Is New Deal for Communities a new deal for equality? Getting women on board in neighbourhood governance

Introduction

Neighbourhood renewal and community involvement have been central themes in New Labour's urban policy. Arguably the focus on neighbourhoods and community does not mark a shift in approach in urban policy in the UK; however the New Labour Government's focus has been particularly enthusiastic (Smith et al, 2007; Imrie and Raco, 2003). The focus on neighbourhoods has coincided with the shift from government to governance and the emergence of new governance arrangements which alter the boundaries between state and citizen. **A number of European countries have embedded neighbourhood governance within public and urban policy (Atkinson and Carmichael, 2007). Across the EU neighbourhoods have been seen as** *"an essential building block to achieve wider social cohesion and solidarity"* **(Kennett and Forrest, 2006: 713). Both in the EU and the US neighbourhood initiatives provide the possibility for community participation albeit with differing expectations and**

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levels of involvement according to political cultures and history (Atkinson and Carmichael, 2007; Hackworth, 2005). In the UK this has manifested in formal neighbourhood-based partnerships which bring together professionals and members of communities in decision-making bodies **to reduce social exclusion in deprived areas.**

Through its regeneration policies New Labour has sought to emphasise the aspiration of full citizen involvement, the devolution of power to communities and the notion of community control over local decision-making. However it has been suggested that this policy focus promotes the idea of community as an 'homogenous group of people living in the same geographic area' (Dargan, 2009). Neighbourhoods contain people with diverse attachments to place; they are culturally heterogeneous and socially variegated and thus do not necessarily reflect the Government's view of cohesive communities based on common values and trust (Imrie and Raco, 2003). Attention must also be given to the destabilising of homogeneous ethnic identities as *"cultural identities become more hybrid and political identities are less separated from cultural identity"* (Delanty, 2003, 109). **On a European scale Allen and Cars (2001) highlight the possibility of forms of neighbourhood governance**

becoming unwittingly part of the institutionalisation of racism. There is evidence from the EU and the US that minority ethnic groups have been underrepresented and marginalised in neighbourhood regeneration initiatives (Atkinson and Carmichael, 2007; Beebeejaun, 2006). Despite this, we have argued that neighbourhood level governance offers the *potential* for the recognition of area-specific diversity (Beebeejaun and Grimshaw, 2007), opening up the possibility to include local residents in decision-making, potentially achieving democratic renewal and more responsive services. There has been an increasing emphasis on widening representation at all levels of politics to reflect the diversity within society, and through an examination of one of New Labour's flagship regeneration polices, New Deal for Communities (NDC), we explore the potential for neighbourhood governance to facilitate the inclusion and representation of diverse communities.

Through a case study of one NDC Partnership we focus on the experiences of women and the challenges they face. We use empirical work which contributes to the literature on community involvement in neighbourhood governance by demonstrating the complexities and

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tensions amongst women as a group. This article explores how different women navigate and interpret their experiences and how assumptions about culture, gender and race/ethnicity influence this experience within one NDC area in England. It problematises the perception that increasing the number of women community representatives intrinsically facilitates empowerment.

The article firstly considers attempts to incorporate by the government equality into the NDC programme through attention to gender, specifically the representation of women and ethnicity. The second section of the article moves to case study material, drawing on interviews which examined women's experiences of involvement within the NDC and focused on how gender and ethnicity was constructed by them both as individuals and in relationship to others. Our case study shows how multiculturalism and women's equality continue to exist in tension even in equality-driven practices.

Images of women, ethnicity and multiculturalism

Brownill and Darke (1998) highlighted the gendered nature of

regeneration partnerships and the potentially negative consequences for

women and Black and Asian Minority Ethnicity (BAME) [1] groups over ten

years ago. Recent research continues to show that some women

participating in regeneration can face disempowering processes which

do not fully take into account their life experiences and the persistent

barriers they face (see Gosling, 2008).

