

NARI KALLYAN SHANGHO

Research Report

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This report looks at the results of research investigating the difference that the work of Nari Kallyan Shangho has made to women who have now moved on from the organisation.

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Summary

NKS works with women and families who originate from the countries of South Asia but who are now living in Edinburgh. This report looks at the depth of influence and input that Nari Kallyan Shangho (NKS) has had on the lives of ten women who used to be a part of the project but have now moved on from attending the groups and activities.

This research is in support of a larger piece of research being carried out at NKS this summer which is to enable development of indicators of social exclusion and health inequalities. These indicators are important in the development of the work of NKS and will provide a clearer way of measuring the success of its work and demonstrating its impact to the wider community.

The piece of research I was asked to carry out is relating to women who are no longer coming to NKS and have been able to move on in life, in different ways. My aim was to ascertain how they have moved on since attending the project, and what influence, if any, NKS had had in helping them to move on and in making a difference to them at a personal level. There have been many positive findings as a result of this research and I feel these demonstrate the value of the work of the organisation.

Main Research Findings

About the Women's lives

- Women face a hard struggle when they first come here because usually they have left all they know behind, and have to rebuild their lives from scratch here, often without any prior knowledge of the language or experience of a different culture. All spoke of the feelings of isolation around this time.
- Women who were interviewed and have lived here for most or all of their lives are not necessarily aware of the issues faced by those of a similar culture and background to them. Some of the interviewees described their experience of working at NKS as 'eye-opening' and found that it ignited a passion within them to help the struggle of their own people. In this way NKS is raising awareness and inspiring others.
- Within some cultures it is not expected that the women will have social contact with others at all. Mostly their role is centred on the family and the home.

About NKS

- NKS is a valued and trusted organisation, well connected and respected within the communities it reaches out to.
- NKS has a distinctive environment, it is thought of as a home by these women, and it means very much to them. They have a space to come and simply 'be' in, to enjoy company of others and to access a wide range of activities and opportunities.
- NKS has been really important in the personal journey of these women. NKS has influenced their lives in a positive way. Some have experienced the nurturing care of NKS which has encouraged and built them up, others spoke of their time at NKS as an 'eye opening' experience that ignited something within them and helped them find a sense of purpose.
- NKS as an organisation has a deep richness to it in that it gives so much to these women in so many different ways; from building their confidence to providing support and encouragement in language learning or job searching. The women spoke of courses they had found useful, activities and trips they enjoyed and got a lot from and also volunteering and how this experience had opened doors for them.
- NKS operates in a collective way; everybody has their role but there are no separations made between people, everyone is equal and equally valued.
- NKS was described as a 'grassroots' organisation. They care deeply and genuinely about the women within their communities and build true relationships with them which allow these women to connect with the organisation

in a way that means they are a part of shaping the work themselves. This means their position within society is perhaps 'on the edge' of the mainstream but this is important in order to be able to reach out to these women.

- The staff team are a significant asset to the organisation, they make NKS what it is through their interaction with the women, the relationships they build, and also the vast wealth of knowledge, their experience and the skills they bring into the project.

Recommendations

- NKS should be encouraged at the strengths that have come through in the findings. I hope they can use this report to take stock of all that has been achieved and to move into a new season, and that it will be useful in presenting to funders and other bodies as a way of detailing the difference they make and the value of this to the city of Edinburgh.
- I believe other workers can be inspired by the distinctive and 'grassroots' ways that NKS engages with their community and hope that others will find this report stimulating and insightful, perhaps allowing them to take a fresh look at their own approaches to practice.
- There is an important message to the funding bodies that support NKS; NKS is a precious organisation, it is needed and it is valuable, it is unique and needs to be protected and supported, allowing it to grow stronger. It is important to surround the organisation and help it to become better and also to protect it from being pulled apart by expectations which conflict with its value base.

Introduction

The results of the research have been very encouraging and have uncovered the strengths of NKS as an organisation. They also show how much it is valued by the community surrounding it. As I go through the findings I hope to demonstrate these strengths using the words spoken by the women themselves. I hope you will find it interesting and inspiring to read about these women and how, with the help given to them by NKS, they have been able to overcome their struggles.

By way of introduction to the findings, I would like to begin by sharing a few words from these women about their lives, about the struggles they faced and their situation at the time of coming to NKS. As you read these words I would invite you to imagine this is you, to put yourself in their position. I have used initials in order to maintain anonymity.

'I had just moved here, I didn't know anyone, I didn't know anything, everything was new for me.' – A.K.

'I moved here because I had health issues and my dad was living here already... At that time I was very isolated, didn't know anyone, didn't go anywhere, was in the house with my Dad doing nothing.' – I.M.

'I was living in Pakistan... I had some difficulties with my marriage, so what else do you do, you go home to be with your family... When I came I never had my boys with me, I was on my own, that was hard for me.' - H.A.

