

Armenians: an invisible ethnicity?

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The *Centre for Armenian Information and Advice (CAIA)* is the principal focus for the welfare and educational needs of over 18,000 Armenians scattered across London. It seeks to enhance the quality of life for disadvantaged members of the Armenian community in London, specifically those in poverty and isolation, and supports their diverse needs through the provision of welfare, educational and cultural services at a welcoming Centre for all Armenians. It is a refugee-led organization, funded by a combination of charitable, local authority and, more recently, central government money. The impetus of its founding comes from the long history of persecution and struggle for survival Armenians have experienced over the centuries. We have no specific funding for women's work, but the majority of our service users are women.

Established in 1986, CAIA's services include information, advice and casework, an award-winning playgroup, day-care for frail senior citizens, training, reference materials, translations, various publication initiatives such as researches, community directories and a free, bi-lingual newsletter which reaches 3,000 Armenian homes four times a year. In 1994/95 it successfully fund-raised to purchase and establish the *Hayashen Community Centre* owing to the enthusiastic support of the Armenian community and major donations from Trusts such as the *City Parochial Foundation, Tudor Trust, Barings Foundation, St. Sarkis Trust* and others. The *Hayashen Project* won a Commendation award from the prestigious '*The Times/Touche Ross Community Enterprise Awards* in 1995/96'. In 1998 CAIA was given *Trust for London* award for 'committed service to the community and in acknowledgement of outstanding achievement'. CAIA has a subscription-paying membership of over 350 members, which annually elects a seven-member Management Committee to administer its affairs. The organization presently employs five full-time and one part-time staff member, as well as several sessional staff, and relies on many volunteers who all contribute towards the various services.

CAIA lists its top three aims as: supporting the welfare needs of the disadvantaged members of the Armenian community through counselling, translation and information services, which help integration into society; meeting the needs of refugees from reception to help with immigration, housing, health and welfare rights; and satisfying the special needs of the unemployed, senior citizens, women, youth and children with practical training, housing, advice, social, educational and cultural activities. It also seeks to promote understanding of the Armenian

heritage amongst the Armenian community and to promote understanding of Armenian history and culture among the wider public.

Armenians are one of Britain's oldest refugee communities. They have sought asylum in Britain since 1915, when the Ottoman government wiped out half the Armenian race. Today, Armenian people are still fleeing from persecution in Turkey, the former Soviet Union and other troubled parts of the Middle East such as Iran, Iraq, and Jerusalem. The problems of newly arrived refugees are still the same: arriving alone, homeless and penniless, they are isolated and so have little or no opportunity to prepare for their new lives. They have often suffered the loss of family and friends and face an uncertain future in a foreign land, with an unfamiliar language.

All Armenians living outside Armenia and considering themselves Armenian, (irrespective of their present national status or years of residence in a particular country, such as Britain, Iran, Lebanon, Cyprus, Iraq, etc.) share the common heritage of being displaced or in exile. This is because Armenian history is one of endless persecution, massacres, invasions, emigration and as such they carry with them their family suffering, and the personal insecurities of being foreigners with the problems of adjusting to different societies. Present-day Armenian asylum-seekers fleeing from the former Soviet Union or from the Middle East face a variety of complex problems including reception, settlement and integration in Britain. Specifically, they often do not have the information or the language skills to access basic statutory services.

Armenians live and work in the same economic, political, cultural and social climate as other refugee and small ethnic minority communities in Britain. This means that our community is not immune to the various challenges, insecurities and problems facing these communities such as social exclusion, struggles for equal access to public services, economic integration – without loss of cultural/national identity. However, one specific problem Armenians face in comparison with other minority ethnic communities is that they are 'invisible'. This is because Armenians as an ethnic group are not identified under OPCS census information because they arrive from different countries, such as the former Soviet Union or the Middle East (similar to Kurds or Roma people). Therefore local authorities, hospitals and GPs often record their nationalities as either British (for those taking British nationality) or from their country of birth. Consequently, their specific social and cultural needs are not generally recognized or addressed by the statutory or voluntary sector. This can intensify their isolation, anxiety or mental anguish, lead to deteriorations in health, a lack of self-esteem and confidence and, in the case of one Armenian woman refugee, suicide.