Women on NDC partnership boards tend to be community

representatives as opposed to 'professional' representatives (Geddes,

2000; Gudnadottir et al, 2007; Riseborough, 1997). They are often

described as getting involved in their communities as a result of their

gendered roles, as a *"natural extension of their domestic work"* (Moser

1993 quoted in Smith, 2001). Women are seen as having different

ways of participating than men, and again this is attributed to their

gendered roles which place women in more informal processes

contrasted to men who prefer more formal methods of organising

(Lowndes, 2004; Appleton, 1999). Research into Tenants'

Associations in the UK showed that women tend to get involved in

specific campaigns such as repairs or child play areas whilst men

participate for more abstract reasons such as wanting to 'make a contribution' or 'play their part' (Balsom, 2000 as reported in Lowndes, 2004). Women's involvement is viewed as a means to an end whilst for men involvement is an end in itself (Lowndes, 2004).

Debates about women's roles in regeneration and community work often essentialise and stereotype women. Whilst we acknowledge the importance of drawing commonalities between women we also believe it is important to look at the different experiences of individual women to give depth to their acknowledged heterogeneity. This article's focus is upon the experiences of both white and BAME women involved with the NDC board. It seeks to acknowledge the differences between women in terms of race, class, age, employment status and caring responsibilities.

In this article ethnicity is viewed in terms of perceived cultural differences. The construction of this concept is also political and framed largely by and in relation to the dominant ethnic group (Anderson, 1991). Thus, discussions about culture mainly focus upon BAME groups as different from the mainstream white culture. More recently there has

been greater attention to 'white working class' culture and how such women are depicted as an object of 'disgust' within media and popular commentary, unable to take care of themselves or their families (Skeggs, 2005). BAME groups and gender are a topic of deep-rooted concern often expressed through unease about the asserted paternalistic nature of such cultures. For example, the government established the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group because:

> *"Hazel Blears[2] believes that women have always had an invaluable role at the heart of their families, their communities and wider society; this is especially true for Muslim women. As mothers, daughters, sisters, wives they bind their families together. As local leaders, they make their communities stronger."* (CLG, 2007)

Strategies of selective engagement with a small number of an under-represented group can be read as seeking to 'balance' representation between BAME men and women and to encourage a progressive liberal stance to culture. The government wanted Muslim women to take a role of challenging the potential violent extremism of Muslim men, through

their role as a 'moral authority' within the family.   Yuval-Davis (1997: 47) elaborates on the role of women:

> *Women usually have an ambivalent position within the collectivity. On the one hand…they often symbolize the collective unity, honour and the raison d'etre of specific national and ethnic projects…On the other hand, however, they are often excluded from the collective 'we' of the body politic.*

This exclusion from the body politic has been most significantly explored through Susan Moller Okin's essay (1999) 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?' which proposes that the prioritisation of cultural rights was in some instances antifeminist and that when cultural groups are seen as monolithic

> *"…they accord little or no recognition to the fact that minority cultural groups, like the societies in which they exist…are themselves gendered with substantial differences in power and advantage between men and women."* (Okin, 1999, p. 12)

Okin is concerned that recognising groups on the basis of ethnic culture obscures or even damages gender equality. She argues that power relations within groups should not be ignored at the expense of cultural recognition. Gedalof (2007) examines the contradictory ways in which immigrant women are portrayed in Government policy and pinpoints the figure of the immigrant (or BAME) woman constructed as

> *"…a problem defined by her linguistic isolation and limited awareness of cultural difference, and by her entanglement in the 'backward practices' of arranged marriage and gender subordination."* (p. 90)

We are interested in the manner in which perceptions of gender and ethnicity manifest within local governance arrangements. We want to give attention to how formal involvement within the NDC is mediated by conceptions of ethnicity and gender. What are the consequences of a process which seeks to develop representation based on gendered and racialised dimensions of an identity?

Was New Deal for Communities a new deal for equality?

