

To whom do I turn when I am invisible? The experiences of Kurdish workers who have problems at work?

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Abstract

Little is known about the experiences of Kurdish workers in the UK and even less about how they attempt to resolve any difficulties or problems that arise in the working environment. In part, this is due to academic oversight, but also because Kurdish workers are difficult to identify from statistical data. Indeed, Kurdish identity is generally subsumed under ethnic categorisations that do not distinguish Kurds from other minority ethnic groups – a factor that renders them ‘invisible’ in government statistics. The study explores the influence of identity, community and social networks on workers’ ability to find resolution to problems work with a particular focus on the experience of Kurdish workers in north London. The paper begins with a consideration of the classification of Kurds – an issue that is inextricably linked to the politics of nationalism in the disputed area of Kurdistan. Then follows a brief history of Kurdish migration to the UK and the impact that has had on settlement patterns. The paper will then draw upon interview data where we will hear the experiences of people living and working in this ‘invisible’ community.

Introduction

While there has been a considerable amount of research on ‘visible’ ethnic groups in the UK looking at issues of racism, nationalism, ethnicity, religion and gender, there is much less on ‘non visible’ ethnic minority groups. The history of migration in the UK context has focused on that of non-white migration – where the effect of ‘race’ and racism has been the significant factor in much ethnicity-based research. A consequence of this is that newer migrant communities like Kurds, are under-researched and little is known about the social and economic factors affecting groups of workers in the Kurdish communities (for exceptions see Enneli 2002; Enneli et al. 2005; Jordon and Düvell 2002). Further, official data, like the Census and the Labour Force Survey, renders Kurds ‘invisible’ as they are classified as ‘white’ and while this is sub-divided into various ethnic or national groups, most Kurds are classified as ‘white other’ as there is no specific category for them. Kurds are therefore less visible than other ‘white’ groups such as Irish, Welsh or Eastern Europeans. Moreover, and more politically sensitive, is that survey questions relating to nationality provide Kurds with little option other than to define themselves as Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian, or Syrian. As such, the Kurdish identity is not only subsumed under an ethnic categorisation that does not distinguish from other minority ethnic groups, but it also imposes upon them an unacceptable national identity (Reilly 1991; Vali 1998). As one writer notes, this has led to a situation where ‘not only has Kurdish origin been masked prior to leaving Turkey...it is also hidden from the moment of arrival on foreign soil’ (Laiser 1996: 127).

Overall, most commentators agree that there is little comprehensive statistical data on the Kurdish population in the UK and that which exists is and ‘conflated and confused’ (King et al. 2008). The local authorities of Hackney and Haringey, using anecdotal data, estimate the figures to be around 25,000 and 30,000 respectively, but it is acknowledged that these are just estimates rather than accurate figures. Despite a long period of Kurdish settlement in the UK, local and national authorities are still unable to assess the number of Kurds and are unable to plan service provision accordingly (King et al. 2008). The exclusion of Kurds from the Census and other data sets means that there is no information on issues such as employment, health care, education and political participation. Leaders within the Kurdish communities have thus been

lobbying local and national governments to introduce 'Kurd' as separate ethnic category on the Census in order to rectify this problem. It has now been acknowledged that official data has led to groups like Kurds becoming 'invisible' to the authorities:

The national identity question may also provide some scope for disaggregating ethnic categories such as 'African' or 'Pakistani' or for identifying groups that span states for example Kurdish. One local authority stated that 'National identity data would greatly improve our understanding of the composition of, for example, the 'Other White' ethnic grouping...and, for example, Somalis within the Black African category.' Another consultation respondent commented that 'National Identity may identify significant groups in the UK which have not been recognised effectively in the past, for example, Kurds. [This information] could provide a rich dataset to complement country of birth since it is how people view themselves rather than a fact e.g. a person born in Turkey might rather write in Kurdish than Turkish or British. (Office for National Statistics 2008: 14)

A consequence of the lack of data is that it has an impact on the information, advice and guidance provided by national and local governments, as well as voluntary sector organisations. The communities have responded to this lack of assistance by setting up community organisations to provide Kurds with support and advice, but little is known about how these operate in the context of support for work related issues. This paper considers the role that different organisations (formal and informal) play in promoting social inclusion, exploring whether these contribute to the collective empowerment and/or individual representation of workers. Instead of assuming pre-existing communities, the research explores how Kurdish workers construct notions of community. The role of age, class, gender, 'race', beliefs and values in articulating different, stable and fluctuating forms of community is explored and we examine how Kurdish workers construct commonality and community in the process of obtaining support for problems at work through their lived experience. Before exploring our findings we provide a brief explanation of the causes of Kurdish migration to the UK and the establishment of local communities in north London.

