

# Women, faith and social cohesion

## Models for building cohesive communities

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**This report examines the role of women and faith in building cohesive communities and provides models for developing and evaluating social cohesion activity.**

The term 'community cohesion' is increasingly used in UK policy, which promotes local action and meaningful relationships between people from different backgrounds. This research sought to explore how meaningful interaction between individuals and groups is affected by differing access to resources, capacity and power between and within groups. Moreover, the research examined whether different types of cohesion activity are more or less successful in achieving policy goals.

The report:

- identifies four kinds of social cohesion activity, each of which has different aims and promotes different kinds of relationships;
- explores how faith identity and religious beliefs can influence community cohesion and the development of shared values;
- identifies key issues for the inclusion of women within communities and in leadership positions; and
- provides a model for working with individuals and groups to promote local cohesion activity.

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## Background

Reduced inequalities and high levels of interaction are typical of socially cohesive societies. The term 'community cohesion' is increasingly used in UK policy and emphasises strengthening civic society through local action. Meaningful interaction and strong, positive relationships between people from different backgrounds are promoted as necessary to secure the vision of 'an integrated and cohesive community'. This research focuses on the role of women and faith groups in cohesion activity. It explores how meaningful interaction between individuals and groups is affected by differing access to resources, capacity and power. It also examines whether different types of 'bridging' activity are more or less successful in achieving policy goals.

## The project

A model for evaluating social cohesion activity was developed through qualitative interviews with 25 'key informants' involved in such activity in Bradford. Focus groups explored the views of women from diverse backgrounds about opportunities for and barriers to social cohesion. Participatory methods were used to engage 19 women in Bradford on six projects aiming to bring communities closer together. Project leaders were from Christian, Hindu, Muslim, secular and Sikh backgrounds.

## Levels of 'bridging'

The variety of cohesion projects described by key informants could be broadly categorised into four levels of 'bridging' activity:

### **Level 1: Hospitality**

Individuals and groups met in a guest/host relationship, for example during visits to places of worship. Such activity could widen people's experience; however, 'hosts' controlled and set the agenda for the interaction. The need for sensitivity

to cultural differences might be recognised but not openly discussed with 'guests', resulting in tension and non-negotiated decisions about how to handle difference. This could rebound on hosts who might unwittingly overlook key issues. At worst, such interactions could reinforce existing divisions when visitors felt unwelcome, or when interaction did not move beyond, or even to the point of, sharing physical space.

### **Level 2: Information gathering/ awareness raising**

This involved educating or raising awareness through positive messages about diversity, for example, through training about diverse faith beliefs or listening to a guest speaker. The value of being able to hear diverse perspectives was recognised but interaction 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 3: 'Real meeting'/developing understanding**

'Understanding one another' 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 were barriers to cohesion.

### **Level 4: Meeting as equals**

This kind of interaction implied 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. Honesty and trust enabled interactions to 'enter a different level' and allowed people to be themselves with those

who might not share their perspectives. Discussing conflicting views could involve emotional responses or 'part truths' that, when brought together, could help create a more complete picture for participants and a new equilibrium in power structures. The process highlighted the value of diversity through its potential to create a more robust understanding. It could also lead to mutual growth and development of shared values to address social injustices.

This level was considerably harder to achieve and is significantly different from current policy formulations, which focus on identifying 'common ground' in relation to existing values (i.e. Level 3 interactions). Where it occurred, skilled facilitation of the process could be necessary.

## **Bridging within faith communities**

The model for evaluating cohesion activity is relevant between subgroups of the same community as well as between different communities. Exclusion within religious communities could be a result of traditional practices that particularly affected women, young people and converts. Faith values could be drawn on to challenge such exclusion and to rally support for new relationships between subgroups. However, internal community space to influence attitudes could be lacking.

## **Faith and social cohesion**

Faith motivated many key informants and project leaders who considered values promoted through religion important for cohesion. Diversity existed within and between faith communities, however, and cohesion activity with an 'interfaith' label could make those who were not part of a religious community feel excluded.

While faith communities could be seen as important for implementing cohesion policy, faith perspectives were marginalised in practice and policy development. Key informants highlighted the need to improve engagement and decision-making so that shared values could be negotiated.

Acknowledging faith identity was considered important in work promoting community cohesion. A 'safe space' could be created by allaying fears

about conversion and accommodating 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**

Failure to focus specifically on involving women in formal structures could marginalise and silence their voices. Providing childcare and ensuring that meetings did not conflict with school times were important to engaging women. Existing structures could involve a predetermined agenda and processes, however. These maintained the status quo so that even when women got involved there was no great difference in how power was exercised. Existing structures may 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. Leadership could be distributed throughout particular groups with shared interests and was not reliant on formal leadership positions.

Influence was viewed as being relationship-based, developing primarily from people having the opportunity to interact in the right surroundings with an appropriate atmosphere to develop their own agenda of activity.

