

Hidden Voices.

Including ethnic minority women in policy-making.

March 2011

Ethnic minority women's organisations have a vital role to play in efforts to build a just society in the UK; they act as advocates for marginalised communities, and ensure policy-makers have access to their views – and thus can improve the quality and effectiveness of services. This briefing explores how BME women's groups could work with decision makers to tackle poverty.

Introduction

Oxfam knows that ethnic minority women's organisations are proud, persistent, and passionate. Activists, members of management committees, staff, and volunteers bring a range of commitment, knowledge, and skills. They know their community and the women they work with, and the issues particular to both. This knowledge is vital to their organisations' success. And, using it, they achieve results.

Building on this knowledge, Oxfam has commissioned interviews with BME women's organisations and regional and national policy officers from local authorities and government departments, to find out more about the barriers and opportunities they face in working together. These interviews, and further desk research, inform this briefing – which provides practical guidance to both groups and decision makers, on how to work more effectively together to tackle poverty and strengthen the BME women's sector.

Summary of key findings

1. The vital role of ethnic minority women's organisations

Ethnic minority women's organisations know and understand their communities and the women they work with. They work with women in need who have little or no other support and tackle the deep disadvantage at the intersection of race and

gender. They act as advocates for, and can guarantee policy-makers access to, one of the most marginalised and under-represented groups in the UK.

2. Threat posed by public spending cuts

Public spending cuts could have a negative and long-lasting effect on the ethnic minority women's sector. Significant concern was expressed about the near future, when many grants and funded projects are due to end. If these groups and services are weakened or lost, so is the voice of this already under-represented sector.

3. Opportunities presented by the new policy context

The government's drive to give local areas more decision-making power could work to the advantage of ethnic minority women's organisations. But can these organisations find the skills, money, and knowledge that will enable them to contribute their expertise?

4. Head to head: policy and practice

The groups and policy makers interviewed also made recommendations to each other. Both sides saw the new, holistic approach to equality, the new Equalities Act, and Public Sector Equality Duty, as key tools in holding local decision makers to account in ensuring that new policy agendas both benefit and empower ethnic minority women.

CASE STUDY: THE WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY FORUM

The Women's Solidarity Forum was set up by participants of Oxfam's Routes to Solidarity Project to increase the visibility of BME women and their organisations in policy making, and to influence decisions and practices which affect the lives of BME women. Since forming, the Forum has gone from strength to strength. They have developed a Charter for BME Women's Participation, hosted events with decision makers, published position papers and articles, run workshops at conferences and spoken to the media – all to raise awareness of the multiple discrimination and inequality experienced by BME women.

Key findings – the detail

1. The vital role of ethnic minority women's organisations

Ethnic minority women's organisations work with women who have little or no other support, and tackle the deep disadvantage at the intersection of race and gender. They provide safe, supportive environments to vulnerable women, deliver some services directly to them, and can signpost women to mainstream services. The organisations help to sustain cultural identities and improve health and wellbeing, enabling women from ethnic communities to take control of their lives.

The organisations directly provide a wide range of services which may include: training and adult education, employment support, English classes, counselling, mental health provision, refuges and other support for survivors of domestic violence, legal assistance, youth work, health care, and campaigning and advocacy. Crucially, because these organisations belong to the communities they work with, they can legitimately raise issues particular to their ethnic community, and lobby for improved policies and services that respond to the reality of ethnic minority women's lives.

2. Threat posed by public spending cuts

All the organisations and policy-makers interviewed feared the impact of public spending cuts on the sector, which is already weak and under-funded. Organisations which are reliant on public funding and contracts may fare worse than small, volunteer-based community groups, but all organisations are made more vulnerable by cuts. Interviewees feared the delivery of services 'on the cheap', and the downgrading of the welfare state.

The impact of cuts on vulnerable women could, to some extent, depend on test cases brought to challenge public spending cuts on grounds of discrimination. The Equality Act 2010 could be used by local groups to ensure that equality issues are considered when assessing options for spending reductions. The Fawcett Society set a benchmark for legal challenge in late 2010 when it took HM Treasury to the High Court for failing in its legal duty to assess whether spending cuts would affect women unfairly.

3. Opportunities presented by the new policy context

The coalition government's Big Society proposals promote the concept of local people taking collective action and responsibility to improve their lives and shape services. This idea is underpinned by the policy of localism, with central government devolving power to local councils, which, in turn, work on 'empowering communities'.

Shifting the focus of decision-making from central to local government brings it closer to where ethnic minority women's organisations operate – and therefore offers new opportunities to them. Under localism, local authorities will assume a greater role in managing their areas, and would benefit from seeking partnerships with organisations with more local knowledge – including BME women's organisations, while these organisations will benefit from strengthening links to local authorities. There are clearly opportunities for local people to take more control at the local level. But given the cuts, can ethnic minority women's organisations find the skills, money, and knowledge they need to do this?

What Oxfam stands for...

Globally and in the UK, Oxfam promotes active citizens and participatory local decision making – both principles of the current government. However, Oxfam also recognises the vital importance of good governance, and the social protection 'safety net' provided by the state to protect vulnerable people.

Oxfam is therefore concerned that cuts in local government funding are set to hit the poor, marginal groups, and women more than others. We do not support the depth of the cuts and advocate that the poor and most vulnerable must be protected from their impact. Oxfam recommends a financial transaction tax so that spending on public services at home and abroad can be maintained and increased.

Head to head

Policy-makers and representatives from ethnic minority women's organisations make recommendations to each other on how to make the most of the new policy context.

From ethnic minority women's organisations to policy-makers...

Protect our funding

- Long-term investment in the services we provide to marginalised communities is vital, and must be protected and increased. The closure of our specialist services should stop.