Kurdish migration and the development of communities and social networks in the UK

Over 30 million Kurds live in Kurdistan under the national jurisdictions of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, where these nations have denied Kurds their identity, culture, homeland and own political representation by the force of arms (Vali 1998). The combination of authoritarian, nationalistic and/or religious ideology and state power in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria has led to Kurdish opposition in these states which has developed differently in response to the nationalisms it has opposed. A consequence has been a forced migration, leading many Kurds to seek asylum in countries around the world (van Bruinessen 1999). People from the disputed territory of Kurdistan have been arriving in the UK since the 1950s (Dick 2002), many of them settling in the north London boroughs of Hackney and Haringey. The majority who have arrived in the UK since the late 1980s are from northern Kurdistan (Turkish occupied Kurdistan) and have migrated as a result of the war between the Kurdish workers party (PKK) and the Turkish state.

Today, Hackney and Haringey in north London have become the main areas for expatriate Kurds from northern Kurdistan and there is a large Kurdish community living, working and socialising in these north London boroughs. The early migrations of Kurds from Maras arrived

in Hackney and established restaurants and supermarkets in this area because of the low rent and cheap housing, resulting in later waves of migrants choosing to settle where they had kinship links. Furthermore when Kurdish migrants from northern Kurdistan first arrived in the UK, they largely settled within the Turkish Cypriot communities of north London. Turkish Cypriots arrived in the UK in the 1940s first as economic migrants and later in the 1960s as a result of the ethnic conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots (for background on this see Enneli et al. 2005; King and Bridal 1982; Thomson et al. 2006). This ‘integration’ between the Turkish Cypriots and Kurds in the UK was as a result of the fact that both communities were able to speak Turkish. Consequently, Turks and Kurds established a number of joint institutions, which tended to be left-leaning or Turkish-oriented. However, in recent years, due to the Kurdish political struggle for being recognised in Turkey, the growth and establishment of the Kurdish community in London, Kurds have begun to assert their own particular identity and independence. Today, in the UK, we can see a transformation – at least within the communities themselves – of the situation where Turks and Kurds were collectively referred to as ‘Turkish speaking communities’ to a situation where the communities have reorganised into more distinctive Kurdish and Turkish communities.

All along the local high streets that follow the A10 through Hackney and Haringey are Kurdish shops and businesses – cafes, coffee shops, groceries, bakeries, fruit and vegetable stores, hairdressers, pool halls, flower shops and the ubiquitous kebab shops. Walking down these streets it is almost possible to imagine yourself in a different country as you listen to the languages and the hustle and bustle of this distinct community. As Enneli et al have noted; ‘the Turkish speaking community is probably one of the most self-sufficient communities in London with half a dozen local community-based newspapers, together with Turkish [and Kurdish] television channels and countless digital radio channels (Enneli et al. 2005: viii). The community’s self-sufficiency also extends to its social and cultural activities, evidenced from the number of locally run community organisations. The first Kurdish community centre was established in 1982 in Haringey and, in Hackney, Kurdish and Turkish refugees established their first community centre, Halkevi, in 1984. As a result of the second wave of Kurdish refugees, which started in 1983 when the war against Kurds in Turkey and in northern Kurdistan began, this changed the structure of Halkevi from a Turkish community centre to Kurdish and Turkish community centre and ‘the [Kurdish] identity become more dominant’ (Keles 2006). Halkevi, the Kurdish Advice Centre (established since 1988) and Kurdish community Centre (established since 1982) are the three most high profile organisations in Hackney and Haringey that provide support for Kurdish and Turkish refugees who have fled oppression. In addition, there are growing numbers of Kurdish housing associations, cultural centres, and women’s organisations providing a wide range of advice and services.

