The mental health support experiences of black women, born outside of the UK, in Leeds

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Aims

This research was undertaken by researchers at Leeds Beckett University and commissioned by Touchstone, a voluntary sector organisation based in Leeds, which provides mental health and wellbeing services to BAME communities. The project's aim was to investigate the extent to which the activities of voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) might help improve the mental health and wellbeing of black women born overseas.

Methodology

Three focus groups were held with a total of 20 black migrant women with lived experience of mental health issues; and ten people were interviewed who worked or volunteered with six organisations supporting black women born outside the UK.

Key issues

Stigma

The research identified different views regarding mental health issues in the black migrant community. On one hand, it’s said that issues can be ignored due to the perceptions, myths and stigma and as a result, there is little or no conversation in the community. On the other hand, the report also outlines acceptance and conversation about the issues within the black community in both the UK and Africa. Gendered differences were highlighted, with a perception that women were more likely both to discuss their problems and have opportunities to do so.

The research suggested that the perceptions of mental health in the black migrant community may conflict with the concept presented by UK health service providers. Participants talked about the unfamiliarity of the concept of mental health in some contexts, and possible associations between mental illness and extreme behaviour. It was also suggested that community members may not be familiar with the vocabulary used by UK health services about mental health.

Risk factors

Several factors potentially contributing to mental health issues

among black women from outside the UK were identified, such as isolation, cultural differences, language, the asylum process, poverty, and trauma from past experiences. Gender dynamics and domestic abuse were also found to be major triggers for mental health difficulties.

Barriers to accessing mental health services

These included not being accustomed to or having the vocabulary for seeking help with mental health, a lack of awareness of rights, fear of accessing services and the consequences of disclosure, perceptions of professionals' attitudes, and anticipated prescription costs. A major barrier was not acknowledging the problem, or not being accustomed to approaching services for help, partly linked to the issue of stigma. It was suggested that women in particular may not prioritise their need for support.

Protective factors

The authors suggest that making connections with people is an important means of protecting against mental health difficulties. Participants identified a number of ways that this can happen, including linking with faith groups, developing trusted relationships for example with befrienders, and participating in activities such as volunteering. Being active was also seen as a protective factor.

Voluntary and community sector support

Both mental health and more general practical support provided by VCOs was seen as critical, with key factors in its success

including:

- strong connections with the communities they support, with an emphasis on the importance of trust
- taking a peer support approach
- the accessibility and approachability of their services
- the signposting and practical support they offer.

Recommendations

The study makes several recommendations:

- Promote understanding of mental health issues, provide support at critical points, and provide opportunities to learn English, including relevant vocabulary on this topic.
- Encourage collaborative work between GPs, VCOs and mental health services, as well as improving health service awareness of issues for black women.
- Support community led activities to aid connection and relationship-building.
- Support VCOs' work in addressing mental health issues in this community with appropriate models of funding.

Web Link
https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/2552/
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