Use our unique expertise

- We are hugely experienced at working with ethnic minority women; we help them to overcome isolation, build their confidence, and give them a sense of belonging. The government should use our knowledge and experience of community development in its plans to train community organisations.

'Community' is about identity, not just location

- Localism initiatives should be based around more than 'geographical' communities; they should also recognise and respond to communities of interest and identity. Serious efforts should be made to raise awareness and understanding of the day-to-day lives of marginalised BME women, or they will fall through the cracks and become even more excluded.

Avoid divisive policies

- We see specific policies such as Community Cohesion, mainstreaming services, and the 'Prevent' agenda as threats to our sector, which undermine recognition of our particular identity and experience. Support to ethnic minority women's organisations based on religious identity alone has proved to be divisive and should be avoided.

Put equality at the heart of policy making

- Relocate the equality agenda at the heart of policy making to make it fair and inclusive. Our ability to hold decision makers to account under the Equalities Act 2010, and the new Public Sector Equality Duty, will be important in achieving this. As national bodies (such as the Audit Commission) and mechanisms (such as Comprehensive Area Assessments) are abandoned, a system to monitor the implementation of new policies on ethnic minority women should be adopted.

...and from policy-makers to BME women's organisations.

Join networks and partnerships

- Working in partnership with others is key to progressing your organisation's aims. Get together with other ethnic minority women's groups and design strategies to strengthen the voice of your sector.

Strengthen your links with local councils

- The new policy context calls for stronger relationships between local authorities and the community. Review your current contacts, look for new local channels of communication, and strengthen existing links.

Rethink and reposition yourselves

- In the new political context, ethnic minority women's organisations should carry out an organisational review and build a stronger profile, presenting your values and impact to others.

“Doing a branding exercise, positioning it with decision-makers, doing events, writing articles in the mainstream papers, doing interviews in the media, writing regularly to officers and elected members, keeping them aware of your work – all this will help ethnic women's organisations.”

Policy interviewee

Share your expertise

- You can offer your knowledge on community engagement and participation to local councils, to shape discussions on community development.

Improve your managerial skills

- Build the capacity of your management groups to plan strategically and to raise and diversify your sources of funds. Redesign your projects for the new political environment. But don't compromise your core values and mission. Invite other organisations and external people to help you grow and develop. Councils should support you to develop your capacity and have a stronger say.

Use the new legal framework

- The Equality Act 2010 is a key tool to challenge discrimination. For the first time, the law acknowledges combinations of disadvantage, such as race and gender. Use it to hold decision-makers to account.

CASE STUDY THE WHY REFUGEE WOMEN CHARTER

The 'Why Refugee Women Charter' which has been adopted by policy makers in Kirklees, is an inspiring example of action by the BME women's sector. A group of refugee women got together to spell out what local services are needed to meet the needs of refugee and asylum seeking women. The group wrote a formal Charter, held public meetings, and persuaded Kirklees to adopt the charter for all the services it provides. This was a major step in helping women in Yorkshire to achieve greater control and influence over local decision making. See <http://www.whyrefugeewomen.org.uk/>

About this briefing

The interviews and analysis on which this paper is based were commissioned by Oxfam as part of its Routes to Solidarity programme, and funded by the Empowerment Programme of the Department of Communities and Local Government. The methodology included desk research on policy and practice (including new areas such as Big Society, localism, and the new Equality Act) and interviews with five ethnic minority women's organisations and four policy-makers.

The nine interviewees were: Fatima Women's Association (Oldham); Sojourner House – Manchester Women's Aid (Manchester); Angelou Centre (Newcastle upon Tyne); North East BME Network; Southall Black Sisters (London); Stockport Local Councillor; Yorkshire & the Humber Forum – Policy and Engagement; Yorkshire & the Humber Forum – BME programme; and the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Oxfam's work with ethnic minority women in the UK

Oxfam's anti-poverty programme in England includes supporting ethnic minority women's organisations to make their voices heard. We are also working to create much greater awareness of ethnic minority women's poverty among policy-makers, researchers, and frontline service-deliverers.

Our 'Routes to Solidarity' project, funded by Department for Communities and Local Government aims to create a stronger BME women's sector, with increased strategic and influencing power. The project, which is concentrated in the North of England, offers a unique opportunity for ethnic minority women and their organisations to share their experiences and engage in policy-making.

Resources

Exploring BME Maternal Poverty, The financial lives of 30 ethnic minority mothers in Tyne and Wear, Chris Warburton Brown for Oxfam GB, 2010. Available to download at www.oxfam.org.uk/publications

Pakistani and Bangladeshi Women Homeworkers in West Yorkshire, Fazeela Hafejee, Safeera Mayet, Pay and Employment Rights Service, 2010

Poverty Pathways: Ethnic Minority Women's Livelihoods, Zohra Moosa, Jessica Woodroffe, Fawcett Society, 2009

A Gender Perspective on 21st Century Welfare Reform, Veitch and Bennett, Oxfam 2010. Available to download at www.oxfam.org.uk/publications

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CASE STUDY: THE INSPIRATION OF ROUTES TO SOLIDARITY TRAINING

Oxfam's Routes to Solidarity Programme runs training courses which are helping members of ethnic minority women's groups to become more effective advocates. Tendayi Madzunu, a refugee from Zimbabwe, describes how the course helped her. "It was like an awakening," she says. "I realised that I am a true activist, but I hadn't realised this until the training... It has given me a platform, because all that I have been struggling with, the racism, the sexism, is shared by other women. We now have self-determination... we are committed to the wellbeing of fellow women. I feel that instead of being the victim, I am the victor."