

Loneliness and isolation in BME communities: a study of BME Communities in London during the Coronavirus pandemic

Special thanks to the community researchers who reached out to community members and conducted the interviews during the pandemic. They were instrumental to the success of this project and we are very grateful to them for their support.

We are grateful to City Bridge Trust and West London CCG for providing funding for this project.



Who we are

The BME Health Forum (<https://www.bmehf.org.uk>) is a charity dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of Black and Minority Ethnic communities. We are based in London and our focus is primarily but not exclusively on first generation migrant communities. We work predominantly through collaboration. We do not deliver services to clients ourselves, instead we support local BME charities, by developing projects, fundraising, developing and leading partnerships, training, evaluating, and supporting organisation deliver projects.

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The loneliness and isolation project

We developed this project in partnership with a number of organisations in September 2019. We applied to City Bridge Trust to fund us and the funding came through in September 2020 in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. While the pandemic certainly changed what we were able to do and how we did it, it only increased the need for the project as loneliness and isolation were more pronounced than ever before. We are very thankful to City Bridge Trust for funding this project.

Methodology

We delivered this project with the support of 16 volunteers from 8 BME organisations. The organisations are: Abbey Community Association, Central London Youth development Trust, Eritrean Elders Welfare Association, French African Welfare Association, Iranian Association, Kulan Somali Organisation, People Arise Now, and Midaye Somali Development Network. All our volunteers were from BME backgrounds, and nearly all of them spoke a community language fluently.

We held 5 online sessions with the volunteers to discuss the project, who we wanted to reach and what questions we wanted to ask them. We developed the questionnaire together, we tested it out on friends and colleagues. When we finalised it, the volunteers were ready to go into the community and interview people. The criteria for our sample were:

- 1) People who live in London
- 2) People who identify as a person of a Black or Minority Ethnic ethnicity
- 3) People who feel lonely and/or isolated

Additionally, we aimed to interview as diverse a group of people and include people who were LGBTQ+, had a disability, experienced poor health, and also people from a diverse age range.

Interviews took place between February 2021 and June 2021. This covered a period from a very strict lockdown with schools closed to a period of easing restrictions where life was returning to a sense of normalcy.

Our sample

We interviewed 375 people. Details of the demographics of the sample can be found in the appendix. In our sample, there more women than men and although we interviewed people of all ages the age range 46-65 was over-represented. In terms of ethnicity, we interviewed more Black African people than any other group. We also interviewed many Iranians, as reflected by Farsi being the most common language spoken, followed by Lingala. This reflects the ethnicity of our volunteer community researchers. The highest proportion of our participants were single and lived by themselves, although we also interviewed substantial numbers of people who were married and who lived with partners and other family members. It is clear that while loneliness and isolation may be more common among people who live alone it is found among people of all circumstances.

Links to organisations mentioned above:

<https://www.citybridgetrust.org.uk> | <https://www.theabbeycentre.org.uk>
<https://www.fawauk.org> | <https://iranianassociation.org.uk>
<https://www.peoplearisenow.org> | <https://www.midaye.org.uk>

What exactly is loneliness and isolation?

We asked 200 of the participants who reported feeling lonely frequently or very frequently whether they felt the following:

I don't have enough hugs and kisses.



I feel disconnected from my peers and friendship groups.



I don't have a sense of fun in my life anymore.



I no longer enjoy the activities I used to enjoy.



I feel isolated because the services that used to help me, no longer do.



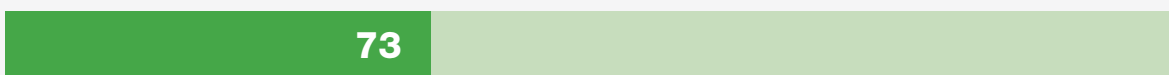
I find it difficult that I have to do things for myself that I used to do with other people.



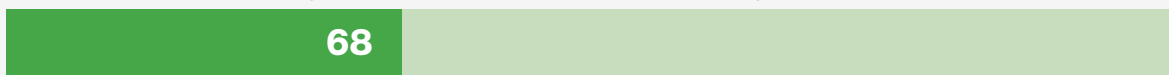
I feel that nobody really understands me.



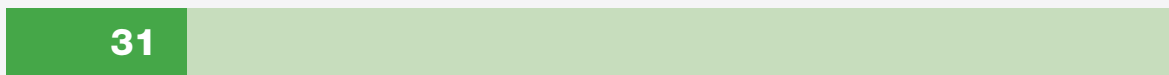
I feel that other people are still able to join in activities and have fun and I'm not, so I feel excluded and sad.



I find myself just waiting for people to call or send messages.



I have nobody to talk to.



I feel that nobody loves me.



This showed that loneliness and isolation for most people was not primarily associated with people feeling unloved or literally being unable to talk or communicate with anyone. Instead they primarily missed physical contact, felt disconnected, and felt a significant loss of enjoyment and pleasure. Some of this could be associated specifically with Covid and lockdowns.

The effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic

For many residents the feelings of loneliness and isolation were strongly related to the Covid-19 pandemic and they viewed these feelings as temporary. Some people felt that Covid-19 put a stop on their normal lives. For example:

“Lockdowns and Covid-19 stopped me in my search of husband.”

African woman aged 46-55

For others it brought back traumatic memories from their past:

“The feelings of loneliness with the pandemic changed for worse. I get flashbacks for when I was a child in my country where we couldn’t go outside because there was a curfew, when there was dictatorship. So it brings back all those fears.”

Latin American woman aged 46-55

Others found themselves torn by the choices they had to make because of lockdown:

“Yes, I own a store and at first I was very concerned just about the lack of business, however problem on problem compounded including me having to take care of the wellbeing of my staff, with people who came into the store without mask and touching things and one of my staff became very sick and I received a phone call from his mother who scolded me about putting her son in danger through making him come to work, that was extremely heart wrenching.” Iranian man aged 26-35

“Change in our routine, staying away from my only sister, who needed me the most when she was sick, and also having to isolate myself, it made me feel so lonely and sometimes desperate.” Iranian woman aged 66-75

“In February last year, my wife found out her sister had a car accident and was not able to look after their elderly parents as easily. She went to Iran for a couple of weeks to help her sister out whilst she recovers and look after their elderly parents and do some general chores. Soon after she left, the lockdown was initiated and she was not able to return home as there was no flights to return to the UK at all until late August. As a father it was not very easy for me to look after our two children (7 and 10) and manage a full-time job at the same time and they really missed their mum and I miss her as well. I had to reduce my work time and pay more attention to our children. My wife was under a lot of pressure staying away from us and my children were going through such a difficult time until she finally came back but since she’s back she’s not been able to find a job and I’m not able to get my old hours back so the financial situation is getting more critical with more people to support.”

Iranian man aged 46-55

“I have become a UK citizen and I want to travel to Iran to visit my family but because of the pandemic getting my passports (Iranian and British) has been delayed and because my parents are sick I’m worried that I won’t make it on time to see them. The Iranian consulate doesn’t answer calls and they don’t help people at all. This has made me feel depressed and lonely.” Iranian woman aged 49

Others simply found lockdowns very hard to bear:

“Ever since I have had to stay at home it has gotten very dull for me and my wife, she is a lovely lady but unfortunately she suffers from clinical depression and I also have been struggling to maintain a good mood because of these problems and we are both affected also by the fact that we can no longer see our grandchild whom we love very dearly and who was a great source of enjoyment and love for us in our lives.” Iranian man aged over 76

Some people felt stigmatised after a Covid infection:

“I had Covid-19 and was in the ventilation for 3 weeks and eventually was cured. I feel that friends are still afraid of getting in touch with me since I came back from the hospital. I phone them but they don’t phone me back” African woman aged 46-55

Some people found bereavement and the inability to mourn according to cultural and religious norms particularly hard to bear:

“Yeah, since my dad died, I feel lonely, and I miss everything about him. Words cannot express the void I feel in my heart to know I will not see him anymore. And because of the pandemic I didn’t grieve well. When my dad died only three members from our family attended the funeral service because of the pandemic and one of the rules in our religion is when a person passed away, he must be buried within 24 hours however my dad was buried in 48 hours. All this stresses me out and I can’t find any person to talk to about it.” Somali man aged 16-25

Some people really struggled with the fact services were no longer face to face:

“Yes, my health condition changed, I have started experiencing memory loss, I am also diabetic and when I feel pain and I want to talk to my GP, it is on the phone now, which is difficult for me due to my limited speaking English ability. Before the lockdown, I could go to the GP and talk to the doctor face to face, I could use actions to explain things; but now it is over the phone and my broken English is not enough to understand and explain things over the phone and all the people like my friends who used to come with me have stopped.” Somali woman aged 36-45

Past and Present - how personal events contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation

1. The experience of illness and disability

Many people felt that their feelings of loneliness and isolation stemmed from the experience of illness, disability, receiving poor medical care or becoming a carer. This was exacerbated by the experience of stigma.