However, behind the façade of this seemingly self-sufficient and business-like community, lies considerably poverty, which is often found in refugee communities. Integration into the wider London communities is problematic for many within the community as a result of lack of English language skills. The inability to speak English (and a lack of education and relevant skills) means that unemployment is high and those workers who are employed tend to work within the ‘ethnic enclave’ for long hours and low wages. In general, employment among women is very low, although women can be found working in restaurant kitchens or family businesses. Employment is higher among young educated women who are employed in places such banks, solicitors, schools and retail – often in workplaces outside the local communities. It is these

different experiences of work, and in particular, how workers deal with problems at work that we consider in this paper.

Methods and data collection

This is an ongoing 3-year Economic and Social Research Council funded research project, which draws on data from the first 18 months of research from over 50 in-depth face-to-face interviews with key respondents and individual Kurdish workers. The key respondents include people working in third sector organisations such as Law Centres and other advice and advocacy organisations like Citizens Advice, local solicitors, community organisations; faith groups and local council representatives. The interviews with workers (18 male and 10 female) were with people from different workplaces and sectors, some of whom are unionised, the majority of who were not and from different age groups. In addition we have conducted three focus groups in local community centres. The research focused on the places workers turn for help or advice and what strategies they developed to solve their problems. We were also interested in understanding how social networks (family, friends, ethnic, political and religious) were used to help people to solve their difficulties at work

In an attempt to understand social networks in some detail, and the context in which people live their lives, the research focuses on the London boroughs of Hackney and Haringey, where there is a large Kurdish population. Although not the largest minority ethnic groups in the area Kurds do represent a significant under-researched ethnic group in this locality. In addition, trade union membership among Kurdish workers is relatively unknown or undocumented, although anecdotal evidence from unions suggests that very few are working in unionised workplaces. For example, the majority of Kurds tend to work within the local community, employed in small businesses and in food processing factories, places where employment procedures and practices can be informal or non-existent. In these circumstances, workers with problems may find it hard to get the help and support they need. The in-depth interviews were designed to elicit the processes workers adopted when they were faced with difficulties at work and the mechanisms they used in an attempt to resolve them.

Difficulties at work: what types of problems?

It is already known from other research that workplace problems among British workers are widespread. For example, in 2001, the British Worker Representation and Participation (BWRP) survey found 38 per cent of respondents had problems at work (Gospel and Willman 2003: 157) and other surveys suggest the figures are even higher: in one study, 49 per cent reported that they had experienced one of ten problems cited (Pollert and Charlwood 2008: 8) and in another, 42 per cent (Casebourne et al. 2006: 98). It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the most vulnerable workers, those in precarious employment, those without English language skills and those who do not have recourse to trade union representation, may have more difficulties in getting a resolution to workplace problems. Many Kurdish workers fall into these categories, but in addition, they may also have problems relating to their immigration status, which increases their vulnerability. Many first generation Kurds are refugees or asylum seekers are exposed to greater exploitation in the labour market and this is even more pronounced for those who are undocumented:

Interviewer: You said that you are undocumented, but working here. What kind of problems are you facing?

A lot of problems. I did not work for 6 months after the fish and chips place. This was a big problem. Then my friends found me this place. For example if there is problem here and if you are undocumented maybe you can only mention this problem one time to sort it out, but if you are documented you can always defend your right. You have the fear of being unemployed. When I was without job for 6 months it was too difficult. If you are not working is too difficult to live here. (H37, Agit, Kurdish male, chef)

However, despite the greater levels of fear for undocumented workers, our findings suggest that many Kurdish workers who were documented were also experiencing high levels of exploitation, particularly in relation to long hours and lack of paid holidays (or in some cases no holiday at all). For example, Aram, a 25-year old first generation restaurant worker explained what it was like in his workplace:

Some of the problems at work are about the long working hours...in these kinds of jobs, holidays and vacations are very limited. Because there is no system, you need to work all the time. So you work all the time. (H33, Aram, Kurdish male, restaurant worker)

Young Kurds like Aram, who have at least managed to find employment, tend to be working in either catering or the retail trade mainly in local Kurdish or Turkish businesses. For many, families, friends and kinship networks within the community are the sole source of employment and this can create even greater levels of exploitation. Some interviewees reported how they were working between 60 and 80 hours a week, without any formal employment contracts. Ciya, a baker, reported how he works 68 hours a week for a total of £250 and that a colleague had worked solidly for 7 days a week for 8 years without any leave. As another worker explained, his life could be summarised in three words: 'working, eating and sleeping'. The problems faced by these workers are often amplified by working within the community, as Rojan explains:

When I joined the Kurdish company, through my relatives and friends, they told me, asked me to be IT manager, but the trouble is, when you start for a Kurdish company, unfortunately they don't have any kind of formal structure. No proper hierarchy there, no job description properly done, no contract is there... This is the main problem working for a Kurdish company. I'm not trying to say every Kurdish company is like that, but most of Kurdish companies I know don't have the kind of policies, like the health and safety policy, emergency policy or job contracts, job descriptions, hierarchies, managers, supervisors. They don't exist in Kurdish working environments. (H25, Rojan, Kurdish male, IT manager)

Second generation Kurds, who have grown up and who are socialised and educated in the UK, and who have graduated with qualifications, are often able to find more skilled and professional employment outside of the 'ethnic enclave'. These workers may also be confronted with difficulties at work, but the issues they face at work are often of a different type. For example, Ezdan, has been working as a criminal solicitor for 5 years, talked about how he faced prejudice as a Kurd, that he felt had hindered his promotion:

I would consider myself an experienced advocate in court and to get to that position has been very difficult, it's not been easy. The main difficulty that I have is that I'm the only ethnic person in my firm. So the main difficulty that I have is competitiveness and the way people see

me. I've not experienced any racism, I wouldn't say it's racism, but I have experienced people getting preference over me. And it's not explained by way of having a higher education or a better degree classification or a better command of the work, that's not the basis. So therefore, one can only conclude that there is some sort of prejudice underlying what's going on. (H23, Ezdan Kurdish male, solicitor)

Although Ezdan claims not to have experienced racism, an analysis of his transcript reveals a number of references to differential treatment. He notes how he is the only minority ethnic employee and that this causes difficulties due to the way he is perceived and that this has affected his chances of promotion. In the discourse used by Ezdan he is searching for an explanation of his 'prejudice' he face, but appears reluctant to describe it as racism. We were cautious in our questioning of workers not to raise the issues of discrimination or racism, but we were interested to listen to how people described their own experiences of differential treatment at work. A number of other interviewees were cautious about describing the behaviour of colleagues as discrimination or racism. Zozan, a 24 year-old operations consultant working for a security company said:

So yeah, inevitably, or indirectly, those things do get in the way, your culture, where you're from, your ethnicity, definitely. And where I worked, the managers and people at the senior levels were pretty much British citizens, like English people rather than other ethnic minorities... Discrimination, I don't - I wasn't directly discriminated, but like I said, from what I explained previously, without realising, you might be facing discrimination without the person maybe not having the intentions to discriminate you. But because of their own beliefs and their ignorance, they may be discriminating me, if that makes sense. (H24, Zozan, Kurdish female, operations co-ordinator)

When asked about any difficulties she had faced at work, Anik, who worked in a chemist shop began the interview by saying:

I don't think I experienced any racial discrimination, but when I first started my work, I was paid a really low amount like £5.15. I don't know why but it was, I think when I started it should have been £5.35 and I knew that but because I needed the job I accepted it...I didn't think it was racial, to do with me not being British [note: all other employees were paid £5.35]. I think it was because it's just they just look for the cheap labour and because I accepted it. I think it was my fault for not knowing how much the minimum wage was. (H26, Anik, Kurdish female, retail worker)

In these accounts, workers, unprompted, made similar comments about racial discrimination, but stopped short of applying the term to the differential treatment they experienced. There are a number of explanations that perhaps explain the apparent contradiction in the statements. The first may relate to the understanding and experiences of the attempted destruction of the Kurdish culture by the nations occupying Kurdistan. Many Kurds compare their lives in the UK with that of their homeland (Keles 2007) where brutal 'ethnic cleansing' has destroyed thousands of lives and communities and prevented Kurds from even speaking their own languages. This open and direct discrimination by the State and nationalist groups is more readily or definitively described as racism. Racism, in the context described above, then becomes a definitional or discourse issue. It is clear from the descriptions given by workers that they are experiencing discrimination as a result of their ethnicity, but to them the label 'racism' perhaps means something different – something more than the systemic disadvantage they have described above.