Women who empowered others needed support to deal with the resistance this might create. Overlap between project work and paid work or membership of a formal organisation was vital to the success of projects and could prevent 'burn out'. Infrastructures from which bridging activity could take place were not well developed or resourced within minority faith communities. This significantly affected the level of bridging activity women within them could achieve. A high level of support and facilitation was needed from research partners when

organisational support was absent. Access to space to carry out projects was also dependent on organisational backing.

## Replicating the participatory approach

Participatory methods offer a valuable way to engage people in cohesion activity, corresponding to Level 4 interaction. The following guidelines are drawn from the study:

- Work with a range of community organisations to engage local people and generate an overview of activity under way.
- Identify project ideas based on concrete experiences and support individuals who can bring 'new blood' to the existing pool of those engaged in social cohesion activity.
- Provide financial support to community organisations and project leaders. Involve all partners in decision-making and create a level playing field to ensure participants feel in control. Be aware that project leaders may understand suggestions from more powerful partners as directives; care should be taken to ensure they do not 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 are more powerful than others.
- Encourage project leaders to develop Level 4 relationships with each other and with project participants.
- Support and equip project leaders to plan, deliver and evaluate their projects. If necessary 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 as a way of sharing problems and developing solutions.
- Allow sufficient time for activities – developmental and relationship building activity is time-consuming.
- Address evaluation early on. Encourage honest assessment of the work, assuring confidentiality and emphasising a wish to learn from what is done.
- Support project leaders to engage with the reflection and evaluation process, for example through focus groups and individual interviews.
- Provide information/accessible papers about funding opportunities and social cohesion activity. 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.

## Conclusions

'Strong, positive relationships' can result when people move beyond contact and consensus to resolving conflicts and addressing social injustice. A more equitable distribution of resources, capacity and power is needed to enable women and faith communities, particularly those from minority backgrounds, to take on a 'bridging' role. A climate of trust is need for interaction that leads to shared values and the resolution of real issues. Such relationships are needed between diverse individuals and groups, but also between social groups and statutory authorities, including government.

# 1 Introduction

It is suggested that reduced inequalities and high levels of social interaction are typical of cohesive societies (see Granovetter, 1973; Kearns and Forrest, 2000). Social exclusion, which reflects inequalities, has been defined as lack of access to social, economic and political integration and power (Room, 1995) that may find spatial expression in particular localities (Madanipour *et al.*, 1998). Faith congregations and organisations may contribute both to social cohesion and exclusion from participatory processes (Furbey and Macey, 2005; Furbey *et al.*, 2006), reflecting strong ties within homogeneous groups and poor bridging ties across diverse groups (see Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000).

Despite evidence that women may play a central role in bringing conflict between communities to a conclusion (see Darlow *et al.*, 2005), the voice of women, particularly those from deprived backgrounds, is commonly absent from decision-making processes both within and outside faith communities (Furbey *et al.*, 2006) and in relation to regeneration initiatives (Scharf *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, while women are often key players in the building of social capital in localities (Cattell, 2001; Forrest and Kearns, 1999), this may assume relational forms rather than be invested in formal political activity to secure change at the wider community level (Lowndes, 2006; Mir and Tovey, 2003).

Current knowledge about how to achieve social cohesion in practice is sparse, and this study aimed to address the issues outlined above. We also wished to explore the use of participatory methods in relation to building capacity for leadership and collaboration within and across communities.

## Our approach

### **To provide evidence that will be useful for social cohesion policy and practice**

We aimed to develop a model for evaluating social cohesion activity from the collective knowledge of people already involved in carrying out such

activity. These 'key informants' were predominantly women (see Appendix 1). We aimed to use this model to work with local women in Bradford on their ideas and to learn from the projects they developed to bring communities together. We also spoke to focus groups of women from diverse backgrounds who were not necessarily engaged in intercultural activity to explore their views on the opportunities and barriers for social cohesion.

### **To develop partnerships with local organisations and local women to develop local solutions**

We worked with two community-based organisations, Active Faith Communities and Womenzone, to develop our research ideas and aimed to carry out the study with their involvement. We also aimed to develop partnerships with local women whom we supported to work on projects they had identified as helpful in bringing communities closer together. We wished to mobilise interest and energy that already existed in the locality using a participatory approach (Rifkin *et al.*, 2000) and attempted to ensure engagement on equal terms between these partners and the research team.

We wished to draw on the knowledge and experience of local women in Bradford about what would work in relation to social cohesion. We intended to support women in carrying out projects that challenged social exclusion and promoted social cohesion, and to increase their access to resources and networks that would help them.

## The six projects

The following six projects run by women in Bradford were supported by the research team and partners as part of the study.

### **1. Lyrics 'n Friendship (Project leader: Muslim interfaith volunteer<sup>1</sup>)**

The project leader (also a key informant and involved in the Sharing Stories project) arranged for

two Canadian artists to perform to assemblies in eight Bradford schools, some with mainly Pakistani and some with mainly English pupils. Performances focused on the theme of building bridges between people from different backgrounds. Songs based on universal themes such as truth and justice were used to emphasise common humanity and promote mutual understanding.