“I was pregnant with twins and lost a baby due to not receiving correct medical help and this caused my depression and loneliness. I was under a lot of pressure and couldn’t do anything. After months of having one of the twins she was diagnosed with Autism and all of this caused my depression.” Iranian woman aged 49

“Yes, when I was diagnosed HIV positive. The stigma attached to it makes you feel more isolated. I have been living with HIV for more than 30 years so I experienced the trauma of the AIDS pandemic in the 80s and lost a lot of friends due to it. When you are living with HIV, it is difficult to find a partner, so I gave up a long time ago. My parents died a few years ago; I have only my sister and my brother who has a degenerative disease and that is the only family I have and they live in Spain. I talk to them sometimes, but I never tell them how I feel, as my sister who is my brother’s carer would worry and I don’t want to worry them.” Spanish woman aged 56-65

“I have a health skin condition which makes me look different from my family, community, peers. I am conscious that people avoid making contact with me because I look odd.” African woman aged 46-55

“My epilepsy diagnosis was a major event in my life that affected me in a very negative way.” Spanish man aged 46-55

“Since I lost my eye sight.” African woman aged 66-75

“Divorce was one but perhaps what has contributed more to my loneliness is my health deterioration. I have very serious health problems and I get tired very quickly making things more difficult. Before my illness deterioration I could go out with friends for a meal or something like that now even if the restrictions are lifted I would find it very difficult as my energy levels are very low and can’t walk long distance.” Spanish woman aged 56-65

“I got divorced 3 years ago. After that I got diagnosed with arthritis. I get a lot of pain and it is difficult to do things. I am in a rented bedroom, I am still working but find it very difficult so as soon as I arrive home from work I get to my room and rest. On my days off I just try to rest as because of the pain I can’t do what I used to do with my friends. Sometimes they call me but the days are very long and although I have 3 children that I talk to often I find myself lonely inside a small room.” Spanish man aged 56-65

2. Trauma, rape and abuse

For many people the experience of trauma or abuse has a lasting impact and causes feelings of isolation and loneliness for many years after the original incident.

“I don’t trust anybody after the rape incident I experienced when I was 14. My family sent me to Europe with smugglers to protect me from the regime that used to detain my father. Since that time, I am alone. Even though I have three children.”

Ethiopian woman aged 16-25

“I suffered domestic violence and abuse in childhood. Later on in life, I was a victim of domestic violence when married. I didn’t live alone and didn’t say anything because of embarrassment and because of fear that the person I was living with (husband) could be prosecuted; and in my childhood my father. Because I had to keep quiet due to fear, that made me feel very lonely.” Latin American woman aged 46-55

“I went through domestic violence and then acrimonious divorce.”

African woman 46-55

“Divorce from a very violent relationship” African woman aged 36

“Loss of brothers and sisters and the torture I felt in prison afterwards. And when I migrated to this country the feeling continued due to depression, anxiety and fear.”

Iranian woman aged 46-55

“My controlling boyfriend doesn’t let me work or be in contact with friends and family. This has caused me a lot of stress and feeling lonely and isolated.”

Iranian woman aged 40

“Separating from an abusive husband. During being with him and after the separation I felt extremely alone and I still feel alone as I am a single parent.”

Iranian woman aged 26-35

“Since I left home in 2016, I travelled between countries taking risk and seeing horror throughout my journey.” African woman aged 26-35

“My marriage was arranged by my family to a man who is 20 years older than me. And I feel isolated and unloved by everyone because my family gave me away. [Since the pandemic] it has gone worse because I feel more controlled by my husband who works from home and spends more time at home. And he wants to divorce me and send me back to Afghanistan.” Afghan woman aged 26

“Yes I was raised in a very strict family and I was always abused by my parents. And this made me feel so lonely and isolated. And I thought that I was different with everyone else.” Kurdish woman aged 36-45

“Yes, a car crash in which I was the driver and my mother died; that made me feel very guilty and since then I started suffering from depression and I started isolating myself from others.” Spanish man aged 46-55

3. Behaviour that doesn't conform to cultural or religious norms

Some people feel lonely and isolated because they have been excluded from their family or community because they are considered to have transgressed cultural or religious norms in some way. This estrangement causes deeply-felt isolation and loneliness.

“I am in love with a guy who is not from my parents' country and he is in the Caribbean. My family say that we cannot get engaged or married. Whatever I do is rebellion to them. I am estranged from them and planning to join him in his country and live there.” Black British woman aged 26-35

“Change of religion and having problems with my family. I've been tortured because of this. All of this caused my loneliness.” Iranian man aged 25 (Christian).

“As a single female living at home by myself this puts me into very difficult situation. There is no female around me to associate with her, and it is very difficult to build any relationship with males. The families around me fear me because I am single and female.” African woman aged 16-25

4. The experience of being LGBTQ+ and not feeling understood or accepted

For many LGBTQ+ people from BAME communities, feelings of loneliness and isolation stem from not being accepted or having to hide their identity.

“I came out as bi-sexual to my parents which caused a huge divide in my family. There was just like a distance between me and my parents and me and my siblings which is slowly changing.” Thai woman aged 16-25

“I am a trans woman, I went through the process of gender transition surgery 4 years ago. The feelings of loneliness started when I was very young, I felt a woman trapped in a body of a man and living in a country that is very Catholic and where people like me are stigmatized. I moved to England and although things improved I still felt lonely. After doing my gender transition surgery I feel better with my body but I still feel lonely as there are not many Latin American trans women living in London to whom I can connect.” Latin American trans woman aged 56-65

“I was married but divorced from my husband and since then things haven't been easy; then I changed my sexual orientation.” African woman aged 26-35

5. Migration and Displacement

The experience of migrating from one country to another to a place where one does not speak the language and doesn't have support from family or friends causes profound feelings of loneliness and isolation.