The first thing that struck me as I was interviewing these women was just how strong they have been. In the face of great emotional distress at having had to leave everything they knew behind, in a way their struggles were only just beginning, not ending. It is important to remember this reality as we consider the impact of NKS in this situation, and to perhaps challenge our own previous assumptions too. One interviewee pointed out that many of us have made assumptions and generalisations about 'the Asian community' believing they are simply coming here for a 'better life' or to depend on or 'use' our system.

'For them [society] it's just a 'better economic life' and they come just as a choice like that. A lot of the time it's not a choice, your family marries you off, you just come and it's not a better life – you've lost the community support you had, you are amidst another family who are your in-laws a lot of the time, you don't know the language, and so the assumption that it's always a 'better life' is a wrong one, and I think the other idea was – it's changed, but the other idea was that if people didn't know English, they were not intelligent, and so you know a Doctor would say something slowly and loudly thinking that would help! But it wouldn't... You start realising how isolated women can feel when they don't have their language, when they've married and come, and they don't have family here, and how they cope, how they want the best for their children and how, you know this whole idea of 'bleeding the system'...I don't think that was my experience. My experience was that these women had a lot of dignity and it was a struggle for them but they coped pretty well, and they were very keen that their children wouldn't go through that same struggle that they had been going through... a lot of them were professionals in their own country, pretty well placed, but not really understood as educated and accomplished' – B.F.

Most of the women I interviewed came to this country on their own, as described here, but a few grew up here. One woman described the influence her family have had on the path she has taken.

'I didn't have a career path, set out in stone, I've always been a driver, I've always been a go-getter and I've always had a lot of energy to do and to progress, and that's just the value-base that I've had, that I've grown up with, I've been pushed to go and do things, go out there and achieve, and I think having that family background probably has made that happen.' – A.C.

This woman had grown up in Scotland and has her family here, she came to NKS on a placement for a course she was studying and is now working in a very successful job, managing a team of people in a well-established organisation in

Edinburgh. It was great to hear about how this had made a difference to her but it made me think of the depth of support that is missing in this way for other women who have left their own families or grown up in a different culture where these things are not encouraged. The reality of their lives is very different. One woman I interviewed couldn't remain with her husband in Pakistan but still needed a way of supporting her family there.

***'I needed to get work but it wasn't possible for me, I wasn't qualified, my husband didn't want me to finish my education so I had to leave my course. So after the separation I finished my practicion, I finished my training, I finished my graduation, my youngest one was eight months old.'* – H.A.**

These women need so much at times like these but as some described, they didn't know where to go after moving here. When asked whether there was any help from organisations other than NKS when she first came to Scotland, one woman answered, ***'No, no, because I didn't know any other organisations...'*** Coming here and not knowing the system of support we have, not knowing anyone in the wider community, there was nowhere for her to 'plug in' to what might have been available for her. If a woman has family here then they might have some people around them but outside of this they have no other connections. Within some families and communities, especially in Bengali families, I heard that social contact is not even considered to be the norm. For most of the women coming to NKS, it is the only place where they can make these connections within their own communities, which gives them some sense of belonging in what can be a very alien place for them, and helps them to begin to build a new life here.

Research Methods

- I carried out ten semi-structured interviews altogether, using open questions in order to gain qualitative data.
- Eight of the interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to use the women's exact words and two were written from notes and memory.
- All of the interviews apart from one were face to face, one was held over the phone.
- I interviewed two workers at the project who themselves were members of the community initially before becoming part of the team at NKS.
- Seven of the women interviewed were of Pakistani origin, three of these women grew up in Scotland and four moved here after living in Pakistan. Two of the women interviewed moved to Scotland from Bangladesh, and one woman moved to Scotland from India.
- The women interviewed were aged between 30 to 50 years and were at different stages of life, some were mothers, others had children that were now grown up and one was single.

Findings

There were key themes that came across from all the women during the interviews which demonstrated just how much NKS means to them and in what ways it has helped them. I have divided these into two main sections; NKS as a 'Place to be and a Space to Grow' and 'The position and location of NKS' within society. In the first section I will discuss how NKS provides a sense of place and of freedom for the women to come and be nurtured and grow, and in the second I will discuss the position of NKS as a grassroots organisation and its location outside of mainstream services and how both these are of great importance.

A Place to 'Be' and Space to Grow

'Because here, it's like one big family' – N.A.

During the interviews, NKS was described as a home time and time again. This is a really important point to begin with – NKS is a Home. As these women shared about what NKS meant to them I heard them describe all the things we would associate with a good home – a place of safety, a loving, caring, environment which is always there and is settled, constant, stable, long term, where people are trustworthy and can be relied upon. It is extremely evident to me, through the interviews, how much this sense of Home, of a place of familiarity, belonging and safety is needed by these women and how much of a positive impact it has in their lives as they try to make a new life here.