## **2. Sahara Mental Health Support Group (Project leaders: Christian and Muslim community volunteers)**

Two project leaders (one a key informant) combined forces on a project to support women with mental health problems. They were encouraged to deliver the project in Keighley so that this area of Bradford District was represented in the research. Women who attended and the two project leaders were from different faith backgrounds. The aim was to develop mutual support and trust within the group.

## **3. Stepping Stones (Project leader: Muslim community volunteer)**

The project leader (also a key informant) was encouraged to develop a project idea based on issues she raised relating to her local school and the lack of influence she and other Muslim parents had over its activities. She and other women involved in an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class at the school developed ideas for a series of nine sessions to equip them with the skills and confidence to interact with school staff on issues of concern to parents. The sessions were held in the school as women would already be there for the ESOL class. They covered a range of issues including confidence building, supporting children at school, dealing with racism and sex education. Session leaders were drawn from local Muslim women with relevant experience as well as school staff.

## **4. UMMAH: Understanding Multicultural Marriages, Achieving Happiness (Project leader: Muslim community worker<sup>2</sup>)**

Three women (who were also focus group participants) wanted to support Muslim women converts to deal with relationship difficulties with either their own or their husbands' families. Two of the applicants moved out of Bradford and one

continued to work on this alone. After initially trying and failing to involve husbands, she and the group focused on equipping the women with conflict resolution skills through work with Relate. The project also supported women to produce a publication raising awareness about their own and their children's experiences of multicultural families. This project leader also became involved in the Sharing Stories project.

## **5. Young Families in BD3 (Project leaders: four Christian community workers, a Hindu community worker, four Muslim community workers and a Sikh community volunteer).**

Women from six different community centres (two of whom were also key informants) aimed to facilitate the movement of women between different centres predominantly used by particular communities. A focus on sessions involving mothers and toddlers developed, led by staff at one of the Christian centres. The aim was to increase relationships and understanding between mothers and children from diverse backgrounds.

## **6. Sharing Stories (Project leaders: one Christian and two Muslim community volunteers, one Christian interfaith worker)**

This project was developed from ideas put forward by two project leaders (both key informants) which did not satisfy the criteria for cohesion activity developed from key informant interviews. They were supported by another two project leaders (also both key informants) to deliver a series of three workshops for women, focusing on themes of common interest: neighbours, climate change and families. The sessions aimed to support women to develop common ground with women from different faith backgrounds.

# 2 Social and community cohesion

## Policy context

Concepts of 'social cohesion' and 'community cohesion' are linked with public policy and academic debates about social exclusion, poverty, employment, citizenship and morality (Levitas, 2005) and with the greater diversity of local communities within a global world (Parekh, 2000). Policy definitions of cohesion in the UK context have increasingly adopted the term 'community cohesion', locating the focus of communality at local or community level and the emphasis on strengthening 'civic' or 'civil' society on action within localities or communities. Thus, from the early Guidance on Community Cohesion published by the Local Government Association (2002) to the report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007a) and the government response to it (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008d), emphasis is primarily on building 'cohesive, empowered and active communities' within and from diversity through a sense of 'shared futures' (see 'Four key principles' below). Even so, there have also been significant shifts in thinking about community cohesion (Institute of Community Cohesion, 2010).

## Four key principles

1. A sense of shared futures: an emphasis on articulating what binds communities together rather than what differences divide them, and prioritising a shared future over divided legacies.
2. Emphasis on a new model of rights and responsibilities – one that makes clear both a sense of citizenship at national and local level, and the obligations that go along with membership of a community, both for individuals or groups.

3. An ethics of civility that recognises that alongside the need to strengthen the social bonds within groups, the pace of change across the country reconfigures local communities rapidly, and that mutual respect is fundamental to issues of integration and cohesion.
4. A commitment to equality that sits alongside the need to deliver visible social justice, to prioritise transparency and fairness, and build trust in the institutions that arbitrate between groups.

*Our Shared Future* (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007a)

Underpinning these four key principles is a more explicit articulation of the following approaches:

- Understanding and action on community cohesion must respond to local contextual factors and a sense of local specificity.
- Individuals have multiple identities – opening up opportunities for creating mutual interdependencies through shared common experiences.
- Approaches to cohesion should be driven by a whole community approach.
- Cohesion must be linked with reducing inequalities.

Further, in embracing the Commission's findings and recommendations, government policy highlights what it regards as the elements necessary to secure the vision of 'an integrated and cohesive community', summarised in 'three foundations' and

'three ways of living together' (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008d):

- people from different backgrounds having similar life opportunities;
- people knowing their rights and responsibilities;
- people trusting one another and trusting local institutions to act fairly;
- a shared future vision and sense of belonging;
- a focus on what new and existing communities have in common, alongside a recognition of the value of diversity;
- strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds.