“Feeling that I don't belong to anybody. Even in Sudan when I came to Khartoum they treated me like a stranger. When I moved to Egypt, the same treatment and now I am here with all of these barriers. The language, my situation with the home office etc.” African man aged 16-25

“I left my country, and I came here to protect myself from the dictatorship regimen in my country. When I came here, I lived far away from my community. This made me feel lonely. Being unemployed made me feel lonely too, I used to work back home but since I came here, I cannot find a job.” African woman aged 56-65

“As a Black, migrant woman I feel that I am excluded from many activities and opportunities that I deserve and these things are withheld without any proper explanation. I am simply told ‘that’s just how things are.’” African woman aged 56-65

“I moved from my country to another country.” Somali woman aged 66-75

“I was moved outside of London whilst I was in foster care and was moved into a flat share out there once I was 18. Because of this, I was isolated from my community which is all in London. I was also hospitalised for 2 years because of my mental health.” African man aged 18-25

“Moving to UK. I thought I will get more help and support in this country but they treat me like I’m a nobody. I feel abandoned and this has made me sad, lonely and depressed.” Iranian woman aged 37

6. Divorce, relationship breakdown and separation from loved ones

Relationship breakdown and single parenthood are another major cause of loneliness and isolation for both adults and children. In some cases, when the divorce process cannot be completed because a spouse wont consent to the divorce, this can cause a lot of hurt as well as loneliness and isolation as the partners cannot move on with their lives. Another form of separation that causes loneliness and isolation is when adult children leave home.

“I got married, had a daughter who is 3 year old, and my wife asked for divorce when the child was about 2. I still can’t comprehend what happened to me.”
Black British man aged 26-35

“My separation from my husband and because I have to get my Islamic/Iranian divorce as well as my British divorce and my husband is not agreeing to divorce me this has made me feel very sad and depressed. I feel lonely because I can’t do anything to change his mind to divorce me.” Iranian woman aged 30

“I had been through divorce, and I have had problems raising my children, my older son is in custody.” African woman aged 56-65

“In the last 5 years I have been diagnosed with a chronic illness and soon after that my partner and I broke up. So, I had to cope with these two situations in a short period of time. It was very stressful and the break up with my partner made me feel very lonely.” Latin American man aged 46-55

“Yes the feeling of loneliness started since I was in prison back in my country because of politics. And it got worse when I got separated from my husband because of him being unfaithful.” Iranian woman aged 46-55

“Change in school and the separation of my mum and dad, this has had a massive effect on my life, I don’t think my mum understands me sometimes.”
Black British man aged 16-25.

“I have always lived with my parents in this country. Two years ago, they decided to go back home. I am living with strangers, and I have to make ends meet.”

Black British woman aged 26-35

“My wife with two children left me for another man in Belgium. I could not bear it and I came to UK to avoid seeing them. Since then my life has changed. People say that I drink and smoke a lot. Living in UK is difficult because of language barrier and culture.” Congolese man aged 46-55

“I was happy when I was with my 2 children; they are grown up and have moved away and married far from me although in the UK.” African woman aged 46-55

7. Relationship/family difficulties

The experience of being in a relationship or family unit but not feeling loved, cared for or understood in that relationship or family, makes people feel lonely and isolated.

“My partner has cheated on me. Although, we have stayed together through mediation in our extended family, things are not as I expected. I have to show a brave face for some reasons beyond my control.” African woman aged 46-55

“I am the main breadwinner. I do 2 jobs to make ends meet. My partner doesn’t care.” African woman aged 46-55

“I completed my degree course and looking for work. I am estranged from most of my family members.” Black British man aged 16-25

“I experienced domestic abuse (emotional violence). My only child supported and backed her father and I felt let down by both of them.” Sudanese woman aged 46-55

“I have two children who grew up and are busy with their own affairs and, my husband frequently visits Bangladesh as he has another lady.”

Bangladeshi woman aged 46-55

8. Bereavement

Bereavement is a major cause of loneliness and isolation. When we asked participants what events may have contributed or caused their loneliness, many mentioned the people they had lost.

“I feel lonely despite the effort my children are doing. My wife passed away 7 years ago, since then I was alone.” Black man aged 56-65

“I lost my only son.” African woman aged 66-75

“I lost my younger brother. He had an underlying health condition and died in his sleep at home with Coronavirus. I couldn’t even attend his funeral, I wish to hold a ceremony for him once this all ends but it might be difficult to do for so many reasons.” Iranian man aged 56-65

“I used to live with a very good friend of mine for many years but unfortunately he died and I found myself living alone, then is when the feeling of loneliness started. I don't have many friends and that friend that died was a very close friend, someone I could trust. I don't have children nor I have family living in England, they are all living in my country, so that friend that passed was like my closest family.”