***'They were the first point for me to settle down here, meeting the NKS workers... all of them were very supportive and positive, not only one person or two, I kind of take it like my second home to be honest, even at that time I didn't know most of the people, then I got involved in different groups and from there got a lot of love, it helped me a lot, I think, to build up and make me what I am today.'* – O.R.**

Here women describe their first experience of NKS.

***'I did feel a bit home sick, not having people around me, but then I came to know Asma, and she, introduced me here, in NKS and I met so many other Asian women and girls... I felt like at home to be honest, very warm, welcoming, very co-operative, supportive, and I didn't feel like it was, maybe...different, like I'd just moved here, new, it was very good, very good experience I have to say.'* – O.R.**

***'The worker, Shamshad she invited me so I was coming to the events, the groups, we had some discussion, and my community was there I liked to meet them... Usually we don't have social contact so coming to NKS was good for making new friends, to meet the community...'* – K.N.**

***'I remember, it was a little bit scary for me, new people, new place, I didn't know what to expect, I didn't know what was going to happen. But I still remember the way Rohina welcomed me, she gave me such a warm welcome, she made me feel such a part of the group.'* - A.K.**

To use an analogy, NKS, you could say, is a bit like a greenhouse. The greenhouse provides a space for new shoots to be nurtured and cared for so that they can grow strong enough before being planted outside. At their stage of growth, new shoots are not ready or prepared for the harsher weather, not strong enough to cope with heavy rain or strong winds, but as they spend time in the warm, comfortable environment of the greenhouse they are able to stretch out, grow and become healthier, moving from pot to pot as they get bigger. Women coming to NKS are in a similar situation, they need somewhere that provides a familiar, comfortable space where they are protected, nurtured and able to grow stronger, to take in every nutrient they need that they might be ready to gradually begin acclimatising to a new outside environment, eventually getting to the point where they are ready to move outside.

NKS have created this space in exactly the right way. They have built the best environment for these women, one which does nurture them, build them up, and help them to grow. This environment is culturally relevant, and appropriate for these women, tailored towards their understanding and their needs. The fact that it is just for

women and children makes it a safe place where the women feel at ease, there is sensitivity to religious and cultural differences. All these things make NKS successful in providing a place where these women can grow.

***'It was welcoming, very culturally sensitive, it's a comfortable environment, where I never ever felt like I had to be something else coming in, you know, it's just easy and friendly.'* – A.C.**

***'I think it's more to do, the first thing, very very important thing is that it's a women's organisation particularly, and in south Asian countries especially the women are really conscious not to go to the people they don't know or they are not from their origin, so here you get that environment which are can't say friends, but sort of trustworthy, that you can rely on? They won't, manipulate information you are giving to them, and, it's started from the very bottom level, that's the difference I noticed, that you don't hesitate to come here and speak... here I think it's kind of like family and kind of homely, you come and you ask or do whatever you want to do.'* – O.R.**

Within the space NKS provides they give much to the women, however it is important to point out NKS is not simply a 'service provider' – there is giving *and* receiving taking place all the time, whether this be in sharing food, giving guidance or advice, helping out practically, or using specific skills. In this way they are empowering these women; strengths are recognised and drawn upon or contributed to the whole, whilst weaknesses are supported and those in need are able to receive.

***'Whenever you need them or they need you, you know they are there and then we are here.'* – O.R.**

All of the women I spoke to mentioned that being a part of NKS helped with confidence.

***'Because NKS is women only you can talk about things that you can't talk about anywhere else, you have the freedom to discuss. It gives women self-confidence which is the key; it is the starting point to all these other things.'* – I.M.**

***'Giving me the confidence, it's like you have the confidence to know something, to learn, and then you can go out and work, and when you are able to learn it gives you confidence'* – H.A.**

***'Respect, for myself and others, being part of different people with different culture and religion. It's made a big difference to my confidence at that time.'* – N.A.**

Along with gaining confidence an important aspect of why women enjoyed coming to NKS was the opportunity to speak their own language.

***'I was coming to the Bengali group, at that time there were only five or six women. The most important thing was talking my language, being able to speak in Bengali. We weren't doing activities it was more talking, spending time, it was important just being with other people to get out of isolation and talking my language.'* – I.M.**

In one of the groups I attended whilst I was at NKS, we were having a discussion around Scottish Independence and the Bengali women were sharing about their fight for independence. I didn't realise this before but at the time of the struggle you could be arrested for simply speaking in Bengali. It helped me to appreciate how precious being able to speak their own language is.

Within NKS there are strong connections. The relationships formed at NKS last for a lifetime and even after women have moved on from the groups, they still express a sense of being connected in some way.

***'I was always involved in NKS in some way, there was always some connection.'* – A.K.**

***'I don't come on a regular basis but still I get in touch with them and see what's going on and try to catch up'* – O.R.**

'There has always been a connection – it feels like a second home to you, NKS is just like a home to you.' – H.A.

The depths of these relationships are important. At NKS women don't only attend groups, they share their lives together and the environment allows this to happen which is especially important when there are big challenges and struggles to face.