The NDC programme targeted the 88 most deprived neighbourhoods in England. A ten year programme which began in 1999 it aimed to take a *"radical long term approach to tackling the problems of the poorest neighbourhoods"* (DETR, 1998: para 3.1). Thirty-nine NDC partnerships operated in England and aimed to pursue a holistic approach to urban regeneration focusing activity on five themes: housing and environment, worklessness, health, education, and crime. The NDC has been characterised by its continuity with previous regeneration programmes such as the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and City Challenge through a spatial focus, an emphasis on partnership working and the involvement of local residents (Lawless, 2004). It has also been differentiated from previous initiatives, as Government sought to redress past mistakes such as a lack of local ownership, of accountability and of long-term sustainability in neighbourhood renewal (Dinham, 2005; Lawless, 2004).

To address these issues NDC partnerships were expected to involve local residents as key partners within the programme. Governance arrangements emphasised the importance of the role of the community. There was a strong rhetoric of participation, with bids having to

demonstrate that local people would be involved in all stages of the process, from choosing the area, to selecting priorities and projects. The local authority was the accountable body for expenditure and was expected to support the partnership as well as become one of the partners on the Partnership Board. The Board was the key decision-making body for NDC Partnerships and was made up of representatives from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. Community representatives drawn from the NDC area were essential to the NDC and were posited as equal partners in the process.

This emphasis on community involvement is not without difficulties. In spite of criticism of the community's lack of influence on policy, potential manipulation (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), or undue pressures of voluntary commitment, community engagement continues to be prized within UK policy-making (CLG, 2008). There is a logic that community engagement will enable local knowledge to enhance policy-making but it sits in uneasy tension with professional claims to knowledge. Evaluation of the NDC programme has questioned the possibility of deprived communities fully engaging in area-based regeneration given their lack of power in the face of a Government-led agenda (Lawless, 2004;

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Jones, 2003; Dinham, 2005). Others argue that it is a *"miracle"* people

in deprived areas get involved at all given the pressures of their

everyday lives (Blakeley and Evans, 2008).

Once in place, community representatives inevitably face questions

about their 'representativeness' - who and what do these individuals

represent and from where do they draw their legitimacy? Barnes et al

(2008) suggest that we can understand two types of community

representatives, those drawn from a 'defined local constituency' and the

second drawn from an identity community. The first type, a

'constituency' representative, is closer to traditional political forms of

representation as drawing legitimacy from their relationship with those

they represent, they must *"take steps to find out about the views,*

interests and wishes of constituency members and to give account of

their actions to them" (Barnes et al, 2008: 72). The second type of

representative, an identity representative, reflects concerns to include

marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities. These representations

are seen as supplementing mainstream political viewpoints. However,

there are complications, as their role is to convey the views of their

group through an embodied understanding of their identity position. As

Parkinson (2004) has discussed, the notion of descriptive (identity) representation, whereby one person speaks for an identity or interest group, runs into problems when we attempt to implement it, because no-one is 'average' or ordinary. Parkinson (2004) goes on to argue that there is a confusion between the two types of representatives Barnes et al (2008) discuss. Better accounts of representation rely on either strengthening accountability with constituency representatives or a 'proper sample' (Parkinson, 2004: 373) of descriptive or community representatives.

The role of the community representative in neighbourhood governance is to reflect the needs and concerns of residents either on a constituency or identity basis. They draw their legitimacy from this local knowledge whilst paid staff and representatives from the public sector draw on their professional knowledge (Barnes et al., 2008). Day-to-day experience of living in a deprived area is assumed *"to confer the insights necessary to define the problems to be addressed"* (Barnes et al, 2003: 293). This distinction is less clear than it seems, as it appears to assume professional and local knowledge is mutually exclusive. This distinction has the potential to disappear entirely when, for example, community

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representatives or public sector representatives both live and lead their professional lives in the local area.