However, while the vision of harmonious and reciprocal relationships between individuals and groups defined by their attachment to place is laudable, it also obscures the very real inequalities that exist between and within groups, within and across localities, and which contribute to, and exacerbate, tensions, mistrust and conflict. From the perspective of community cohesion, three sets of questions are posed: first, how is meaningful interaction between individuals and groups affected by differing access to resources, capacity and power within localities as well as between them? Second, are there types of 'bridging' activity (i.e. activity promoting interaction between people from different backgrounds) that are more or less successful in achieving policy goals? Third, what kind of 'linking' action is required (i.e. action that connects actors of different degrees of institutional power, whether local, regional or national; see Szretet and Woolcock, 2004) to achieve structural change that reduces inequalities?

### **Findings from key informants: a model for 'bridging' activity**

Through our work with 'key informants' – individuals involved in social cohesion activity in the fieldwork area for our study – we were able to establish a model for evaluating different levels of interaction,

and the quality of relationships involved. The variety of activities described by key informants, which aimed to achieve the government policy aims outlined on pp8–9 (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008d), could be broadly categorised into four levels of 'bridging' activity. These four levels are outlined below.

#### **Level 1: Hospitality**

At this level of interaction, individuals and groups met in a guest/host relationship. For example, visits to places of worship aimed to make these sites more accessible to people from diverse communities who might never have previously seen the inside of a church, temple or mosque. This kind of activity could be seen as valuable in terms of widening people's experience; however, those who had control of the site or event set the agenda for what the interaction would entail. The need for sensitivity to cultural differences might be recognised by hosts but not openly discussed with members of the visiting group, resulting in tension about potential issues and non-negotiated decisions about how to handle these:

*when the ladies from the temple came over here, you know, I was quite hung up on how we had our seating arrangement. And you know, did we put half on this table ... and then, you know, kind of stepped back from that and thought "well actually no one really wants to be forced to sit next to somebody that they don't know and they can't actually converse with". That was really quite an awkward situation.*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

Decision-making of this kind could rebound on host facilitators who might overlook key issues affecting the visitors. For example, a series of evening meetings for women organised during the fasting month of Ramadan precluded women from Muslim communities taking part. Nevertheless, rather than recognising her own role in making engagement unlikely, the programme organiser felt that Muslim women were 'reluctant to engage with other faiths'.

At worst, such activities could reinforce existing social divisions between groups when visitors were not made to feel welcome and interaction did

not move beyond, or even to the point of, sharing physical space:

*all of the women who were asylum seekers were in one room and all of other people were in one room and when the music started it was just crowded and really awkward ... Here they are trying to invite people in but have they actually prepared the space, so those women and children can come in and not feel like they're either separated in a corner or feel just really awkward ... it's one thing to say we're going to invite people and I think it's a completely other thing is how do we welcome them and how do we try to make them feel comfortable?*

Christian focus group participant

### **Level 2: Information gathering/ awareness raising**

This level involved educating or raising awareness about diverse communities through giving positive messages, for example, training events about diverse faith beliefs or listening to guest speakers presenting their perspectives on social, political or religious issues, with the opportunity to ask and answer questions. Participants could be drawn from local communities where the initiative had developed from a local group, as well as from all over the city where a group with a wider remit was facilitating the activity. In either case, the value of being able to hear such perspectives 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:

*they might not use the information straightaway but a year, or even months down the line, they might think back, "gosh yes, I went on that training day and this is what I learned" and "oh yeah, I have an understanding of" or "this is why they're celebrating their festival", or "this is why they're acting or they're going on pilgrimage" and things like that.*

Muslim key informant: interfaith worker

### **Level 3: 'Real meeting'/developing understanding**

Key informants described this kind of meeting

in relational terms: 'getting to know' and 'understanding one another' as groups or individuals. Such interaction could be informal and everyday as well as facilitated. Coming together on issues of mutual importance and seeking 'common ground' was felt by a number of key informants to support recognition of common humanity, increased dignity and respect and to create solidarity. For example, a key informant described friends from a variety of backgrounds rallying round to comfort her when her mother had died abroad; disasters, such as an earthquake in Pakistan, led to different community groups joining forces to fundraise as well as pray together.