'Your family are there to support you but if someone else is supporting you too then it's very very good support, everybody was so loving and caring, everybody was telling me, it will be okay, we have seen something worse than this, and this is what you need at that time, in the hardest time you need someone with you, telling you these things' – H.A.

'Anything that happened in my life, NKS was the first place I'd come to. My Father passed away in 2000, I never felt alone, I had so much support in every way, really, a lot of support.' – A.K

'I was living with extended family so I had to get out... [I enjoyed] the company, conversation, speaking to somebody about my problems, just getting away and relaxing here, it was somewhere I could come and let my hair down' - N.A.

The people who make this happen are those on the staff team at NKS, there are many volunteers but these workers lead the way for others to follow. They are strong women who bring a depth of positive values and their own experience with them - they too have faced situations similar to these women and they are now there to help others. They are trusted. The team are well respected within their community on a professional level and a personal level. One woman now working for the NHS said, *'Any programme which I need to convey the message from the health services to the community I will come here first'* (– R.I.)

Here other women share their view of the workers at NKS.

'They encourage women to come out, to get awareness of health and to have contact with community, also an awareness of social wellbeing.' – K.N.

'I was inspired by the women I saw working at NKS, I saw them and thought if they can do this then so can I!' – I.M.

'...and I think their whole acceptance was a great thing – the women accepted me in spite of my very different background, so that I think was quite a rewarding experience, yes.' – B.F.

'when people come here and they sit down and they share their issues and their worries, and that's the platform you know, it's not easy to share with one woman and in a group atmosphere people have friendship with each other, the staff they listen to them, that thing is not easy to achieve, it's very hard to set up, and harmony between the group when they come here, I've seen them, and the attendance, every time I come I think more than 20 people is always there which is very very nice to see, and I must say this is all the hard work of the good reputation of the workers... people have understanding that when they go here the ladies they will help them , there's a trust, they have built up the trust with them so that helps people a lot, it makes them really different, that they, they're a trusted project, a trusted place where people can come and share, with other people and with staff, and they feel like you can get things off your chest... they can maybe not tell the family and they are telling us so obviously they have trust in this organisation.' – R.I.

'team work, still I find a very very nice team to work every person, is so much they are included in the feel of that and they feel they have inclusion with the team and very valued, so that's their main strength, group working and trusting each other and very good people...all the women working here, very very enthusiastic, with limited resources, and just this one room so many people share, they are really really very dedicated staff they have and I was one of them for two weeks!' – R.I.

Another strength of the environment at NKS is that everyone is together, no separations are made between background or position; they operate as a collective unit. This allows for genuine relationship and connection. Women respect each other, they are able to find 'unity within diversity', to celebrate the differences that each one brings and to make others a part of the whole, of their community.

'It's almost a unit that brings people together because it is as I say that grassroots, it doesn't pretend to be something else, the staff truly engage with the users, it's not like at arm's reach and 'oh you can't talk to me' and 'I don't have time for you' I think the approach is so flexible around people where it works, you know the rules are different around NKS.' – A.C.

'It is like a second home – it doesn't feel like somewhere new, you feel comfortable. Everybody is so friendly here, it doesn't feel like you are in an organisation, everybody is so friendly, no matter whether they are from India or Bangladesh, or from Pakistan, or from anywhere else, it's like you are completely getting together, it's like a family.' – H.A.

'Multiculturalism, another thing which is a good part because sometimes, you know, when you are even from different countries, the same region but different countries like Pakistan, India, Sri Lankan, Bengali, but here you get a chance to know each other and it's promoting each other's events and celebrations and things.' – O.R.

They also have a particular sensitivity in relation to religion which is important as explained here.

'They have workers from all the different countries so they have knowledge of the different groups in the region, and I think another thing that distinguishes it is that it's very sensitive to Muslim sentiment, because it really caters for Muslim women and children, it doesn't close doors to others but the way it handles questions of Muslim identity and takes things on board concerning such an identity I think is very positive given today's misunderstandings about the community in the world.' – B.F.

All these aspects I have highlighted make for a very distinctive and successful environment, one which takes these women in, welcomes them and builds them up, making them ready to move out on their own again. It also shows the level of skill that the workers bring to NKS. They have such a richness of life experience which they pour out in order to help others. I will now discuss the position of NKS and how this is also relevant to its success.

The Position and Location of NKS

NKS has well established connections across the city. The social network NKS maintains is unique. It spans professionals in all sorts of fields, reaches to women at all levels, from many ethnic and religious groups, and brings all of these groups together in a very positive way. Just looking at the variety of ways women come to know about NKS demonstrates an aspect of this network.

'We knew a couple of families and they were going to NKS so I went with them.' – A.K.

'I came from Pakistan at that time so, you can say that was the first contact for me in the community, basically from an NKS worker... I met her here, in the community centre in the mosque and from there we introduced each other, she asked about me, what I am doing, why am I here...' – O.R.

'I first came to NKS in 2005, for my work placement through Women into Work organisation.' – R.I.

