of South Sudanese women have sought assistance or accessed the services provided by local authorities or charity organisations offering assistance to ethnic minorities within Camden Borough. This is very low considering the high level of unemployment for the women in my study.

Table I below illustrates the circumstances of 53 South Sudanese respondents according to their employment status and education background. The majority of respondents are secondary school leavers (equivalent to form 6) in UK followed by some university graduates, college graduates who attained education in UK. Finally, there is a group who have only ever attended primary school showing that only 15 out of a possible 53 had further or higher education.

This table below is extracted from the questionnaires distributed to South Sudanese women's Centre. The number of employed and unemployed is general in sense that the levels of education of women employed and unemployed are not taken into account.

Employed	28	50%
Unemployed	25	40%
University graduates	11	22%
College graduates	4	7.05%
Secondary school leavers	36	67.9%
Primary school leavers	2	3.8%

## (ii) Accessing Statutory Services

Result From questionnaire indicated that less than half of respondents have been to a job centre and only a few women made some form of attempt to find employment. This can be for different reasons including child care, family relationship and lack of confidence. The above mentioned reasons are answered by South Sudanese women who are less educated or have not attended any training either in Sudan or in UK despite the opportunities offered by non- profit organisations for those who want to learn English as a second language (ESOL).

## (iii) Factors Hindering Access

### Less Education, Longer Unemployment

Participants commented that amongst South Sudanese women, those who are less educated or have not pursue any training since their arrival in UK are most vulnerable and most likely to remain unemployed and dependent on welfare state. This is largely due to their level of English Language.

### Lack of English

It was clear that many of the participants had low levels of English and this was stopping them from getting jobs. In addition, since most of qualified among these women are trained in Sudan they were used to Arabic as the medium of instruction. To master English language in short period is a challenge for most; fluency in English language is essential for employment.

For women who are less educated their problems are more complex. In addition to the great pressure to learn English, they have to find classes at local colleges or at charities like Camden and Westminster Refugee Partnership.

### Equivalency of qualifications

Even for higher qualified women there is an issue of their qualifications not being recognised. See case study A for a positive example of this. It often takes years to get qualified to the standard of UK requirements.

Many of the women in this study, as noted above, did not have any qualifications.

## (iv) Effects of Un-employability

### Bleak Future

The unemployed women commented that they felt their chances for employment and improving their living standards are bleak.

### Lack of confidence

A number of participants stated that they lack self-confidence in the workplace. They find it difficult to manage a group of people in offices or any tasks that involved a lot of English communication.

### Family Break Ups and Child-care Issues

For the rest of women who are well educated their problems are different from their colleagues are less educated but, they have common problems which are child care and family relationship. The family break up among South Sudanese community is a new phenomenon because traditions and norms back in South Sudan do not encourage divorce and unlike in Britain, women do not have the freedom to ask for divorce. But South Sudanese women felt under enormous pressure once in UK because they are the ones looking after the family.

An important point to note, participants flagged up that some of their husbands either remain in South Sudan, had returned to work in South Sudan or had joined the South Sudan Liberation movement which was fighting for Self-determination for South Sudan and have moved back.

## Chapter 3: Research Discussions

### (i) Employability Discussions

From research carried out by Trust London entitled London's Poverty Profile in 2009 it backed the claim Respondents made about their employability because according to the report the Job Seekers Allowance decreased in 2007 and increased again 2009 through out London. But nothing indicates that these South Sudanese women have been employed in 2007-2009, perhaps they have been employed earlier before 2007 and remained in jobs through out the recession in 2008-2009. Because of limitation of my research I cannot say whether the 28 employed (50%) South Sudanese women were employed or not by time the above mentioned Report by Trust London published. As I said my analysis is based only on my interpretation of the Report.

### (ii) Extent of Un-employability: Comparative Data.

Hannah Babikir's research, whose target was Sudanese Women as a whole, supports the findings of this research, which focused on South Sudanese Women in London. The general thrust of our arguments merge at the point of difficulties Sudanese Women both from the South, professionals or non-professionals face in accessing the job market in the UK. What the research did not look into, which will be of interest, is whether this is also true of immigrant communities from other parts of Africa or the world, whose education system is different from that of the UK, and where English is not the main language of instruction. This is an area worth pursuing in my view.

### Relating to existing literature

There is an interesting study conducted by Ilolelian (2004) for Africa Education Trust (AET) on whether study grants do help refugee find jobs in UK.

The key findings of this report support and corroborate my own findings. The research found the refugees who received study grants were more likely to attend and successfully complete their education and training courses than those who did not. This has been one of my recommendations, that access fees be waived to enable access. The research also found that women were more likely than men to undertake further education training. This has part of my reason for doing research on women, as they are possibly keener to develop their skills. One of the findings about who the main employers according to the research were: small businesses, supermarkets, community centre and local authorities. The finding which was in line with mine is that employment of refugees was affected by their understanding of the UK labour market and the English language. This is one my key findings.