Spanish man aged 66-75

“I was engaged to a man who passed away before we could get married. He died of a disease that brings stigma in my community.” African woman aged 36-45

“I was married for more than 48 years and thought we would celebrate the 50th anniversary of marriage and we would get the Certificate from the Pope; unfortunately....” African man aged over 76

“Since I lost my only Grandson five years ago.” Eritrean woman aged over 76

“Since my son's death.” Iranian woman aged 60

“The Covid-19 Pandemic killed my best friend last year. He was a real support for me.” African woman aged 26-35

“The death of my wife [from Covid-19] leaving me with children was a big shock. When she went to the hospital, she was walking and not really very sick. To die after just 2 weeks was a real shock for me and children.” African man aged 46-55

“Unfortunately I lost my mother during the pandemic due to clinical negligence, she was the most precious thing I've ever had.” Iranian woman aged 36-45

“Yes, I have my own young sister age around 45 had 4 kids, her youngest kid is 2 years old. She passed away during February months 2021. She even talked to me 3 day before she said it was temperature, and she find her chest is very heavy, she also mention she will be fine after taking rest. The next day she went to hospital the following night she passed away.” Bangladeshi woman aged 46-55

9. Economic difficulties and Unemployment

Economic difficulties, and anxiety about money and unemployment were also commonly mentioned as causes of loneliness and isolation

“I had a baby and I am struggling on my own to raise up the child. In the meantime, I gave up my career as I didn't find I was better off after paying all the bills and the cost of childminding.” Black British woman aged 26-35

“I have recently lost my job as a chef and have no income except Universal credit which is very low, as I was self-employed for less than the 3 year period I had no income help for a long time and really felt it.” Iranian woman aged 46-55

“I have recently lost my job as a teachers' assistant and my probation period was not accepted.” South Asian man aged 46-55

“My children travelled abroad. I change my housing to new area where I thought I will be closer to my community, but unfortunately I felt lonely. Being unemployed made me feel lonely I used to work back home as a journalist but since I came here I cannot find a job, any job.” Middle Eastern man

10. Stigma/shame

Any event that has stigma attached and brings shame to a person or a family is a cause of loneliness and isolation.

“Yes my son going into prison, my friends all disappeared.”

Somali woman aged 46-55

11. Not being able to have a partner

Being single can be stigmatising in some cultures especially for women.

Additionally, many people feel lonely and isolated if they don't have a partner.

“Because of my weight I can't find a person to go into a relationship with and this has made me feel lonely and isolated. I feel unwanted and unloved.”

Iranian woman aged 33

“Not finding a person to fall in love and get married to.”

Iranian woman aged 26-35

What services are needed to improve loneliness and isolation in our communities?

We asked the question:

What do you think we should do differently as a community or as a society to help people in your situation?

General activities

Many responses were general suggestions about activities that would improve people's lives. These included: Book clubs, chess clubs, dancing classes, exercise classes, swimming, seaside visits and trips, painting and crafts, English classes, computer classes, youth clubs and others. For example:

“English classes for everyday life, not grammar and spelling.” African man aged 16-25

People asked that activities were inclusive of people who don't speak English, people with disabilities and activities for older people, activities for young people and activities for divorced people.

“Activities for disabled people who can speak the same language.”

Eritrean man aged over 76,

“I think activities that meet the needs of people with disabilities. Activities that take into account individual needs and bring those people together. I like many things but because of my disability I can't do many things I used to do. So now just having nice talks about interesting subjects will be very nice for me. Learning about meditation and ways to relax are very useful as well and I am very interested in.”

Spanish woman aged 56-65

People also asked for help for housing and homelessness, job search, and small businesses.

Mental Health

People asked for workshops around mental health, for 1:1 emotional support, meditation, information on how to relax, befriending and professional counselling in other languages.

“I need professional help and some therapy. So do my daughters.”

Iranian woman aged 26-35

“Should have some sort of activities where can easily participate and share the feelings.” Bangladeshi man aged 56-65

“More emotional support for over 50s. Create groups for Farsi speakers to communicate when they feel lonely.” Iranian woman aged 56

“Right now I think a service that would benefit me is a women’s group meeting either via zoom or when restrictions start to ease face to face. I think meeting other women particularly women that are going through the same thing that I am going through would be very helpful. There could be meetings to discuss our feelings and the best ways to deal with them; a kind of group counselling. It would also be a good way to make new friends.” Spanish woman aged 46-55

Sexual Orientation

People asked for services and activities that fight prejudice against LGBTQ+ people.

“Different BME communities should organise activities talking about sexual orientation. Many young people in BME communities are voiceless and suffering in silence as they cannot express themselves in the community.”