We are concerned with this heterogeneity within communities and in particular how women as a diverse group become conceptualised within neighbourhood governance. Some attention has been given to the interplay of gender (Gosling, 2008) and ethnicity (MacLeavy, 2008a; 2009; Lawless, 2004) within NDCs. However, limited attention has been paid to how gender and ethnic categorisations contribute to community representatives' experiences. NDCs provide a way of exploring how women are involved in decision-making since they also attempted to acknowledge and incorporate race into neighbourhood renewal. This article by focusing on gender and ethnicity provides a relevant insight into some specific challenges to inclusive neighbourhood governance.

The NDC programme can be distinguished from previous regeneration programmes because it sought to acknowledge ethnic difference. The NDC programme contained a specific goal to engage with BAME communities. Previous policies such as the Single Regeneration Budget had been criticised for the lack of involvement of BAME

communities and neglect of race equality (Brownill and Darke, 1998; Loftman and Beazley, 1998). The Government acknowledged this failure and NDC Race Equality Guidance was issued to support Partnerships in developing ways to include BAME people in all levels of decision-making (SEU, 1998, DETR, 2000). For the first time, race was placed at the centre of regeneration and, as Lawless reminds us, the NDC programme led the way:

> *"Although by 2002, race equality was being mainstreamed across neighbourhood renewal as a whole (ODPM, 2002), NDC was already majoring on this two years earlier (DETR, 2000)… no other ABI (Area Based Initiatives) has ever placed as much emphasis on BME communities as has NDC…"* (2004: 386)

This emphasis on race was not initially matched by an emphasis on other equalities issues such as gender and disability. Lawless (2004) considers that this emphasis on race was due to the numerical presence of BAME communities in NDC areas, as well as the notable lack of attention to these issues previously. Twenty-two out of the thirty-nine areas have higher BAME populations than the districts in which they are

located, thus partnerships *"placed considerable stress"* on engaging BAME groups (Lawless, 2004: 388). Guidance published almost six years after the commencement of NDC finally acknowledged the neglect of gender and recognise the differences within BAME communities:

> *"The diversity of the BME population needs to be considered in terms of ethnicity, religion, culture, age, disability and gender, and if appropriate reflected in the composition of the Board."* (ODPM, 2004: 32)

This approach to 'equalities groups' is problematic and cannot fully engage with the intersections of social categories and identities as it divides groups into mutually exclusive categories. Representation is here taken to be a relationship of identity with the represented constituents. Certainly NDCs have taken a concern with racial equality and representative voice through increased presence of such groups within Boards, alongside policies to stimulate their involvement. However:

"On this image of democracy, representatives could only properly express the 'will of the people'. If they are <u>present</u> for their constituents...the representative <u>substitutes</u> for the constituents, stands for them in a relation of identity." (Young, 2000: 126)

[Emphasis in original]

The constituency based representative is based on presence, and presumes a good representative will gather the viewpoints and interests of those they represent. However, as Young clarifies, an identity based representative substitutes for all others of that identity. The values of that group are already known to the representative, there is no assumption of connection to constituents. Young (2000) goes on to note that this form of representation is impossible within democracy. Because it presumes that representatives and constituents mirror each other; possessing identical values and therefore do not need to engage in a dialogue. This strategy, through a focus on the representative, calls attention to legitimacy based on group membership and, by implication, shared group identity and concerns. The representative's basis for legitimacy is unachievable, for example, being an Asian woman does

not mean it is possible to derive a set of both innate and universal values for all Asian women. As Dovi (2002: 731) clarifies:

> *"Most theorists of group representation recognize that members of historically disadvantaged groups have diverse interests and beliefs and that a politics of presence by itself is insufficient for revitalizing democratic institutions."*

NDC guidance has had a strong focus on representation by presence, suggesting that partnership Boards should reflect the profile of the neighbourhood population and have a *"strategy to work toward a race and gender balance appropriate to the area's profile"* (ODPM, 2004, p. 4). Lawless (2004) is concerned that despite the focus on race equality there are significant limitations in practice. A number of the partnerships have low numbers of BAME representatives with little evidence of strategies to address this issue.