In this section we have only been able to provide a brief account of the issues raised by some interviewees about the problems they have experienced at work, but other stories are remarkably similar. The issues of low pay, long hours, denial of holidays and withholding or non-payment of wages, are those that are most common. The next section will look at how workers have attempted to extricate themselves from the unfortunate situations in which they find themselves.

To whom do workers turn?

Other research has found that un-unionised workers (and indeed many unionised workers) find it extremely difficult to find a satisfactory resolution to problems at work (Pollert 2007; Pollert and Charlwood 2008). Similarly, the most vulnerable of the Kurdish worker interviewees reported that there was simply no mechanism for resolving workplace difficulties and that they did not know where to seek advice. In these circumstances, although many individuals raised complaints with their bosses, they were often given little options, either leave or put up with the situation:

We work at restaurants or off licences. In these sectors there is not such a complaint procedure. If you confront a problem at these workplaces, you have to solve it alone. There is not any institution or union help you. Either you solve the problems or you leave there. (HFG1, Dijwar Kurdish male, restaurant worker)

The relationships between workers and family members makes dealing with problems even more difficult as greater pressure is applied to work extra hours or cover for people who are sick or on leave. One interviewee, Shilan, a young woman, was working as a waitress in her brother's business and was desperate to find another job outside the community. As she explained, 'I had to do it because it is my brother's and it is like a family business'. Rojan, also a young worker talked of how younger and more educated members of the community were resisting working in family run firms:

Most of the Kurdish people I know they say proudly and very firmly they say 'I will never ever work for my close relatives, never, ever!' They say no, every single time and [there are] lots of problems. At the end of the day you just ruin the relationship. (H25, Rojan, Kurdish male, IT manager)

While it is the case that many Kurdish people work in these small firms, others are working outside of the community and in business where there are no kinship relationships. We were interested to explore what workers in these circumstances did when they had serious problems at work. Key respondents from the local Law Centre, Citizens Advice and local solicitors were able to provide data on the ethnicity of their clients. Hackney Law Centre, a charity providing legal advice to members of the local community for the last 30 years, reported that they had very few employment enquiries from Kurdish (or Turkish) workers. Similarly, the Citizens Advice office in Hackney did not provide any employment advice, and workers in Hackney were directed to the CAB in nearby Tower Hamlets, who held the employment advice contract from the Legal Services Commission. However, this CAB also reported few enquires from Kurdish workers. One local solicitor, who worked for a large national firm, however, explained that they actively marketed their employment services to the local Kurdish community, advertising in the local Kurdish press and using Kurdish interpreters to pass on information about the practice:

We also have a number of interpreters who are Kurdish and they refer work to us as well, because they've got a large database of potential clients. And the Kurdish community are pretty tight knit and they don't like necessarily disclosing too much information to anyone apart from themselves. (H11, local solicitor)

Compared to our other interviewees in the black Caribbean communities of Lambeth and the South Asian communities of Ealing – part of the wider ESRC research project – Kurdish workers appear more likely respond that they were likely to turn to solicitors for assistance with work related matters, and this was particularly the case among younger workers:

But what it seems to me is that the older generation seems to be more reluctant to take it too far. The younger generation wants to take it further. So there are elements of honour and also a question of trying to take maybe more of a sanguine or more of a realistic viewpoint by the older generation. (H11, local solicitor)

The expectation that workers could use solicitors for employment advice is probably due to the lower unionisation rates among Kurds, but also reflects the fact that there is little employment advice provision available within the local community (see Holgate et al. 2009a; 2009b for further information). Although most of our interviewees were aware of the CAB, there was a reluctance to use the services – either because it was so difficult to access advice due to long queues, or it was thought the advice available was limited. There was an expectation that solicitors may be a useful source of help and advice, yet few had actually approach solicitors, nor knew how the system worked. Solicitors are only able to provide limited advice for those on low or without income and legal aid funding is only available for initial advice and case preparation and is not available for representation at employment tribunal. If a case needs to go to a hearing, then clients are left to represent themselves, which can be daunting, particularly as employers, are likely to have solicitors or barristers to present their case. Yet, the fact that solicitors advertise in local Kurdish newspapers and make it known that they have Kurdish interpreters, may appear to make the advice here more accessible.