Apart from dialogue, relationships could also develop through people 'having fun together' and learning about each other in ways that created trust. Shared activities provided opportunities to raise awareness that increased understanding. This challenged the stereotypes that created feelings of threat, such as those of Muslim terrorists or Western promiscuity, which were often promoted through media influence:

*so that someone who sees a man with a big beard and in his Pakistani clothes, they don't think "oh! I saw someone like him on the television last night. He must be dodgy" ... Because they've got nothing to counteract that. ... but you can go "well I've seen this picture, and that wasn't very good from the media, but I've also got this other picture and this experience that I know is very positive, so therefore everybody who looks like that isn't like that".*

Christian key informant: community worker

Such meetings could be everyday or routine and linked to the reality of people's lives. For example, positive experiences of living in close contact with people from different religious backgrounds resulted in more positive attitudes:

*you can probably get some real elder[s] that probably wouldn't get on. And yet you can have the opposite as well because you've got to remember that people that were involved in the 1947 [partition of India] lived together as brothers and sisters. You know they had no issues whatsoever. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs living*

*together, they used to get on like whoa, you know, like brothers and sisters*

Sikh key informant: interfaith worker

Level 3 activity could also be facilitated; for example, members of a church and mosque ran sessions to help people ‘rub alongside each other’ in an area where there had been little or negative interaction between diverse groups of residents. However, while discussion and meetings to help develop positive relationships could have an impact on those taking part, they necessarily involved a minority of people rather than whole communities. Furthermore, the focus on ‘common ground’ did not support movement towards discussing conflicts and tensions between groups which might continue to cause barriers to cohesion.

#### **Level 4: Meeting as equals**

This kind of interaction implied recognition of citizenship rights and expectations of ‘a level playing field’ with parties in equal positions of power, rather than acceptance of differing social status. Key informants described the importance of being able to ‘listen to one another well’ and allow expressions of concern as a means of moving beyond the consensus position of common ground. Discussion of conflicting views could involve emotional responses or ‘part truths’ that, when brought together, could help to create a more complete picture of events and situations for participants, and a new equilibrium in power structures.

One key informant, for example, described how she had organised a community meeting following raids on the homes of Muslim families in an area of Bradford. She was appalled at the way in which these families had been treated and gathered support to mobilise and educate local people, and demand an explanation from the local police:

*dragging them and pushing them ... in this day and age how dare people think they can get away with this? ... I rung one of the barristers in London and ... you know if anything happens like this again you need to know your rights ... we held the police accountable on that day ... 150 people – packed. And that was just within four or five days we managed to organise an event like that just to show, you know, just a minute we’re*

*not going to take this, next time you do something like this you’ll think twice ... it’s happening in Beeston, it’s happening in Manchester, Birmingham. Who’s to say I won’t be raided tomorrow?*

Muslim key informant: interfaith volunteer

Not only did this meeting highlight the expectation of the community that it would be treated fairly and protected rather than targeted by the police, but it also contained the potential violence that could have erupted because of the anger that the raid caused:

*If you are sensitive and you accommodate you know these young teenagers or adults and you provide safe space for them and you hear them out and you listen to them and you take their ideas and you say we’ll try to help you and support you, you know those ideas and frustrations have to be listened to. If they are not listened [to] they’ll take things into their own hands and that’s what you don’t want happening. Young teenagers taking things into their own hands. They’ve got to feel there is a space for them to let their frustrations out.*

Muslim key informant: interfaith volunteer

Honesty about difficult issues supported interactions to ‘enter a different level’ and allowed people to be themselves with those who might not share their perspectives. This was considerably harder to achieve than other levels of interaction and it was recognised that some groups and individuals might not be ready for such interaction. Where it took place, skilled facilitation of the process was necessary:

*to give them just enough of a moving out of their comfort zone to have started to challenge something, but not so much that they rebel and never want to do that again*

Christian key informant: cohesion worker

This process corresponds to what the Commission for Racial Equality has described as ‘growth interactions’ (2007). It could highlight the value of diversity through its potential to create a deeper and more robust understanding between individuals

and groups so that ‘people tell their part of the reality and together we make something of a whole’.

### **Relevance of the model**

Key informants indicated the need for improved interactions between a range of different social groups extending beyond faith communities. This suggests that the framework for understanding cohesion activity outlined above could apply beyond interfaith work to other areas of bridging such as intergenerational or gender-related interactions.

The model is also relevant to how key informants understood dynamics in UK society as a whole. Some key informants felt that weak minority communities worked against social cohesion. ‘Jostling for position’ against other minorities for favour with the dominant community, ‘having to be nice to them’ and accepting the position of ‘guest’ prevented misunderstandings and injustices being discussed or addressed. These individuals felt that citizenship rights needed to be exercised if they were to be retained and that members of minority groups should be considered as part of the wider community rather than ‘pigeon-holed’ because of colour, religion or background. One key informant described the riots in Bradford as ‘a form of self-harm’ – a reflection of the lack of voice and power among the social groups involved and the only way of being noticed.

While community activists recognised and appreciated the fact that rights in the UK may be greater than those granted in some other parts of the world, government policy on cohesion could create mistrust, particularly among Muslim respondents, by conflating cohesion and national security issues. Cohesion funding that carried the ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’ label, and the implication that violent extremism existed only in Muslim communities, was seen as an example of the failure of policy to protect citizenship rights and equity for Muslims in the UK (see also Khan, 2009). The duality of this approach was rejected by a number of key informants involved in promoting cohesion.