Even where there are high numbers of women and BAME communities represented on NDC Boards this should not be presumed to lead to an increase in power for these groups and an ability to influence decisions

(Squires, 1993; Dovi 2002). Numbers may reflect a trend but do not give a complete story. Structural inequality means that these groups still struggle to get their voice heard despite having 'a seat at the table'. This is discussed further in our empirical section.

Case Study of an NDC Partnership

Methodology

The following material in this article is based upon empirical data from both authors' doctoral research. Author One's focus was on developing a greater understanding of how ethnicity becomes socially constructed in practice. The research process explored how different actors defined ethnicity and how these definitions were reinforced, challenged or subverted in different contexts and how interviewees made sense of this. Author Two's focus was on how gender impacts on women's experiences in regeneration organisations. It examined the gendered nature of organisations and the implications of this for women's involvement and influence on decision-making. Both authors undertook case study research in the NDC area in 2001-2005, exploring representations of diverse groups in neighbourhood governance. For

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this article we have returned to our interview data and worked together to re-analyse and interpret our findings in order to explore in more detail the experience of women, the impact and intersection of gender, race and culture and the values placed on these phenomena.

A case study design allows social phenomena to be placed within a wider context of meaning, and this allows for a better understanding of social situations and processes (Bryman, 1989; Yin, 1993). We drew on forty semi -structured interviews with local authority staff, NDC staff and community representatives (ten) on the NDC Board. We spoke to a range of people to gain a fuller understanding of the role community representation within the NDC. Semi-structured interviews offered our interviewees more freedom to express their views and reflect on their experience, thus enabling a better understanding of the complexity of these views and experiences (Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2005).

Developing a diverse Partnership Board

Our case study is based in a predominantly urban area. It is ranked in the highest 20 of areas suffering deprivation based on the Index of

Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The local authority has a BAME population of around 20%, twice the national average, and within the smaller NDC population around 40%, with Asians constituting the largest group. The case study area has been anonymised as issues of ethnicity and gender are highly sensitive and contested. Despite the significant issues raised, we consider the main issues to be about societal inequalities rather than solely about the Partnership itself. The following sections will describe the NDC Board, elections and composition; analyse the experiences and perceptions of women on the Board; and the power and influence of community representatives.

The Partnership Board is the key decision-making body within the NDC and brings together a range of representatives from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. The involvement of local residents provides the main route for ensuring that the NDC is responsive and accountable to local people. From the outset of our case study the NDC decided that the Board should have 51% or more community representation, with the remainder of the members drawn from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors (see Table 1). It achieved 55% community representation.

[Table one here]

In 2005 the Board had twenty-nine members; twelve women and seventeen men; eleven were from BAME communities. The Board appeared to reflect the diversity of the local community in terms of race and gender. It met the standards set out in the guidance for NDC Boards which suggests a gender split of 40-60 (ODPM, 2004a). Community representation has been necessary to achieve an ethnically diverse and gender balanced Board. The other sectors represented on the Board have few women and only one BAME representative.

Eight neighbourhood representatives are elected through resident elections; BAME representatives representing the largest BAME groups are elected or nominated through a local ethnic-centred community organisation, and two youth representatives are elected from the local Youth Forum. Initially all the representatives were men appointed by the NDC. Once the NDC was established elections were held and after the first election in 2000 there was a marked increase in the number of women elected on the Board.

The NDC Community Empowerment theme has been proactive in gaining and retaining BME community development. The NDC has encouraged gender equality by requiring community organisations to develop their Business Strategy (incorporating an equality strategy) before receiving funds. As one interviewee stated, a couple of the BAME organisations changed albeit *"grudgingly"* because of the NDC's policy.

Initially there was no such attention paid to the broader representation of gender or other groups such as disabled people. Indeed the increase in the number of women on the Board after neighbourhood elections was often declared an unexpected and surprising consequence by interviewees. This approach has changed over time and a focus on gender has emerged. The NDC has successfully reflected the diversity within the local area in terms of numbers of BAME and female representatives. However, numbers offer a limited picture of the inclusion of ethnicity and gender in practice. What do the experiences of and perceptions about women and BAME community representatives tell us about the consequence of representations based on particular aspects of identity?