At the start of the research we expected that Kurdish community organisations would perhaps be an important resource for workers with problems at work. Both Hackney and neighbouring Haringey have a number of well-organised and well-funded Kurdish/Turkish/Cypriot community centres. With around 10-15 organisations – the largest run weekly advice services as well as daily social and cultural activities. The community centres play an important role for Kurds, both first and second generation and many in the community attend either daily or at least once a week. In some case, the use is purely instrumental:

When we first came here we did not speak English. If you had the problem you would go to community centre. If you wanted help you can go to community centre. Over the weekend where I was? I was in community centre. And especially our community centre provides different activities. Like the language school, teaching Kurdish at GCSE level courses. They provide translations. They provide help to the elderly. They provide help to the mentally disabled. The list goes on. I would use my community centres more than I would use Citizen Advice bureau or Law Centre, because in the community centres we have friends who are lawyers, friends working in different positions. So it's a big resource actually to tap in to. I do use it, yes. (H27, Civan, Kurdish male, housing officer)

In other cases, the centres are a repository of Kurdish identity, helping to retain links back to the homeland, but they also encourage the expression of Kurdish culture and language, which has been forcibly suppressed over decades:

Kurdish community organisations? They are very important, they are definitely very important. Keeping the identity alive, the Kurdish identity and forwarding that identity to the new generation by creating schools, education and all this. And in our case of Diaspora community organisations, they have multi duty rather than one. It's not only to keep the community alive, but also because we don't have a united government back in homeland, our community organisations they are acting as branches of government. As institutions that would duplicate and regenerate the sense of identity and the amount of communication and unification of the Kurdish identity that you see in the Diaspora, you don't see it back home. (H34, Kurdish male, housing officer)

Given the importance of the community centres to many in the Kurdish communities, it was expected that workers might turn to them for help or advice when facing problems at work. Yet despite many positive associations with community organisations, most interviewees felt that they would not use the centres for employment related matters. Interviewees talked about the using advice services for issues of immigration, housing, language etc, but not employment. Mostly this was due to the lack of specialist employment advisors in the advice surgeries, but there was also reluctance among workers to discuss what they considered to be the 'private issue' of employment in these public spaces (despite the surgeries being conducted confidentially and in closed offices). While immigration and language are perceived as common or collective matters, the same does not seem to apply in relation to employment. The kinship nature of much of the employment among Kurds is no doubt a factor in this regard. Workers and bosses are members of the same communities and all use the community centres as social and cultural centres. In these tight social networks where people are well known to each other, it is understandable that there is caution about raising complaints against other people within the community. A second factor is that issues of low pay, long hours, lack of contract, denial of holiday, or in fact, any statutory rights, are so common that they have become normalised. As was noted earlier, in these circumstances, and as a result of the lack of opportunity for different types of employment, workers do not seek to resolve their problems and either leave or 'put up' with the situation for as long as it is tolerable.

We did, however, find that there was one formal mechanism within the Kurdish communities for dealing with some of the more serious employment related problems and it was here that the community centres were able to play a role in helping to resolve difficulties between members of the same community. The director of one community organisation explained how a 'Peace Committee' was established, made up of respected elderly men and women who were elected by members of the community centre. As he explained, this committee, which had considerable standing in the community, would be called on to arbitrate and its decisions were expected to be binding on the parties involved (although, of course, had no enforcement in law):

What they will do, they will just call the business owner, because the naming and shaming is a big issue [in the community], so this business owner will come over and they will say 'look this person says that he works for you and you do not pay him, why is that?' [He might say] 'Ok, he worked but he left early'. [The Peace Committee] they will find a consensus. So they will either make him pay, they will ask him to pay all the money he owes, or if the person that works for him has not fulfilled his promises, if he hasn't worked for four

weeks, if he worked only for two and a half weeks, he will get two and a half weeks' pay. (H15, Kurdish male, Director of Halkevi, Kurdish community organisation)

This dispute resolution procedure is only for the most serious of cases and open to those Kurdish workers working for Kurdish employers. It is also subject to the social network constraints mentioned above, meaning that many may be reluctant to avail themselves of the service.