Using the model helps further understanding about such dynamics. For example, government policy describes some of the perspectives of those who disagree with its position as ‘misinformed’ and

sets out plans to ‘explain and debate’ the policy position (Home Office, 2009). This suggests that a combination of Level 2 and Level 4 interaction will be used to address tensions arising from the strategy. Explaining the government’s position is unlikely to be helpful, however, if those who disagree with the policy feel their perspectives have already been dismissed. Steps to establish common ground between diverse perspectives and to create the climate of trust needed are likely to be important if debates are to lead to shifts in position that can help resolve tensions. In terms of its own guidance, the plans will have little effect if they ‘impose pre-set actions and don’t really listen to participants’ (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008e).

### **Moving between different levels of interaction**

Key informants often recognised that there was a progression between different stages of interaction and that facilitation could involve supporting people to move to a deeper level of relations:

*you could start off with something like that where people come together because of something, because of a common ... hobby or whatever and thereafter, through that, would be able to build up ... relationships with other people*

Muslim key informant: community volunteer

Cohesion activity could progress from one level to another within the same project in some cases, whereas some activity was more focused on one level of relations. The evidence suggests that while lower levels of interaction might be inevitable at the beginning of engagement activity, it is important to recognise the limitations of this and to support movement to deeper levels of interaction over time.

Key informants described the development of interactions that built relationships as necessarily long-term and small-scale. This highlighted a tension between the need ‘to change mindsets’ through individual relationships and the fact that the aims of cohesion activity were relevant to the whole population. Large one-off events were considered unhelpful, however, unless these were organised in the context of a wider strategy,

and widespread replication of small-scale local activity was considered the best way of increasing cohesion. The need for political leadership both nationally and at a local level to support this was emphasised by a number of key informants.

### Facilitation

Key informants indicated that all levels of interaction could occur between individuals but interaction between diverse groups needed facilitation. Facilitators required good communication skills and an ability to 'grasp things more deeply'. An awareness and understanding of different faith groups' beliefs was considered important but only useful if this led to acceptance, openness and a 'warm heart'.

Reasons for taking on the bridging role could differ because of the social context of individual facilitators. Those involved with young people or marginalised groups, either through their work or personal lives, often referred to a concern for social justice and a better future. Curiosity, goodwill and generosity and the availability of funding also motivated key informants to take on this role (see 'Reasons for taking on the bridging role').

Level 4 facilitators often acted out of concern even when they lacked influence. Rallying support through mobilising others helped create credibility through a critical mass that would be taken seriously. Where individuals were too fearful to mobilise, community organisations could provide vital backing to individuals who raised concerns. For example, one key informant found she was the only parent willing to object to a local primary school after Muslim children were served non-halal food twice in succession. Other parents clearly saw their position within the school, and indeed within the UK, as that of guests who had no right to complain. Drawing on support from the local mosque helped this key informant address the power imbalance she faced in relation to the school:

*They are afraid because this is a white man's country and everything belongs to them and they fear that if they come forward the children will be mistreated. Like if I go to [key informant's] house and touch something there without permission and whatever she puts in front of me I will have to eat it.*

*... power is very important. The first time when [Muslim key informant] spoke to the teachers they didn't take any notice of her, the second time round when she spoke to them and they knew they were related to the mosque and she knew she had a position there they took it more importantly. So position is very important and if people are in certain positions and they have power to do something then they should get together and do it and not be scared.*

Muslim key informants: community volunteers

### Reasons for taking on the 'bridging' role

*a commitment to human rights, which again I think is a moral and spiritual issue. And, therefore there is a commitment to race equality and a commitment to anti-discrimination*

Non-religious key informant: interfaith worker

*there was very small grant available and then [key informant] approached me*

Hindu key informant: community worker

*we're aware we have as a national church institutional influence, we've sought to use that with generosity, so where people have been marginalised we've used it*

Christian key informant: church leader

*I want people to know what Islam is really like. Rather than read it in the media. I think the best way to do that is to go and talk to people and be yourself and let them see who you are so that they don't have any myths or misunderstandings about you. And once you've done that then you can go on to work together on other issues.*

Muslim key informant: community activist

*It's that thing of wanting to find out more about people from other countries that includes their faith but it's not just about their faith. It's about their social way of*

*living and their food and, and these things are often interwoven with faith but they're not necessarily about faith.*

Non-religious key informant: community activist

*it's valuable, children gain a lot from first-hand experience and being able to talk to a member of that community, whichever community it is. Whether it's the Mandir, or the Mosque or whatever ... we get requests from all kinds of organisations*

Sikh focus group participant

Activism could, however, have adverse consequences for those in minority positions, leading them to seek anonymity. Fear of such consequences could also lead to individuals employed as facilitators failing to act. The key informant above reported that a school liaison officer failed to act as a 'bridge' between Muslim parents and the school, while encouraging parents to take action themselves, as she 'feared losing the job' and was 'not really empowering the community'.