Women in the neighbourhood: Gender, race and culture

Women traditionally have less experience and confidence in participating (Gosling, 2008), even though all community representatives face barriers to meaningful involvement. The community representatives had real motivation and commitment to giving large amounts of unpaid time to be involved in the NDC. Their reasons for doing so varied, but included the idea of being an active citizen and setting an example to others. Jane[3], an NDC officer reflecting on the motivations for women community representatives emphasized the gender dimension in terms of the influence of tradition and culture on women's roles:

> *"I suppose it's the traditional gender thing, you know that women okay, women traditionally are the more maternal, more caring type of people and maybe they're the type of people who experience these sorts of problems, these feelings of isolation. A lot of our groups focus around caring, caring around children, parents, young children, elderly and it's traditionally women who*

are in those caring roles. I think also women are more motivated,

more quick [sic] *to roll their sleeves up and do something about it.*

Whereas men are more sort of 'okay let's go along to a

committee'…"

There is an implied difference between the way men and women

participate, with women's roles being community and family-focused, not

a political experience (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Their lived knowledge is

seen to be experienced through caring for others rather than as

politically concerned action. Some studies have found that women-

organised community development organisations have been pivotal in

women's empowerment (Sullivan, 2009). There is a need to think about

the gendered dimensions of social capital *"with women's social capital*

being more strongly embedded in neighbourhood-specific networks of

informal sociability" (p. 235).   Definitions of gender can also act to

divide as well as unite women.

Serena is a neighbourhood representative and from a BAME

community. She is a mother in full-time paid employment. She made a

number of distinctions between herself, women community

representatives and Asian women in general. During her interview she distinguished herself as different to other local women by reinforcing their image as 'housewives' with 'a lot of time on their hands'. Despite her BAME identity, 'traditional' gender roles are threaded through her recounting of her role:

> *"One thing I find in* [the neighbourhood forum] *is that because I'm a female an Asian female a large number of Asian females come to that meeting and that is not normal… it's because they see another Asian female there … they feel comfortable in talking to me and it makes them feel like yes it will be listened to by this female but if it was a male they'd feel threatened and they wouldn't be here. Well you know in our Asian culture women, (most women feel fine right) don't actually speak up in front of men because it's the cultural thing, men are superior and… it's like women are always second best."*

Serena makes claims which reflect the idea of identity representatives sharing essentialist attributes which mean the represented 'feel comfortable.' However, she also distinguishes herself as different

saying how she 'speaks up' in meetings unlike other Asian women. These attributes are categorised as cultural even though identity representatives did not agree with them or demonstrate such behaviour themselves.

One particular BAME organisation was described as male-dominated by one of the BAME representatives interviewed. Nisha, a BAME community representative, said that this organisation had problems attracting any members so needed *"anyone to succeed"* but was *"quite developed in its thinking in…gender empowerment".* These types of gender relations were acknowledged but replicated as 'monolithic' gender oppression (Bhabha, 1999). These stereotypical categorisations of BAME groups lead to ways of thinking about and categorising gender relations as less progressive and measured negatively against white culture. This does not reflect the way individuals can reflect upon and resist the way their identity group is perceived. Serena lamented being the only Asian woman at many meetings but used this to act as a proponent for their interests.

Gender roles then became discussed as separate and distinct within each ethnic group. BAME women are attached to their families but do not challenge ideas gender relations. One ethnic group is described by Nisha:

> "*I think they've come on leaps and bounds I love their attitude to women …I think they've developed far more in terms of allowing women, I mean the activities are still women's activities.*"

There is still the implication here of cultural barriers to women's involvement as men 'allow' women to participate and women organise for themselves in cultural, not political activities.

The interviews reveal a set of ideas about women as caring, and of Asian women and older women as deferring to men in political life (Gedalof, 2007). However, all of our women community representatives (eight) had stepped into political life. There were tensions between how these narratives of the women they represented challenged the link between them. We now want to turn to experiences in the formal arena of the Board and how these played into ethnic and gender differences.