'I had friends who were coming.' – N.A.

NKS maintains strong connections professionally and also exists to influence and shape mainstream services in a positive way. Another woman I interviewed explained about issues with a certain dialect in Bangladesh called Sylheti.

'Sylheti – this is not a language, it's a dialect and there is no script, Bengali is the language but a lot of people who were from the villages don't read or write because Sylheti is not a language, so there were audiotapes with instructions' – B.F.

Here she is discussing about the translation of information by the NHS which is an important issue for these women. In this particular dialect instructions had to be recorded for women to listen to as this was the only way of getting the information across. These other quotes also demonstrate the issues surrounding translating information and cultural differences.

'Most of the health talks on the NHS will be delivered by professionals in English, we have some vocabulary people can't understand, although they do translate they are changing complex medical things into simple terms they don't understand.' – R.I.

'A lot of information that we're fed in the UK is quite straightforward and it's often bite-sized whereas trying to disseminate that same information in a more culturally sensitive way can be quite difficult... it showed that when health organisations, especially NHS, when they try to translate information it's not always the best thing for it because there's slight variations, there's topics that you can't just translate per se and give and expect people to take in because there will be cultural, other areas that you need to consider' – H.Aw.

'We worked with other groups like Milan, Saheliya, the Wellbeing Project...and of course we also worked with NHS...I worked as a representative, went to their meetings regularly, made suggestions which they took on board, the entire menu in hospitals changed with the whole idea that we brought in' – B.F.

The strength of NKS is that the workers are fully aware of these challenges and cultural differences, and they have a pool of women to draw on who are both experienced in medicine and other areas, and can speak the languages, translating information and synthesising it in the most effective way. These are really valuable skills that can be overlooked or not realised as being necessary but are essential in helping these women gain access to other mainstream services.

Another strong theme that came through in the interviews was that NKS is a grassroots organisation. It also operates on the fringes of mainstream society and it has to, because these women are isolated, they are excluded from the mainstream because of the barriers they face. The strength of this is that NKS can exist in a place, and work in a way which they will connect with in order that they can then reach out to them and invite them in and respond directly to them.

'It's always shouted about being a grassroots type organisation, and it's remained like that, you know it's that kind of safe, comfortable...appropriate as well, type of organisation, appropriate in the way that it will always be on the level of the users, it'll be representative of what their needs are and the kind of issues that are around for that user group, and I think that's what makes NKS so special, in that it doesn't become out of touch with what the community needs are.' – A.C.

'NKS is sustaining progress and development, because sometimes you have these ups and downs in organisations... but it's not like that because they keep trying to improve their things and they keep involving the community which is very good as well' – O.R.

'It's always been very people focused, so it looks at what the users want and is able to provide the services, cater their services accordingly. There's a lot of organisations out there that seems to think they know best and 'we'll decide' and because it's run by people from ethnic minorities themselves, they've got a better understanding of what the issues are because some of them have probably gone through the same themselves and that makes it much more easier to engage service users.' – H.Aw.

'It gives them a platform really, a lot of the women who come from overseas particularly, who have migrated here through marriage or through other areas, they're not able to access mainstream services easily even though there's a lot of translated information flying around, but often that's not really what they need, it's more understanding what their needs are, and I think NKS has been able to fill that gap for these women and just tell them in their own language in a way that they'll understand what it is so that they know how to access these services, but also look at what their needs are and be able to bring in information, bring in experts, from different areas and give them that information in a more user friendly way.' – H.Aw.

As was described above, NKS acts as a platform for these women, almost like a 'springboard' into the mainstream, one woman said, **'It was like the building block for me.'** (– H.A.)

Another woman described the experience of NKS like this;

'It was an intensive, wide-ranging, awareness raising, but at the same time, an opportunity for women to come out and meet each other, learn from each other and to break the isolation, and provide a platform for a unified voice' – B.F.

One of the workers has been with NKS for over 10 years but originally came from the community herself and gained so much from the groups and activities NKS provided at that time. Here she describes how NKS was a 'springboard' for her and now is for others.

'NKS gives the support, emotional, moral, but so much else. I know what has worked in my life, the path that worked for me, I try to encourage other women onto this path; coming, getting confidence, volunteering, moving onto sessional work, maybe a job. We provide the opportunities, we see that they can do the work and then are able to move them forward. Many women don't have the confidence, they feel confident working within their own community, with the children, then they build the confidence, then they can move outside, to the mainstream and find jobs.' – A.K.

This is a really important aspect of what NKS provides. As the women grow in confidence, as described here, they are able to move forward into the next step, into other opportunities and hopefully into the workplace, or onto courses as appropriate to them. This is like the greenhouse I described; the women are able to move within NKS into different opportunities, they may begin on the edges, excluded but as they move 'through' NKS, they become able to access things beyond the project and into the mainstream.