## Chapter 4: Conclusions and Recommendations

### (i) Conclusions

My aim in this research, conducted among South Sudanese Women refugee in the United Kingdom, using the facilities of the Abbey Centre, Kilburn has been to investigate the factors which hinder the employment opportunities of these women. I have found out that there is no single dominant factor. Rather, there are a number of complex factors that affect the employment prospects of these women whose qualifications vary from primary level to university level.

The factors vary from lack of proficiency in English to child care difficulties; from difficulties of recognising foreign qualifications to the ability to transfer foreign skills into British workforce; lack of awareness of the available services to failure to embrace available opportunities.

As part of recommendation, I have stressed, among other things, the need for new arrivals to be mentored, the provision of ESOL opportunities, and child care facilities.

### **Literature Review**

Lack of resources or studies about South Sudanese in UK is a challenge for any one who has an interest to conduct a research on South Sudanese community in UK. Most of information in this research is drawn from some different references and interview I carried out at Abbey Community Centre at Kilburn with some South Sudanese women.

## (ii) Recommendations

- English for speakers of other Language (ESOL) opportunities should be made available not just to people who are actively looking for work but to especially parents with young children who are unable to work currently. This would ensure that by the time their children are grown up, they are ready for the job market than waiting until; they are ready for the job market before embarking on training. This is important because the job market requires proficiency in English.
- Any barriers like paying for access courses should be removed to ensure more participation in further and higher education.
- The availability of cheap and available childcare facilities could improve employment opportunities.
- A mentoring programme should also be engineered for refugees who are employed and are ready to become mentors. This will enable refugees to assist and support other unemployed women in their search for employment.
- A job search Skills training course aimed at unemployed refugee and asylum seekers women who are looking for work would help in preparing beneficiaries for the UK job market.

The recommendations from Illelian's (2004) study are in line with my own. They recommended that:

- Voluntary organisations like AET should continue to seek, promote and provide funding for the education and training of refugees in the UK
- Refugees should be provided with the earliest opportunity to study for and obtain UK education and training qualifications
- Refugees should be provided with the earliest opportunity to study for the English language foundation courses in order to facilitate their entry into UK labour market
- Refugees should actively be encouraged to use the relevant UK job seeking techniques

- Refugees should be encouraged to attend training courses that offer opportunities for job placements in the UK(2006)<sup>5</sup>

In other research conducted by Dixon et al (2006) entitled “Research into employability issues facing refugees in East London”,<sup>6</sup> their findings too support some of my own. They recommended that:

- Each borough should have a centrally held database with details of local advice and support on employment/ training issues for refugees. This is one of the issues I have identified so that refugees are able to get help.
- The importance of specialist and holistic advice for refugees should be recognised
- Commissioners should support positive partnerships between voluntary organisations and mainstream providers
- Training should be provided for mainstream providers in relation to refugees, asylum and immigration issues
- Local refugee strategies should be developed in each borough

### (iii) The strengths and limitations of research

The strength of this design is

- simplicity of selection of sample
- open and closed-ended questionnaire allowing flexibility of the tool with high response rate; good questions that got the answers I needed
- Participants said the questions were straight-forward and clear
- the interviews allowed participants to open up and talk clearly on issues

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<sup>5</sup>Ilmolelian, Peter.

A case study of the effects of the voluntary sector grants on the education, training and employment of refugees in the United Kingdom.

<sup>6</sup> Dixon, Diane, Cater, Mary, Lukes, Sue.

Research into employability issues facing Refugees in east London.

- Useful comments/ answers from participants

However, the limitation of such design is that you cannot know the outcome of the research whether there will be change on the subjects being investigated. What I mean is whether these South Sudanese who are in employment will they continue in employment or some will be made redundant in future.

- Limited time
- No funding
- To get participants – many were very busy and found it hard to attend
- My own busy life working and studying

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## Appendices

### Case study (1).

Bella (not real name) is 27 years old and from South Sudan. She arrived in UK in February 2001 at the age of 16 years old and applied for asylum. Unfortunately, her application for asylum had been rejected 3 times and at that point she hadn't more options because she lost all support from the government. She became homeless, jobless and destitute asylum seeker in UK for 9 years.

Through some acquaintance she was introduced to the Chair, at Abbey Community Centre in Kilburn where she asked the chair woman if she could allow her to volunteer at the centre. Because of her commitment and dedication to assist and help those in need of her services, she has gained the confidence of the Chair who introduced her to members of Refugees Council.

The Refugees Council took up her case by writing to Home Office which advised Refugees Council to re-apply on her behalf for asylum at the same time she was offered accommodation at a hostel. After 3 months from the date she re-applied for asylum she was granted an indefinite leave to remain and now she works as a sale assistant in a large departmental store in London.



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