Experiences on the Board: Power, influence and discrimination

Within the NDC the need for a diverse Board in terms of gender and race has been accepted. The rationale for involvement was to increase participation from communities of interest (ethnic communities) with the additional outcome being that women made up the majority of the constituency elected representatives. Whilst they were not there to represent gender *per se*, their knowledge was perceived and constructed in relation to their being women. But does physical presence ensure a greater degree of attention to gender and/ or issues for ethnic groups?

The community representatives enjoyed their work and gained satisfaction from being able to represent their community. Locally-based knowledge should be integrated within the NDC (Barnes et al (2003). This oversight was one of the key failings of previous regeneration initiatives. It might be thought that this would be prioritised by the NDC given the attention to creating and finding constituency and identity representation. Yet, none of the community representatives or

NDC officers interviewed were confident that the community

representatives had much influence on decisions.

These experiences are not unusual (see for example Dinham, 2005;

Dargan, 2009) and despite the Government's rhetoric of learning from

past mistakes, the NDC community representatives related to a

perception of being 'less than equal' within the Board.

Community representatives considered that non-community Board

members wielded more influence and this caused some resentment.

Barnes (2009) highlights how community representatives negotiate and

make sense of their role, thinking about when and how to use

professional knowledge. These different bases for legitimacy were

particularly difficult to manage for two interviewees who were both

community representatives and professionals. Unlike Barnes' (2009)

findings, they found it difficult to separate and present appropriate

identity claims. This also increased self-doubt for non-professional

community representatives as they know that their experiences of living

in the NDC area is supposed to underpin their legitimacy, rather than

other types of knowledge. One community representative was dubious

that the professionals could understand the problems of the people in the area since they *"are highly paid people who live in maybe detached houses"*.

The idea of middle-class, paid workers confronting working-class resident volunteers is a simplistic analysis. Evidence here and elsewhere suggests that community representatives in NDCs are not composed solely of the unemployed and 'socially excluded' (Robinson et al, 2005). In our case study the younger women on the Board, predominantly from BAME communities, described themselves as middle-class, university educated professionals in contrast to the older white community representatives who described themselves as working class. Age presented issues for interviewees, with Sharon, an Asian NDC officer suggesting that the relationship between representatives from different sectors was further compounded by the culture amongst the older White British women on the Board. They expressed a certain deference to public sector workers described as *"an old style of 'you men folk know better.'"*

Sheila, a White British older representative is self-deprecating and refers to herself and a close friend who is also on the Board *"the two old fuddy duddies they call us don't they?"* The NDC grappled with questions of legitimacy. It had gained representatives along the lines of age, gender and ethnicity, as well as class. But tensions emerge when the bodies of community representatives convey the demeaned figure of the white working class woman (Skeggs, 2005) or the 'backward practices' of the BAME woman (Gedalof, 2007).

This culture lent itself to the male professional representatives, including the chair, holding more power to make decisions and speak during meetings. Nisha reflected on the position of women on the Board:

> *"I wonder if it's all about my own perceptions of gender but I do think they're [the women] not taken as seriously as the men are and you can observe that, that even the Chair's comments to men and females…. It's only in the last two or three months he's come to know my name."*

The literature highlights that capacity-building initiatives and training programmes are often focussed on the community representatives, due to deficiencies in their professional knowledge and protocol (Taylor, 2000). This does not challenge the hierarchy which places professional knowledge as more valuable than local knowledge, and this patronisation is further reflected in how community representatives are sometimes treated.

