Women, faith and social cohesion

This research uses a participatory approach with women from diverse backgrounds, to examine the role of women and faith in building cohesive communities.

Key points

- The study identified four kinds of 'bridging' activity that can promote interaction between people from different backgrounds, reflecting different kinds of relationships between those involved:

    1. hospitality or a 'guest/host' relationship;
    2. information gathering/awareness raising;
    3. 'real meeting' or developing understanding; and
    4. meeting as equals to develop shared values and decisions.

- The exclusion of social groups from bridging activity can result both from avoiding and focusing solely on faith perspectives. Faith perspectives need to be given space and legitimacy if they are to be addressed within intercultural discussions.

- Bridging is needed at two levels: between diverse groups, and within and across communities. It is important to support women to be more included within their faith communities and knowledgeable about their own faith, to increase their confidence to bridge to other faith groups.

- Interaction between policy-makers and faith groups needs to move beyond information-sharing or identifying common values, to a 'level playing field' that allows shared values to be negotiated in a climate of trust.

- The inclusion of women in decision-making structures within and outside their faith groups requires recognition of their multiple responsibilities. Such structures have most often been developed without women's input and need to be reviewed to encourage women's effective participation.

- Women often see leadership as a grassroots activity rather than a strategy-led or 'top-down' system of influence. Women's personal experiences and ideas about how to address problems of social cohesion are an important resource for local communities, with potential impact on future generations.

The research
By Ghazala Mir, John Lawler and Mary Godfrey

JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

www.jrf.org.uk

Background

Reduced inequalities and high levels of social interaction are typical of socially cohesive societies. The term 'community cohesion' is increasingly used in UK policy, which emphasises strengthening civic society through local action. Meaningful interaction and strong, positive relationships between people from different backgrounds are promoted as vital to create 'an integrated and cohesive community'. This research explored how interaction between individuals and groups is affected by differing access to resources, capacity and power between and within groups. It also aimed to find out how successful different types of 'bridging' activity are in achieving policy goals, focusing on the role of women and faith groups in cohesion activity.

The project

A model for evaluating social cohesion activity was developed through qualitative interviews with 25 'key informants' involved in such activity in Bradford. The views of women from diverse backgrounds, about opportunities and barriers for social cohesion, were also explored through focus groups. Participatory methods were used to engage 19 women in Bradford on six projects aiming to bring communities closer together. Project leaders came from Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and secular backgrounds. The research partnership included two community-based organisations, Active Faith Communities and Womenzone, which helped develop ideas and supported fieldwork and analysis.

Levels of 'bridging'

The variety of activities described by participants could be broadly categorised into four levels of 'bridging':

Level one – Hospitality: individuals and groups meeting in a guest/host relationship, for example, visits to places of worship aimed at making these sites more accessible to people from diverse communities. Such activity could be valuable in widening people's experience; however, those who controlled the site or event often set the agenda for what the interaction would involve. The need for sensitivity to cultural differences might be recognised by hosts but not openly discussed with visitors, resulting in tension and non-negotiated decisions about how to handle difference. This could rebound on host facilitators, who might unwittingly overlook key issues affecting visitors. At worst, they could reinforce existing social divisions if visitors felt unwelcome, and interaction might not go beyond sharing physical space.

Level two – Information gathering/awareness raising: educating or raising awareness about diverse communities by giving positive messages. For example, training about diverse faith beliefs or listening to guest speakers' views on social, political or religious issues, with opportunities to ask and answer questions. The value of being able to hear such opinions was recognised but did not develop to the level of dialogue or relationship-building. Nor did this kind of bridging equip people to apply what they had learnt to situations in their daily lives.

Level three – 'Real meeting'/developing understanding: "getting to know" and "understanding one another" as groups or individuals. Such interaction could be both informal and facilitated. Coming together on issues of mutual importance and seeking 'common ground' could support recognition of common humanity and create solidarity. Relationships could develop through dialogue and through people "having fun together", learning about each other in ways that created trust. Such activities provided opportunities to increase mutual understanding and challenged threatening stereotypes. However, the focus on 'common ground' did not support movement towards discussing tensions between groups that sustained barriers to cohesion.

Level four – Meeting as equals: implied recognition of citizenship rights and expectations of equality between all parties. The importance of being able to "listen to one another well" and allow expressions of concern was key to moving beyond common ground. Discussion of conflicting views might involve emotional responses or 'part truths' that could be brought together to help create a more complete picture for participants and a new equilibrium in power structures.

Honesty enabled interactions to "enter a different level" and allowed people to be themselves with those who might not share their perspectives. This level of interaction was considerably harder to achieve and it was recognised that some groups and individuals might not be ready for it. Skilled facilitation of the process might be needed to achieve this.

This process could lead to mutual growth and development of shared values to address social injustices. It highlights the value of diversity through its potential to create a more robust understanding among people. This level is significantly different from current policy

formulations which focus on identifying 'common ground' in relation to existing values (i.e. level three interactions).

Bridging within faith communities

The model for 'bridging' and evaluating cohesion activity seemed to be relevant between subgroups of the same faith community as well as between different communities. Exclusion within religious communities was sometimes a result of traditional practices that particularly affected women, young people and converts to a faith group. Faith values could be drawn on to challenge such exclusion. Distinguishing between religious teachings and cultural practices was a means of rallying support for new relationships between subgroups. However, there was often a lack of internal community space to discuss issues and influence community attitudes.