African woman aged 36-45

“Different BME communities should organise LGBTQ+ activities. There are no activities for LGBTQ+ in the BME communities.” African woman aged 26-35

“For me I think a service would greatly benefit is a group of trans women from ethnic minorities background where I could meet people in the same situation I am, a group where we could do different activities but most importantly a group where we could support each other. I feel at disadvantage as I am not only a foreigner, but also a trans woman with not family in this country and from a culture that stigmatizes people like me.” Latin-American trans woman aged 56-65

“Be more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, not treat them any differently than you would to anyone else. There are people all over suffering from hate due to their sexuality and it is not acceptable.” Thai woman aged 16-25

Activities around values: acceptance, inter-generational respect & communication, citizenship

One theme that came up was that people felt judged by other members of the community for the choices they had made, sometimes by other generations and sometimes by their peers. They wanted activities around citizenship, equalities and women’s rights. Older generations also wanted to feel understood and respected by younger generations.

For example:

“The community need to educate a certain generation from abroad that this is a free country. I’d like to see more communication, debates among different generations, communities, beliefs, young people to try understanding or empathise with other people who are different from us. Citizenship needs to be taught widely in the migrant communities, especially my parents to understand the laws of equality, freedom, democracy, and so on.” Black British woman aged 26-35

“Maybe more education sessions about acceptance. Work towards awareness among women that divorce is not a crime, educate people to accept each other and support other.” Sudanese woman aged 46-55

“Maybe helping the youngsters to have a better understanding about their parents. Media might be helpful to remind family members to stop annoying each other when everyone is under pressure. It doesn’t help anyone. Young people think because they have good jobs and become successful in the work place, they understand everything better than their parents. People almost forgot how to live together and how to live with each other’s needs ... “Encourage more services that involve parents and young people to help with communication.” Iranian woman

Support for victims of domestic abuse

“Coming out of a controlling/ abusive relationship is not easy. I need help and support to start a safe and new life. Creating an organisation instead of multiple ones can be more straightforward and helpful.” Iranian woman aged 40

“Give more help and support and guide people like me who are new to this country and help me out of my marriage. More immigration support for people on spouse visas whose visas are cancelled by their partner.” Afghan woman aged 26

“More support for people who went through abuse in their marriages. More housing support for single parents.” Iranian woman aged 26-35

Tackling digital exclusion

“I am not a computer literate, some people have told me that there are some charities that offer zoom meetings in the community but because of my lack of knowledge about computing and also the lack of a computer I can’t access. I don’t have either a smart phone. So, I think charities could do something to help people like me to access those services by providing or lending computers and showing us how to use them to access the meetings.” Latin American woman aged 46-55

Support with Immigration

“Understand that for people like me to leave their country is not something easy. Home Office should empathise with us by understanding our cases.”

Black African Man aged 26-35

“Support refugees more and treat them as equal as others. Help them more financially and provide things like mobile phones and laptop. Not isolate us in a hotel and help us improve our English. Support us to find jobs and be more active.”

Iranian man aged 26-35

“Have more support for people like me that have been tortured. And create group talking for people like me.” Iranian man aged 26-35

Conclusion

It is clear from the report that many BME people went through very difficult periods of loneliness and isolation in the first six months of 2021. Some of this was related to the coronavirus pandemic and the lockdowns but a lot of it was due to pre-existing factors which were exacerbated by the pandemic. Loneliness and isolation affected people in every domestic situation, but the biggest group in our sample were people who lived alone. The life experiences that contributed to loneliness and isolation were predominantly: bereavement, divorce/separation or other forms of family breakdown, experience of trauma including domestic abuse, the experience of migration and losing family and community ties, and loss of health through developing an illness, disability or through acquiring caring responsibilities for others. Additionally, loneliness and isolation was caused by being excluded by one's community and family, and this was a cause of loneliness and isolation for people in very different circumstances including people who are LGBTQ+, people who formed a relationship outside the community, women who divorced, people who have a stigmatising illness such as HIV and people who have a family member in prison. The project has demonstrated the importance of intersectionality in that BME people who are also disabled or in poor health, are LGBTQ+ or victims of trauma and abuse, face multiple risk factors for loneliness and isolation as well as barriers in receiving services.

Recommendations for BME organisations

How can we, as BME organisations do more to ensure firstly that our services are as inclusive as possible and secondly that we model a culture of inclusivity which values diversity and is welcoming to people different from us? To do so we need to acknowledge that a lack of resources will limit many BME organisations from developing as many inclusive services as they would like. BME organisations support clients with very high needs in terms of poverty, communication needs, housing needs and mental health needs and these are the main areas where resources are directed. It is not always easy to acknowledge that there are other additional needs that also need to be explored and help directed. However, we have consulted with BME organisations about how to address this issue and we have reached the following recommendations which we hope are as practical as possible.