A survey of the needs of the Armenian community in London conducted by the CAIA in 1988 revealed linguistic and cultural diversity, diversity regarding the countries they had fled, in their levels of education, living conditions, health, class and

economic position, experience of discrimination and in their attitudes, levels of integration and participation in the social/economic or cultural life of Britain. The majority did not access local authority or other statutory services and they had varying expectations of the Armenian community, church and cultural societies and from the host society/indigenous population. It confirmed that Armenians live predominantly in the outer London Boroughs of Ealing, Hounslow and Brent.

It showed that new Armenian refugees continued to arrive, most notably after the break up of the Soviet Union, and because of the continuous tensions in the Middle East. It documented the weakening of traditional forms of social relations and structures as a result of the impact of the assimilation process: for example, breakdown of the extended family, inter-generational tensions, the rise in mixed marriages, the inability of the church and other traditional Armenian organization to operate as before in the Middle East or their country of origin, and the personal/cultural tension of accommodating dual-identities.

The Armenian community is not helped by the continued denial of the Armenian Genocide by the Turkish government and NATO allies which resulted in the murder of one and half million Armenians in 1915, the occupation of Western Armenia (today's eastern Turkey) and the forced deportation/dispersal of the survivors. The most recent example of this denial was the exclusion of Armenians from the first National Holocaust Remembrance Day events in January 2001. The impact of the establishment of an independent Armenia is too early to be fully assessed as it struggles to overcome years of social, political and economic mismanagement as well as the catastrophic earthquake of 1988. The situation has been further exasperated by the unresolved dispute over the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabagh with Azerbaijan and the economic blockade imposed by Turkey soon after Armenia's independence in 1991.

For refugee women, the break-up of the extended family on arriving in Britain puts pressure on them as their traditional support structure no longer functions. This occurs because members of the extended family are actually absent or because houses are generally too small in London, and because of poverty, the vastness of London and related travel problems. Many women are confused by the complexity and lack of information about statutory provisions, such as registering with a GP, putting their children into school, or obtaining welfare benefits. They tend to mistrust 'authorities', which makes approaching or complaining about council/public or other services very daunting. Not being allowed to work in the first 6 months of their arrival in the UK means they become dependent on welfare and charitable/practical support. They live in very poor accommodation such as hostels, bed & breakfast hotels, flats in high-rise blocks in the most deprived parts of London or outside since the introduction of the 1999 Immigration & Asylum Act. Many feel culturally alienated and isolated. Armenian is only spoken by Armenians and the general ignorance of public workers, such as teachers, council staff, GPs etc. of who Armenians are and why they are in the UK confounds this problem.

Our advisory services deal with problems of poverty, housing, access to public services, debts, immigration, family disputes, etc. and most of our service users are women. We have a Carers Project, funded by the council in Ealing (and the majority of Carers are women who look after aged partners/members of the family), and a Health Advocacy Project that assists isolated elderly women who experience loneliness. The majority of senior citizens attending our 'elderly's club' are women. The users of bus provision are mainly elderly women, frail and disabled who have transport problems. Almost all of our clients have language problems even though many are bilingual (speaking Armenian, as well as the language of the host country they are fleeing to) and our bilingual playgroup was established in July 1987 primarily on the initiative of women and continues to serve their needs.

CAIA serves a primarily female constituency, though it only occasionally actually sets up programmes to focus on female needs. The very nature of CAIA, the way it is set up, already does this and therefore we see no need to have specific women's programmes. Women are at the centre of what we do and their needs are integrated into the whole organization, not a side issue.

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400085

anti-trafficking legislation: protection or deportation?

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In November 2002, under the guise of protecting women from violence and exploitation, new legislation against trafficking was introduced by the UK government as part of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill. Yet experience has shown that anti-trafficking legislation and initiatives are most often used to deport women. Feminists have either initiated or supported such moves, refusing to admit their effect on the women they are supposed to protect.

The police and immigration raids in Soho, London, last year on over 50 flats, graphically illustrate this. Over 60 asylum seekers and immigrant sex workers were