Faith and social cohesion

Faith was the motivating force for some participants and project leaders, who considered values promoted through religion to be important for cohesion. Religious values were not of equal importance to everyone and diversity existed within and between faith communities. Cohesion activity with an 'interfaith' label could make those who were not part of a religious community feel excluded.

Faith communities could be an important resource for implementing cohesion policy but this study found that faith perspectives were marginalised in practice and within policy development. Participants highlighted the need to improve engagement so that decision-making about social issues could directly involve faith communities, and shared values could be negotiated.

Participants, including those of no faith, felt it was necessary to acknowledge faith identity in work promoting community cohesion. A 'safe space' could be created by openly addressing reasons for engagement and allaying participants' fears about attempts to convert each other, along with sensitivity to accommodate difference. Some focus group participants felt they needed more knowledge of their own faith before they could engage at this level. Faith-based education and knowledge could build confidence to bridge and reduce fears about exposure to conversion. However, the space to acquire such knowledge and organise faith-based groups could be denied in both faith and non-faith settings.

Women and social cohesion

Women were often described as having qualities that supported and promoted peace, in educating the next generation and passing on important values. Women's involvement in cohesion activity was often motivated by concerns about improving children's experiences and futures. However, nationalism and concerns about their own cultural values could sometimes override a bridging role for a minority of women.

Failure to focus specifically on involving women in formal structures could marginalise and silence their voices. Providing childcare and avoiding meetings that conflicted with school times were important to engage women. Existing structures could involve a predetermined agenda and processes, however, which maintained the status quo, so that even when women got involved there was no great difference in the way power was exercised. This suggests that existing structures need to be reviewed with input from women, as a more effective way of creating sustainable change.

Women and leadership

Women sometimes exercised leadership individually, but primarily this was on a collective basis, "bringing people together who can take action in some way". This approach supports the idea that leadership can be an emergent activity, distributed throughout particular groups with shared interests, and not reliant on formal leadership positions.

Work that involved 'ordinary people' was seen as important to any progress on social cohesion. Influence was viewed as being relationship-based, developing primarily from people having the opportunity to interact in the right surroundings and atmosphere to develop their own agenda of activity. Action that furthered joint interests was considered more likely to develop in conditions that encouraged trustful relationships.

Project leaders were more visible in communities due to their cohesion activity. This could stimulate negative reactions, suggesting that women who empower others need support to deal with any resistance created. There was also danger of 'burn out'. Overlap between project work and paid work or membership of a formal organisation was vital to the success of projects, and the time and space to carry out projects was also dependent on organisational backing. Infrastructures from which bridging activity could take place were not well developed or resourced within minority faith communities, however. This significantly affected the level of bridging activity women within them could carry out. Where such infrastructure was in place, projects could be delivered with little input from research partners; however, a high level of support and facilitation was needed when organisational support was absent.

Replicating the participatory approach

Participatory methods offer a valuable way to engage people in cohesion activity, and involve level four

interaction. The study suggests the following guidelines for those adopting a participatory approach:

- Work with community organisations to engage local people and generate an overview of activity underway. Speak to a range of people, not only those who are experienced in social cohesion activity, to engage different views.
- Identify project ideas based on concrete experiences, seeking to draw in 'new blood' to the existing pool of those engaged in social cohesion activity. Support those with little previous experience and reinforce the value of their contribution.
- Provide financial support to community organisations and project leaders and ensure reciprocity is built into partnerships. Involve all partners in decision-making and create a level playing field to ensure participants feel in control. As project leaders may understand suggestions from more powerful partners as directives, take care not to lose their ideas about what will work.
- Encourage project leaders to plan with people from other cultural backgrounds when they intend to deliver intercultural projects. Be prepared to facilitate the relationships between them, particularly when some people are more powerful than others.
- Encourage project leaders to develop level four relationships with each other and with project participants.
- Support and equip project leaders to plan, deliver and evaluate their projects. Provide institutional backing to help them gain legitimacy and space for their activity.
- Provide ongoing support, for example through workshops and regular contact. Use workshops to widen human and practical resources and as a way of sharing problems and developing solutions.
- Allow sufficient time for activities – developmental and relationship-building activity is very time-consuming.
- Address evaluation early on so that project leaders can gather data for this. Encourage

honest assessment, assuring confidentiality and emphasising learning from what has been done.
- Support project leaders to engage with the evaluation process so they gain from the learning. Help them to use a variety of assessment methods, including focus groups and individual interviews.
- Provide information/accessible papers about funding opportunities and social cohesion activity and support people to apply for funding if necessary.
- Produce summaries of projects with descriptions of the process and key learning outcomes, and make this easily accessible to others.

Conclusion

Contact between people from diverse backgrounds is an opportunity for initial engagement. However, developing awareness, understanding and shared values contributes more to community cohesion and equips people to address areas of difference. Strong, positive relationships can result when people move beyond contact and consensus to resolve conflicts and address social injustice. A fairer distribution of resources, capacity and power is needed to enable women and faith communities, particularly those from minority backgrounds, to fulfil their potential contributions. A climate of trust can be created through interaction that leads to the development of shared values arising from the resolution of real issues. Such relationships are needed between individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds but also between social groups and statutory authorities, including government.

To reach a new equilibrium in social relations, deeper connections are needed within and between communities, based on the understanding that women and members of faith groups are not only able to contribute to social cohesion, but also have the right to expect equity in their relationships and equal citizenship.

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