Concluding remarks

Our aim in this paper has been to consider how an individual's identity and community involvement impacts upon the way they respond to employment related problems. The focus on the Kurdish communities of north London has allowed an exploration of a community with strong social networks where many work within the local ethnic based businesses. Issues of belonging, class, gender, kinship and migration status, each have a particular influence on the way individuals seek to deal with the situations in which they find themselves. But the lack of official data on the Kurdish population in the UK has meant that there is little understanding of Kurdish labour market activity and in particular the problems within work. The Kurdish population of north London, is predominantly from northern Kurdistan is generally categorised as 'Turkish' or 'white other' and as such, when Kurds are included in research accounts they tend to be collectively grouped with Turkish and Turkish Cypriot communities, thus denying the distinct social, political and cultural identity of the Kurdish people. A consequence of this is, in effect, to render the Kurdish communities invisible. Yet, conversely, it also serves to reinforce a strong collective consciousness.

The concept of a Kurdish community to which all Kurds belong, built around experience of oppression and denial of cultural expression, was deeply felt amongst interviewees. Local Kurdish community centres have nurtured the notion of belonging, becoming repositories of Kurdish history, politics, current affairs and cultural identity. However, these strong local community ties are the same social, familial and kinship networks that operate to provide workers with jobs. A consequence is that some workers are reluctant to use community resources as a means of advice and support for work-related problems. Others however, called for investment in professionally trained advisors to be located in community centres, arguing that 'mainstream' advice services were inaccessible for those who did not speak English. The 'invisibility' of Kurds to national and local bodies, also leads to a situation where employment advice is unavailable in Kurdish languages. Although this is not an issue for most second generation Kurds, first generation migrants who speak little or no English, are not only unaware of their employment rights, but are also unable to access the information that exists on government websites (Pollert 2005). Further, the difficulty of access to interpreting services and the lack of ESOL classes at local institutions hinders rather than fosters an individual initiative to deal with problems. Yet, it was more than an issue of language that prevented these workers from using CABx and Law Centres, there were also issues of trust and understanding. Interviewees reported how they felt more 'comfortable' within their own community where their problems were more readily understood, but that advice needs to be provided by professional employment advisors, rather than by members of the community centres.

The research has recorded cases of super-exploitation and systemic disadvantage among Kurdish workers, particularly among those who are undocumented. The refusal of the government to allow refugees to work inevitably contributes to this situation as asylum seekers are forced into 'illegal' working in order to avoid becoming destitute (Sargeant and Forna 2001). Many interviewees who worked without contracts, were forced to work long hours and paid below the minimum wage, had effectively normalised these bad work practices. Poor employment conditions were so common among Kurds that to complain to outside bodies seemed almost irrelevant. While workers did raise concerns with their bosses, they seldom were in a position to force a resolution to their problems. In some cases, issues were internalised to the extent that workers blamed themselves for the way they were treated. As Anik, the young female retail worker explained; 'I think it was my fault for not knowing how much the minimum wage was.'

Overall, the workers we have interviewed so far have found little resolution to their problems at work. While some younger workers think that solicitors may be able to assist, these views are based on assumptions rather than a real understanding of their legal rights in terms of employment. There was also a strong feeling that unions ought to do more to recruit and organise within the community, again using the community centres as a resource. However, small businesses have seldom been a priority for trade unions. Even if unions were minded to put resources into this area, the disparate nature of small retail establishments and restaurants and the transient nature of the workforce means they are not the easiest workplaces to organise. Yet a community-unionism based approach modelled on the migrant workers centres in the UK, maybe an approach that could work in these circumstances. For example, Fine (2005a: 155) argues that in community-based unions 'forms of identity such as race, ethnicity and gender stand in for craft or industry as the principal means of recruitment and strongest bounds between workers.' For Kurds, for whom the community has great importance, the community centres could become an essential place in which to organise. Fine as noted that unionisation campaigns have been most successful where they have taken account of the context of individuals' lives as workers and as members of wider society (Fine 2005b). In the context of the Kurdish communities, many people already have a sense of belonging to a wider community and this is one of the necessary prerequisites for collective mobilisation (Kelly 1998). This, combined with the positive attitudes to unionisation, perhaps provides an opportunity for unions to attempt new approaches to organising vulnerable workers in marginalised communities.

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