The team at NKS are very gifted at recognising people's strengths when they come to the organisation and fitting them in so that they might be able to learn but at the same time use their existing talents, knowledge and experience to contribute to the work. For example, Mrs Iqbal came to NKS for a work placement through Women onto Work. She had moved to this country with her husband to study and then they started a family and she was out of the workplace for a long period of time. NKS provided a place for her to explore her opportunities. Here she talks about how the experience helped her discover what she was passionate about.

'Because of my background, I thought, what I can do, I can deliver some health sessions, so I gave a health talk on different issues in the Urdu language... it was a very good experience for me that I can be effective, not a patient and doctor relationship, I can be effective so with some health promotion things we started from NKS like that and it worked out for me to get a job in the NHS in primary care.'

'I can say without NKS it will be very hard for me to find a space, NKS not only gave me a particular help but also opened my eyes to how I can use my skills so allowing me to deliver the health talks in this project, in this service, then I go out for my interview and I had a kind of vision [of how I could help] by listening to so many different age groups of ladies, of their issues'

'People come here to take a start like myself and go out and deliver so many things to our communities, to work, it's a great place. Job opportunities you can say, you have done the placement, you find some enthusiasm, a vision and you go out and deliver, it will give you a kind of initiative.'

Like Mrs Iqbal, all of the women I spoke to had been involved in not only coming to the groups but in volunteering in some way. Out of their time at NKS they spoke of how this opportunity gave them practical experience but more than this they told me how being at NKS had changed them personally.

'Then I did some volunteering, Shamshad invited me to do lectures, I did about different things like diabetes, women's cycles after childbirth, I trained as a Doctor in Bangladesh but I wasn't able to work here, I needed to do my registration exams... volunteering made me think I can help, I can do something in my community to make a difference.' - K.N.

'When I was getting to terms with what I was supposed to do and what the organisation was about, I was intrigued because it had been around for a while even then and the work that it had done with women, encouraging them to get out of the house and do things, I'd never really thought of services like that previously because I'd just gone through the usual mainstream system and gone to school and I hadn't really been involved in organisations like that beforehand so it was an eye opener that there were services out there and there were women that really needed services like this... it was through NKS that triggered my involvement in ethnic minority issues... I went to do accountancy and business stuff and then NKS did change the course [of my life] because it just highlighted a lot of areas where there's not sort of intentional discrimination, but there is services that are not catered for around ethnic minorities, and NKS kind of geared me, put me in that direction,' – H.Aw.

For other women these opportunities provided a space to adjust to this new culture and environment, teaching them all they needed to know about how to live and work here, which as they described was key to their integration into this new context.

'[The most helpful thing about NKS was] getting to know the new environment, and if I needed some information, wanted to get some information, obviously I needed experienced people, guidance for the situation and they helped me a lot with that...also, confidence, to deal with the day to day basic things in a new environment basically, that's the most important things that I learned from here' – O.R.

'When you go out to get a job they normally ask you do you have experience of working here, I had all the training but there were so many differences... NKS gave me the ability to prepare me for every kind of work... so I know, okay, this is how things work over here... I started working here with children and there are children everywhere but their needs are different; physical, their social and emotional needs change according to the environment, so it helped me to learn with support from NKS.' – H.A.

They also mentioned the value of courses they had done at NKS such as First Aid, Food Hygiene, Health and Safety and Childcare. As well as providing these practical courses NKS has an English class. Some of the women I spoke to had done this course but the interviews highlighted that having the opportunity to volunteer at NKS helped with their language issues in a different way.

'When I came here and moved here English wasn't my first language, and I needed a place where I could use both things, and it helped me a lot when I was working in the nursery and I had that interaction with the children, and speak with them, so I used to practice with the children my English, my conversational English and it helped me to

build up my vocabulary... NKS provided a platform to practice and to get involved with the workers and children but at the same time get the language.’ – O.R.

As one woman described NKS, ‘acts as a language interface, if you like, not like a translation service but for somebody who’s experiencing language difficulties out in the community it’s somewhere they can come back to and actually speak in their own native language and be understood and feel welcome in that kind of way as well, I think that probably is an under-represented part, it’s not recognised massively because NKS isn’t a translation service but the language and how it breaks down language barriers is massive’(– A.C.) This is quite an important point to bring out; the value of the informal language learning and practice that takes place at NKS is huge. It is also highly accessible, and there is no pressure to learn. Some women I spoke to whilst working at the project had completed the English course and done well but they still struggled when speaking conversationally, with this practice available the women I interviewed were able to develop their language skills easily and quickly, especially the confidence in speaking to others.

I hope you have been able to see how NKS is changing lives; changing life for women who are struggling with isolation and battling many barriers, and inspiring others, helping them to find their place in supporting and advocating for other women. Here are a last few words from some of the women which demonstrate just how much NKS means to them.

‘I owe so much to NKS, it has had such a big influence in my life. I have had so much support. Everything I know I have learned from here, from the other workers. Taking on the manager role I have learned everything from Naina, Rohina, from watching how they work. They were my role model. Everything I have learned from here, how to do community work, managing... I think most I have enjoyed is being in this position now, being able to give back to people, to help the women move on, to give back into the community when I have received so much.’ – A.K.