Even when the identity based representatives clearly differed from the stereotypes of Asian women, as they were professionals, this was turned into a weakness of representation. Sharon struggled to work with these contradictions:

> *"The BAME reps are generally professionals, they have a certain intellect, they are a benefit to the Board but they don't necessarily represent the women in [the area]. They can argue the case, they can be assertive and I guess they're women and Asian women so they have some vulnerability, but the other women on the Board don't see them as representing them, they're Asian and there is, there are those who have a problem with black people…."*

Thus being a professional and an Asian woman was considered

unrepresentative of the wider population of women. Racist attitudes and

lack of understanding of different cultures were also alluded to in other

interviews with BAME officers and community representatives. Yet the

BAME community representatives were also seen as an asset since

they were assertive and confident and represented a generally

unrepresented and marginalised group of BAME women.

Discussion

The case study reveals some of the deep complexities and tensions

produced within community involvement that seeks to reflect the

diversity of NDC areas. Confusion arises over presumed differences

between constituency and identity representation. The representatives

were women and in some cases BAME, so did not embody the norm of

a white non-working class man who is often the figure of constituency

representation. Thus the line between these two types of representation

was challenged by their presence (Dovi, 2002). The BAME community

representatives struggled to reconcile what they should and could

represent within the NDC. Thus whilst Parkinson (2004), for example, suggests that questions of adequate identity representation can be solved by attention to quotas, our research highlights the dilemmas that representatives fail to reconcile within their roles.

The community representatives had differing ethnicity, employment, education, age, class, skills and experiences. Clearly the NDC had chosen and set boundaries around the particular BAME communities at the outset which excluded other BAME communities and reified the identified groups (Beebeejaun, 2004). This then supported ideas that change occurred within individual ethnic groups, attitudes towards women were discussed in relation to each ethnic group rather than referring to the challenges faced by the area which impacted on women more generally. This was challenging to the role of community representation. To its credit the NDC recognised their narrow approach to equalities and made steps to widen this to include other ethnic groups as well as gender and disability.   However this may also contribute to the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes whereby women from BAME communities continue to be perceived as subordinate.

Recent debates have suggested that the use of the term 'community' in policies around community cohesion and immigration has de-racialized the language used; this enables policy makers and practitioners to avoid naming which communities they are referring to whilst their focus is clearly BAME groups (Worley, 2005). Worley states that there is a need to avoid community being neutralised and homogenised (Worley, 2005) and the dynamics of multiple identities and membership of different communities recognised. We would argue that this has been paralleled by a de-gendering of policies such as NDC which has ignored the gendered nature of 'community'. Evidence from our case study and the literature suggests that women will be predominantly from the community sector and, as such, are likely to wield less power in decision-making.

This article demonstrates that despite a misconstruction of identity, representatives' roles limit opportunities to increase equality in these political spaces. Community representatives have less power in the formal decision-making body, which leads to questions about where their power lies. They continue to be involved and gain personal satisfaction; they feel they contribute to debates despite not always

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being listened to. The Board is not the only place where the community

have the ability to influence and hold power, but it is the principal

decision-making body in the NDC. The final evaluation of the NDC has

raised questions about the impact that residents have had on decision-

making, and suggests that professionals and residents priorities are not

the same (Batty et al, 2010). This is of great concern due to the power

imbalance between these groups.

Finally, we argue spaces of power need to be altered in tandem with

diversifying them.   Diverse representation should not be focused in the

community sector, given the less powerful role community

representatives may have. We must also be alert to tradition and

culture as changing and contingent in both white and BAME groups.

Women may, as a result of their gendered roles, end up in the

community sector but they also resist gender roles and assumptions

about their culture. The NDC in the case study provides optimism about

the possibility of including diverse groups and people in neighbourhood

governance yet divisions and issues of inequality were left unaddressed.

Too little attention is given at both national policy and neighbourhood

levels to working politically and productively with concepts of ethnicity and gender as dynamic and socially constructed.

Acknowledgements

Footnotes

1. There are a number of terms used to describe the ethnic minority population of the UK, mostly arriving from the New Commonwealth and their descendents. We use the term BAME to denote the significant Asian component given the location of our study. We emphasise that this population are equally British citizens.

[2]Hazel Blears was Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government at the time of writing.

[3]Psuedonyms are used.

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