



## **Diversity and difference: Minority ethnic mothers and childcare**

January 2004

**Kathryn Hall, James Bance and Nickie Denton (Directions Research)**

This study is based on twenty-two focus groups with minority ethnic and White mothers, to explore their attitudes to childcare and employment, to examine childcare preferences of different groups of mothers and the impact that the accessibility, affordability and quality of childcare has on their employment decisions. It also examines mothers' views on taking up childcare as employment.

### **Key findings**

- The research found that there is a rich diversity of minority ethnic women, their views and experiences, which confirms that there is no single approach which will meet everyone's needs.
- Minority ethnic mothers in the study felt that there have been positive changes in culture and in their position in society. Muslim women were keen to point out that adapting to Western culture does not mean losing traditional Muslim values.
- Childcare services are not considered to be in tune with changing gender roles and the increasing number of working mothers, due to the perceived lack of appropriate, accessible and affordable services. This can inhibit women from participating and progressing in the labour market.
- Mothers felt that there is a need for culturally and religiously sensitive childcare services for Asian and Muslim mothers, this includes employing staff from various ethnic communities, and encouraging minority ethnic mothers to provide childminding services.
- There was interest in and enthusiasm for setting up childminding businesses. However, there was low awareness of how to start a business and concern about the investment required was also a barrier.
- The research identified a need for more practical support to encourage mothers to return to work, or develop their own childminding business. Sure Start was felt to successfully provide this support, and women who had used Sure Start generally had very positive experiences of the scheme.

## Introduction

The aim of the Women and Equality Unit is to work across Government and with others to reduce and remove barriers to opportunity for all. This research was commissioned to address the evidence gaps around the views and experiences of women from different minority ethnic groups with regards to employment and childcare.

## Aims of the research

The aim of this project was to examine the attitudes of a range of White and minority ethnic groups of women to childcare and employment, including their own role in providing childcare, and their attitudes towards informal and formal childcare. The research explored explanations for non-participation in the labour market, and also views on taking up childcare as employment. Researchers examined what influenced the childcare preferences of different groups of women, and the impact that accessibility, affordability and appropriateness of childcare (formal and informal) have on their employment decisions.

## Method

Twenty-two focus groups were carried out at a range of locations across Great Britain. This number of focus groups meant that all the major minority ethnic groups in the UK could be represented within the study.

The following focus groups took place between February and April 2003:

- four focus groups amongst White respondents;
- eight focus groups amongst Asian respondents (Pakistani, Sikh/Punjabi/Hindu, Bangladeshi, East African Gujaratis);
- six focus groups amongst Black African and Black Caribbean respondents;
- two focus groups amongst Middle Eastern and North African Muslim respondents;
- two mini groups amongst Chinese respondents (Vietnamese, Mainland Chinese, Malaysian and Hong Kong origins).

The recruitment process ensured the focus groups included a combination of the following: women who did and did not plan to return to work; women who had, and had not worked up until having their most recent child; women working different hours, in a spread of industries; partnered and lone parents; women with and without family living close by; women living in close-knit communities; women with various numbers of children; and users of different types of childcare services. Respondents had a high level of integration in the UK. Most groups within the study included mothers of children with special needs.

It should be noted that findings are illustrative and not statistically representative, due to the relatively small sample and the method used.

## Main findings

### Roles and responsibilities

The research found that there is a rich diversity of minority ethnic women, their views and experiences, which confirms that there is no single approach which will meet everyone's needs.

Minority ethnic women felt that there have been positive changes in culture and their position in society and greater levels of integration, and that attitudes towards women in education and employment were improving. The older generation were felt by some to have more traditional views on gender roles and adapting to Western culture. Muslim women were keen to point out that adapting to Western culture does not mean losing Muslim values.

Most partnered women said that their partners were more involved in parenthood and taking on a more active role in the home than their fathers. However, women still assumed the responsibility of being the primary carer and the family organiser/secretary. Invariably mothers, rather than fathers, regardless of race or religion, tend to deal with the childcare and the childcare organisation. Unless the woman earned considerably more than her partner (and this was the case in only a few instances), it was taken for granted that a mother would alter her working pattern, or face the double pressure of work and family commitments. This was the case regardless of race or religion.

While many minority ethnic mothers value having a career outside the house and the financial security and stimulation provided by their work, some mothers made a conscious choice not to return to work after having children.

## **Women and employment**

Women in the study felt that they had busy and complicated lives, more so than their mothers at a similar age. They felt they had more choices and access to more technology, yet carried out more tasks and fitted into more roles than ever before.

Childcare services are not considered to be in tune with changing gender roles and the increasing number of working mothers, due to the perceived lack of appropriate, accessible and affordable services. This can inhibit women from participating and progressing in the labour market. Working mothers, particularly those without close family support to rely on, often found it difficult to juggle childcare needs with the needs of their employers.

There were positive reactions to the new extended maternity leave option (from April 2003, working women will be entitled to six months paid maternity leave). Mothers also responded favourably to the news that employers will legally have to consider requests to adopt flexible working practices.

The research identified a need for more practical support to encourage mothers to return to work, or develop their own childminding business. Sure Start was felt to successfully provide this support, in areas where it operates. Women who had used Sure Start generally had very positive experiences of the scheme and felt the emotional and practical support provided was very important for them.

## **Women and childcare**

The research highlighted a need for culturally and religiously sensitive childcare services for Asian and Muslim mothers, this includes employing staff from various ethnic communities, and encouraging minority ethnic mothers to provide childminding services.

More services were required which offer teachings about cultural beliefs, languages, and also the provision of Halal food. There seemed to be an opportunity for more local authorities to encourage local ethnic communities to set up their own childcare services through local authority funding, as demonstrated by Sure Start in Bradford, Leeds and Leicester.

Mothers with younger children (under five years) needed more appropriate one-to-one and small nursery service provision with adequate supervision, and the option to extend the child's stay to full-time day hours, which complement employment hours, including travel, throughout the week.

Those with older children had different needs. There is mainly a large need for the provision of childcare when schools are closed, for example before and after school and school holiday care, as this was not always available in all areas. Parents would welcome alternative childcare to be arranged at schools during teacher training days, and when children are unwell (although mothers usually wish to be with their children when they are very sick).

Within this study, mothers often relied on a combination of formal and informal childcare services.

## Further information

Copies of the full report can be obtained from:

DTI Publications Orderline

ADMAIL 528

LONDON SW1W 8YT

T• 0870 150 2500

F• 0870 150 2333

E• [publications@dti.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:publications@dti.gsi.gov.uk)

Copies of the full report are also available on the Women and Equality Unit website, along with further information about the Unit.

[www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk](http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk)