‘NKS has been part of [my] journey, certainly for me that’s where I started off from and that’s where I explored a lot of my avenues and my work styles and developed myself... [What I have learned,] it’s definitely about people and it’s definitely about just understanding how people work and that everybody’s so different but we’ve all still got the similar values where everybody wants to thrive, everybody wants to be understood and everybody wants to be valued and recognised, and I think that NKS does all of that, provides all of that.’ – A.C.

‘I felt really very positive and the services delivered from here, people who are very isolated, people with a language barrier, people who had no-where to express themselves... I saw lots of women’s groups, and to see all age groups, young women, old women, and by talking to them and telling about myself, I think it was a lot of issues where women were suffering I thought I should be looking for a place in NHS where I can be a part of it where I can solve their problems.’ – R.I.

‘Yeah, I learnt a lot – I learned the system, the benefits system , I learned about the education system, the loop holes, the lack of support in some cases, the assumptions mainstream society can make, the lack of knowledge in mainstream society, so for me it was a learning process... I have this kind of what sociologists call ‘insider-outsider’ status, which the women accepted and as I said I learned a lot from my fellow workers because they were very good they were very sensitive and they knew the issues as insiders... personally I learned a lot about the communities here and how...I think I learned to individualise them rather than see them as a group and that was the best thing.’ – B.F.

‘I think [I learned about] not having assumptions... because I’ve been born and brought up in Edinburgh I just went through the usual way and I thought well, that’s just the way it is, but when you go out there and you see other people and see what barriers they’ve had to face because of language, because of where they’ve come from, cultural barriers that I’ve taken for granted, because I didn’t see them, so when you come and you see what other

people's experiences have been you realise, I think that's been the biggest one, it's just opened my eyes to different experiences and different people. ..by the time I graduated in '98 I'd more or less decided I didn't want to do accountancy as a career, and I think NKS was pretty instrumental in that, I ended up having a passion for these kinds of issues... now that I look back on NKS there's so much there that started that fire. ' – H.Aw.

Analysis

In considering the findings it is easy to see the richness of provision within NKS. At a most basic level they are very successful in filling the gap in the provision of awareness-raising opportunities for these women around health and wellbeing. From the research we can also see that at the most complex level they are influencing and changing the city, bringing about positive futures for women who would have been lost without their support, empowering and releasing potential. In reviewing Gert Biesta's paper on lifelong learning (2006), it was interesting to consider what types of lifelong learning have been taking place at NKS. Biesta proposes three functions of lifelong learning: an *economic* function, 'learning that has to do with the acquisition of new skills and knowledge in relation to the world of work,' a *personal* dimension including learning from experiences, locating a sense of meaning in life, and personal growth, and lastly a *democratic* dimension, 'to do with democracy and social justice, with the empowerment and emancipation of individuals.' (p173) It is clear from these interviews that these women have experienced all three during their time at NKS. They have been able to explore opportunities and various courses in relation to employment, to develop their sense of self, and have been encouraged to grow and move forward personally and democratically. I think this is an important model to keep in mind as NKS develop their work in future and provides a sort of map in which to locate their activities.

It would be easy to lose the personal dimension and to think that this is a woman's individual and private responsibility but I would like to expand a little on this aspect. Illeris (2003) described different levels of learning, the deepest of these being transformative learning which takes place 'as the result of crisis-like situations caused by challenges experienced as urgent and unavoidable, making it necessary to change oneself in order to get any further.' (p402) It is important to remember back to how some of the women were feeling when they first came to NKS and to this country, and to realise that they are going through this deep process of personal change that Illeris describes. He uses the words 'profound and extensive' in relation to the changes it brings, and I believe it is important to note the significance of what these women are going through and just how much support they might need in this time. These are not usually experiences we can process on our own and can be ones which create anxiety as everything around us, including ourselves, is moving, therefore the stability and support that NKS provides really is necessary for them in this time and should not be overlooked.

There are also lessons to be taken away from observing the work of NKS, in considering what *true* community work is. Shaw and Martin (2000) discuss 're-making the connections' between community work, citizenship and democracy, and suggest that 'community work... takes place within the creative space between the intentions and outcomes of policy.' (p403) NKS is definitely one of these 'creative spaces'. They also talk of re-politicising citizenship (p410) and allowing 'the community work role to be about expansion rather than closure: activating 'voice' rather than managing diversity; exposing awkward political problems rather than obscuring them,' I believe my research has shown the strength of NKS in doing this, in opening the door for these women and tackling the issues they face head on. Shaw and Martin (2000) end with the question over whether those in power will recognise true 'democratic renewal as a political process in which people in communities are regarded as critical allies and creative actors in the building of a new and inclusive kind of democracy.' (p410-412) Until this change in thinking happens, organisations like NKS, with its workers strongly rooted in the community, are essential. NKS was described as a platform and as having given a voice to these women, and who else is able to do this? We must not allow communities to slip away to the margins of society with no-one to act on their behalf, or to provide what *they need* in order to stand strong on their own. It seems now that there is a danger in assuming a 'one size fits all' mentality and that we can incorporate everyone into one type of provision but we must remember there are different needs within different cultures.