Similarly, some individuals responsible for leading cohesion work appeared to lack clarity about the aims of this activity and struggled with some of its concepts. A number also said they held 'unpalatable thoughts' that they would not air publicly, as they were aware that their views were not generally accepted but were unclear about why. Some of these views would have the consequence of preventing the social inclusion of certain, particularly Muslim, groups within mainstream society. Decisions about excluding such groups were implemented without open discussion:

*basically, there seems to be an acceptable amount of difference, and if you're outside that acceptable amount of difference, you either have to keep quiet, or you are excluded ... some situations were brought to a conclusion because it was seen better, because [members of Hizb ut Tahrir] had been coming ... they increased the quality and the broadness of who was involved in those events, giving it validity, um, and basically they come from*

*opinions that are not really for want a funny word to use in a situation, 'kosher', you know?*

Christian key informant: cohesion worker

This kind of exclusion was linked by some key informants to fear of opening up discussions. However, as noted above, the lack of space afforded to dialogue with such groups limited the potential to develop more inclusive positions for everyone.

Key informants felt local activity was more representative than formal structures and district wide events that attracted middle-class participants: 'you don't see a lot of new blood'. City-wide forums could be seen as 'a politically correct tick box' rather than relevant to social cohesion and some key informants felt that city-wide interfaith leadership lacked clarity about its own structure, aims and purpose. Attracting new participants to formal meetings was considered more likely if there had been some relationship building with potential members beforehand. Top-down structures were therefore seen as unhelpful if they lacked a link to local communities where such relationships could develop between forum members.

## Findings from cohesion projects

For project leaders the concept of social cohesion was related to people living together peacefully, with mutual respect, understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures and context. However, the ability to promote this vision was limited by the context within which project leaders worked.

### Capacity to 'bridge'

It became clear during implementation of project plans that organisation and capacity within communities influenced how much project leaders could effectively 'bridge' to other groups and take on the role of equal partners with others. Project leaders at the six community centres originally involved in 'Young Families in BD3' were not on equal terms with regards to resources and capacity for leadership. The idea for the project was developed in consultation between the groups but led by a centre that could provide a worker with dedicated time. The lead centre, a church-

based group, proposed that the project should focus on mother and toddler groups as this was an activity the centre wished to pursue in any case. This was agreed but did not prove feasible in practice, mainly because only the lead centre had an existing group of mothers and toddlers.

The Hindu Cultural Centre and Sikh Temple both dropped out of the project because they did not feel it would be possible to set up such a group with the resources they currently had. Two other centres, which attracted mostly Muslim service users, attempted to engage with the project with children from their crèches but this proved problematic in terms of maintaining the continuity of women involved. In addition, these centres were short staffed and so could not co-facilitate the sessions; women from these centres who might need support to become involved in the group consequently did not have access to workers who could provide such support.

This situation highlights a weakness in policy proposals to support only funding within communities ('bonding social capital') in exceptional cases, and to instead focus on interfaith activity (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007a; Home Office, 2004b). The need for capacity building within minority faith communities has been highlighted (Community Cohesion Panel, 2006) and our findings indicate that where inequalities in resources and social capital exist between different communities, 'bridging' activity is less likely to involve equal partnerships and is more likely to fail or drift towards a guest/host relationship between the most and least resourced groups (see also Orton, 2008). Evidence from fieldwork indicated that bonding social capital is needed within minority communities, not just to provide the 'confidence to bridge' (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007a) but also the resources and capacity to do so. As the Commission on Integration and Cohesion report (2007a) highlights: 'Those who have bonding social capital are more likely to bridge'.

While four centres did manage to 'host' a session, these did not initially lead to relationships developing between the women who attended. A second church-based centre did, however, successfully set up a mother and toddler group during the period of the project and a turning

point came when the two church-based centres began to focus on working more closely with each other. One of these had managed to attract a significant number of Muslim mothers and children to the group and collaboration led to mother and toddler groups at both church centres becoming a space where intercultural relationships between the mothers could develop:

*we had a toddlers inspection the other week didn't we, and there was Ofsted in it and the lady who came she said "I've been to playgroups", she said "And we have somebody there", she said "And they're segregated, sort of ... I've come here and I can't believe it", she said "They're all sitting down on the floor chatting to one another about babies ... Absolutely wonderful", she said "The mixture sat together at the tables, laughing, talking, discussing different things", she said "I have not seen this in such a group that's multicultural".*

Young Mums in BD3: project leader

Relationships were being formed by women within the project and the outcome showed that bonding between the two Christian groups had been a means by which one learnt from the success of the other and increased its own capacity for such work as a result. Bridging between the project leaders from other centres, however, had not been as successful because of the unequal partnership caused by lack of resources in Sikh, Hindu and Muslim centres. This resulted in problems with carrying out the work and too high a reliance on the lead organisation to implement the project plans, with no consequent capacity building for these partners. The dynamics of this project help explain 'funding bias', with most funding for interfaith activity being allocated to organisations that already have the most developed infrastructure, rather than building capacity within minority ethnic and faith communities (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007b).