1) Ensuring our own services are as inclusive as possible

Many BME organisations already go out of their way to provide services that are inclusive to women, to older people, to people who don't speak English and to people who have mental health difficulties. These services are absolutely vital and make a huge difference to clients. However, providing services that are inclusive to people with a range of disabilities is a massive area which requires a lot of thought and resources - from ensuring venues are wheelchair accessible, to developing services for children and adults with learning disabilities and their carers, ensuring services are inclusive to clients who are blind, deaf or neurodiverse or suffering from dementia. Clearly, not

every organisation will be able to develop services in this direction but we all need to be thinking about it and doing what we can. Our suggestion is that BME organisations should:

- **use their strategic plans to consider how to fundraise, develop services and outreach to people with a range of disabilities.**
- **Consider what low cost solutions can be applied in the near term -such as ensuring that services (including trips and excursions) are delivered in accessible venues that support wheelchair users or those with hearing or visual aids.**
- **Our research has shown us that many people feel devastated when they are diagnosed with a debilitating illness leading to disability. Organisations should consider offering support groups for people who suffer from ill health to ensure users can support and empower each other.**
- **Organisations should develop referral pathways to disability organisations (whether mainstream or BME specific) and provide support, including interpreting support to clients who need to access these organisations.**

BME organisations are obliged to follow the 2010 Equality Act which includes not discriminating against people on the basis of protected characteristics such as sexual orientation or gender identity. This is vital and, in our experience, BME organisations do a good job of following the law. However, there is scope for greater work in ensuring that people from LGBTQ+ communities feel welcome and supported. In our research there was a clear request for activities specifically for BME LGBTQ+ people. We are aware that some BME organisations already have events and activities both to celebrate and to support people from LGBTQ+ people but these are not many. Our suggestion is that every BME organisation should consider:

- **Having a visible symbol on their door and website to indicate that LGBTQ+ people are welcome.**
- **Training all staff around equalities including LGBTQ+ issues.**
- **Holding an event to celebrate LGBTQ+ people from their particular ethnic group.**
- **Offer a visible service for LGBTQ+ people within an existing service - e.g. befriending for LGBTQ+ people delivered by suitable trained staff.**
- **Explore partnerships with LGBTQ+ organisations, possibly starting with common delivery areas around sexual health or work with HIV+ clients.**
- **Creating a working environment where staff and volunteers feel comfortable to disclose their sexual orientation.**

Good practice example: We worked together with Middle Eastern Women and Society who organised an online event to celebrate LGBTQ+ people of middle eastern origin. There were many presentations as well as entertainments and it was a great day.

2) Developing services to support victims of domestic abuse

Our research highlighted the important role domestic abuse plays in the mental health of victims who have experienced it even years after the abuse took place. We also heard about the trauma of women who married without informed consent and the difficulties some women face in trying to get a divorce. Although these difficulties are faced by victims of all ethnicities, genders and economic circumstances, intersectionality plays a significant role and BME victims, victims who don't speak English, victims who are displaced from their home communities through migration and victims who are poor, face additional challenges. Our recommendations are that every BME organisation should:

- **Ensure all staff are trained to understand what domestic abuse is, and to know what support can be given within the organisation and what support needs to be accessed from specialist organisations.**
- **Fundraise for projects that raise awareness of domestic abuse in the community and create capacity in the organisation to support victims access the services they need.**
- **Develop projects that support women who are going through divorce, aid women whose husbands refuse to divorce then in getting an Islamic divorce and raise awareness of the new legislation around no fault divorce that make getting a divorce easier.**
- **Hold community discussions that help reduce the stigma of divorce in the community.**

3) Develop projects that enhance communication between generations and foster communication about values, equalities and community cohesion

Our research showed that some community members feel that there is a growing gap between generations in terms of values and that can directly affect how excluded people feel. It would be useful if community organisations could foster greater communication and debate between generations as well as an understanding of wider society values to facilitate better relationships across generations. We would recommend that BME organisations:

- Develop projects that encourage activities across generations and foster communication.
- Organise events that encourage conversations about values and deal with the issue of discussing the difference in values from back home to the UK.
- Organise parenting courses or training that include equalities, safeguarding and the shift in values for people raised in the UK compared to those raised abroad.
- Maintain a politically neutral stance, particularly with regard to party politics in the users' home countries to avoid participating in political rifts between different generations or different political groups from the same community (This doesn't preclude campaigning for democracy or human rights).

Good practice example: Midaye Somali Development Network have developed a parenting course specifically to deal with the challenges of first generation migrants raising children born in the UK (or fish and chips children as they are called). The project seeks to explore and bridge the differences between raising children in the UK and raising children in Somalia.