Another really strong aspect of NKS is the level of participation that takes place at all levels in the organisation; it is clear who works for the project, it is clear who manages the project, and it is clear who volunteers and who comes to take part in the groups, but there are no separating lines drawn between these groups. At NKS there is no 'them' and

'us' everyone has their place and I think this is the point; there is room for everyone. If anyone wants to say something, they are listened to; their words are valued and responded to. When people need an opportunity for training or to gain experience every effort is made to try and fit them in, to find a space for them, or to organise something. There is respect between everybody and a genuine sense of relationship which guards against tokenism and an unequal distribution of power, as described by Croft and Beresford (1992), allowing everybody to enter into the process of developing and shaping the work – all contributions are valid and valued. As community workers this process can be scary, you don't know where listening to your community will lead you! But, we must not be afraid as Jo Macfarlane encourages, 'if community workers genuinely want to empower users, we should recognise that their journey of growth may take them in other directions and this is a possibility we should not shrink from.' (2002, p89)

Another positive to draw out from the evidence is that multiculturalism is possible, and bringing cultures together can be very positive. All of the women spoke of how within NKS many different cultures are able to come together and certainly in my own experience I found I was accepted and people were interested in getting to know me and finding out about my culture. Andrew Haywood describes multiculturalism as being 'characterised by a steadfast refusal to link diversity to conflict or instability,' and, 'based on the assumption that diversity and unity can, and should be, blended with one another: they are not opposing forces.' (2007, p321) These are important to remember when working with others, because we all have differences but these can bring us closer as we share together. I saw how at NKS there was space for the women to share their stories, this was a powerful experience for them and for me as I listened and shared my own. Through this we were able to appreciate where the other was coming from and value those different experiences.

Recommendations

In bringing out these points I wanted to encourage NKS as an organisation, along with community workers as well whilst also challenging those who provide support to NKS. For community workers I believe it is important to reconsider our own established approaches to practice in the light of all that is so positive in the way that NKS works. Without allowing for new inspiration in ways of connecting with our communities and carrying out our work, we will no longer be responding to what we see in a fresh and relevant way. At a recent conference community worker Lynn McCabe described relationships as the 'bread and butter' of our work and it is vital to remember this and value them, putting them first in our work. This is how the staff at NKS work, and the outcomes and depth of all they do is invaluable.

In terms of support for NKS there is difficulty in the current climate in ensuring that community work is not limited or put into a specific box through stringent targets and expectations being put upon organisations. There is a duty of accountability for every organisation to those who support its work, but this must be kept in balance with a freedom to operate in the community's best interest which will ultimately bring about the positive difference that all parties would like to see. We must recognise the richness of what NKS brings to these women and work to protect it and enhance it, celebrating its strengths and supporting it to become even more. I believe there is a danger that if we encourage NKS to become something that it is not we will destroy the very essence and source of its success. As a grassroots organisation which exists on the edge we must value and protect its distinctive nature, style, and way of working and realise there is still a specific need for such a place to exist.

I would encourage NKS to retain those ways of working which encourage all the breadth and depth of their work to continue. I hope the key concepts discussed will help to inform their work and provide a perspective which will help them to take stock and review all they are doing. I would encourage them to remain true to who they are as an organisation in their distinctive nature, and fluid way of working, and encourage them that they are making a big difference to the women they come into contact with.

Conclusion

Through this research I have gathered a wealth of insightful information which I have tried to use in order to present the strengths of NKS, and to show in what ways the project makes a difference to Asian women living in Edinburgh. I have detailed how NKS is viewed as a home, how it is a place that nurtures and empowers women, and how it acts as a springboard, helping women to move out into 'mainstream' society here. In my analysis I was able to bring useful theoretical concepts into the discussion. Bieta's (2006) triangle of lifelong learning was a good way to locate and measure the different strands of the work of the project, and Illeris's (2003) paper reminds us how significant their support is for these women in all that they face. Looking at Shaw and Martin's (2000) concept of regaining the root values of community education I have been able to show the strengths of the ways NKS carries out their work with this community and also inspire them to continue in this.

Through my recommendations I felt it was most important to highlight the need for projects such as NKS to be valued and protected by those supporting them, and for Community Work as a whole to be influenced by its fresh and distinctive approach to working with people. The staff at NKS can be proud of the valuable work they are involved in, I hope this report will give them a sense of the importance of all that they do and will encourage them to continue building upon the success of the organisation. It is important for them to see all the different strands of their work and recognise the deeper more wide-ranging and long term positive effect they are having and will continue to have in women's lives.

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