Recommendations for funders

For our BME organisations to become more inclusive and to develop the services that are needed to reach out to people who are excluded, they need more funding and support. Our recommendations to funders, including statutory organisations is to create dedicated funding that will specifically look at intersectionality and funding for groups that share multiple vulnerabilities. Additionally, we urge funders to provide more core funding and more funding for social and cultural activities that will support organisations to become more inclusive. In more detail, we urge funders to provide support in the following areas:

- 1)** Support for people within BME communities who have protected characteristics, including people with disabilities and people who identify as LGBTQ+.
- 2)** Support for people suffering from poor mental health, who need services and activities to prevent people becoming isolated. Although most BME organisations already work in this area, the need always exceeds service delivery.
- 3)** Support for migrants who often suffer from isolation through losing family and community ties as a result of displacement. Although most BME organisations focus on this group, need exceeds service delivery.
- 4)** Domestic abuse support for migrant victims. We need to have a comprehensive range of services so that victims who don't speak English can access services in their own language. We would like to see a 'no wrong door' policy implemented which would mean that all BME organisations would be equipped to support victims suffering from domestic abuse, whether that means supporting them inhouse or supporting them to access specialist services and being resourced to provide interpreting services and emotional support.
- 5)** As well as funding services, funders should look at funding social/cultural and arts events that have a purpose to reduce social isolation and ensure they are as inclusive as possible.
- 6)** Core funding is an important facilitator in allowing organisations to think beyond their regular client group and consider how to be inclusive, how to reach out to new groups and how to remove existing barriers that exclude people. Funders should consider providing more core funding and using core funding as a tool to promote inclusivity.

Appendix

Please find detailed information about our sample:

Gender

Male	133
Female	236
Other	2
Prefer not to say/incomplete	4
Total	375

Age

16-25	52
26-35	62
36-45	59
46-55	75
56-65	70
66-75	44
75+	10
Prefer not to say/incomplete	3
Total	375

Ethnicity

Black African/African	137
Black Caribbean	4
Black/ Black British	49
Chinese	3
Latin American	24
Middle Eastern/North African/Arab	19
Afghan	5
Kurd	6
Iranian	73
South Asian/Bangladeshi	31
South Asian/Indian	6
South Asian/ Pakistani	6
South Asian/ other	1
Mixed heritage	7
Prefer not to say	2
Incomplete	2
Total	375

Religion

Buddhist	3
Christian	129
Hindu	1
Muslim	174
No religion	28
Mix	1
Other	3
Prefer not to say	34
Incomplete	2
Total	375

Language

Our interviewees spoke 29 different languages including English.

Amharic	Spoken mainly in Ethiopia and Eritrea	6
Arabic	Spoken across the Middle-East, North Africa and parts of East Africa	39
Ateso	Spoken mainly in Uganda and Kenya	1
Bangla	Spoken in Bangladesh and parts of India	34
Cantonese or Mandarin	Spoken mainly in China	1
Dari	Spoken in Afghanistan	5
English	Spoken mainly in the UK and North America	39
Farsi	Spoken mainly in Iran	67
French	Spoken mainly in France and parts of Africa	6
Hindi	Spoken mainly in India	2
Igbo	Spoken mainly in Nigeria	2
Patois	Spoken mainly in the Caribbean	4
Kikongo	Spoken in the DRC, Congo, Angola and Gabon	4
Kurdish	Spoken in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Armenia, Azerbaijan	4
Lingala	Spoken in the Congo and the DRC	58
Luganda	Spoken in Uganda	1
Luo	Spoken mainly in Kenya and Tanzania	1
Pashto	Spoken in Afghanistan and Pakistan	2
Somali	Spoken mainly in Somalia, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti	33
Spanish	Spoken mainly in Spain and Latin America	25
Swahilli	Spoken across East and Southern Africa	12
Tajik	Spoken in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan	1
Thai	Spoken mainly in Thailand	1
Tigrinia	Spoken in Eritrea and Ethiopia	10
Tshiluba	Spoken mainly in Central Africa and DRC	4
Turkish	Spoken mainly in Turkey and Northern Cyprus	1
Twi	Spoken mainly in Ghana	1
Urdu	Spoken mainly in Pakistan, India, and Nepal	1
Yoruba	Spoken across West Africa particularly Nigeria	3
Incomplete		7
Total		375

Sexual Orientation

Heterosexual	334
LGBTQ+	15
Other (bisexual)	2
Other (“I’m experiencing something”)	1
Prefer not to say	20
Incomplete	5
Total	375

Disability

Yes	75
No	279
Incomplete	21
Total	375

Marital Status

Single	147
Cohabiting/Married	85
Separated/Divorced	94
Widowed	36
Prefer not to say	7
Incomplete	6
Total	375

Who do you live with?

By myself (including people living in hostels and hotels)	149
In a flatshare	23
I’m a guest in someone’s home	4
With a partner	25
With my family (including children)	75
I’m a single parent	27
With my family (adults only)	67
I’m homeless and live in different places	1
Prefer not to say	1
Incomplete	3
Total	375

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