The backing of a strong organisation from which project leaders could 'bridge' was again shown to be vital in the Stepping Stones project. The project leader was a parent at the school that she wanted to involve in her planned activity. However, she was unable to interest school staff in this until she

involved the research team, who wrote asking the school to participate and met to discuss how the project might take place. The school responded positively when it became clear that there was credible backing for the project leader's work. By the end of the project, school staff also realised that the activity had helped them to extend their networks and fulfil their own statutory requirement to develop activities promoting cohesion. The project became a model of good practice for other schools on how to fulfil this requirement:

*It's been important for the school – [we] have spoken to some 90 head teachers from the different ... schools about what we are doing – it's about sharing good practice.*

Deputy head teacher: Stepping Stones evaluation focus group

Ability to interact at any of the levels described at the beginning of this chapter (pp9–11) could also be adversely affected by low self-perceptions of social status. In the Stepping Stones project, women initially doubted whether the project could even get off the ground:

*They did not think they were important enough to attract the valuable time and attention of those people in higher jobs, especially those who cannot be seen without an appointment. They felt this project was only a rumour and just mere talk.*

Stepping Stones project report

For the project leader, educating women in the group was an important part of the process of empowering them to engage with the school. Moving a step closer to achieving the three policy foundations of cohesion, outlined at the beginning of this chapter (p9), involved developing the confidence and capacity of women within this group. This supported not only their sense of their own worth but also the worth of the communities of which they were part. Through the sessions, women were able to raise with senior staff incidents of racism and exclusion they had faced within the school and demonstrate expectations of fair treatment in a non-confrontational atmosphere. This introduced Level 4 bridging activity into an

arrangement that had initially begun as a guest/host relationship between the school and the women's group. The sessions led to new forms of engagement between the school and the women, as well as between the school and mosque to which the project leader and a session facilitator were connected, and which many children from the school attended. One of the women in the group was from a Sikh background and the Sikh temple also subsequently approached the school for similar partnership work.

The project led to greater involvement of the project leader and the group itself in the decision-making structures of the school, with consequent benefits for all parents:

*Now the head teacher and deputy head come and speak to the class regularly and get comments from the group ... Before the project the school was worried about the expense of translation but I pointed out at the Parents' Forum that parents couldn't support their children if they didn't understand. I became a member of the Forum as a result of the project. The school now involves parents much more than before.*

Stepping Stones project report

### **The social context for bridging**

The UMMAH project also demonstrated that the context within which bridging activity took place could also influence ability to carry out such activity and the level of interaction possible. The group of women involved initially struggled to find a space within which they could meet. They were excluded from a community organisation that did not wish to support groups providing faith teaching (which the women felt they needed) as well as a mosque which would only agree to provide space under the auspices of its own group leader. The project leader eventually secured agreement for the group to meet socially at the organisation in which she worked on the understanding that faith teachings would not be provided. The group's position as 'guests' in the centre was firmly established by their lack of involvement in setting these conditions.

The group discussed potential activities to address the hostile relationships they faced as women who had married into Muslim families

– both from their own families, as a result of converting to Islam, or from their in-laws, as a result of their marriage. Ideas ranged across different levels of ‘bridging’ activity – from raising awareness through social events to meeting other women in local community groups in order to discuss the issues and develop friendships. The project leader felt that the husbands of women who had converted could support improved relationships with in-laws; she collaborated with a Muslim male colleague to plan a social event aimed at discussing issues and solutions with husbands. However, this level of interaction, which attempted to address areas of tension, proved too ambitious. Only one of the husbands agreed to come and one woman reported that her husband ‘didn’t want anyone interfering in their problems’.

The group consequently decided to step back to a level of ‘bridging’ that felt more feasible. Instead of dialogue and relationship-building activity (Level 3) they opted to raise awareness through producing a booklet about their experiences which they hoped would dispel some of the myths and ignorance about women in their situation and about Muslim communities (Level 2). They felt the booklet would be useful within and outside the Muslim community, and could be handed to professionals as well as to other women in situations similar to their own.

### **Local links**

The Sharing Stories project focused on Level 3 activity between women from different religious backgrounds on issues of common concern, with project leaders presenting faith perspectives at the beginning of the session to generate discussion. Although tensions and power structures were raised during these discussions, these were located outside the group in relation to fair treatment of people in inner city areas, and were seen as a further area of common ground between the women. At a session on climate change, for example, two members of the group decided they would take the fact that recycling facilities were not available in a deprived area to the Council’s Equality Services meeting the following month. The common ground established between the women consequently became a foundation for Level 4 bridging to local government structures.

This city-wide project was not able, however, to maintain the relationships formed between women or the momentum on this issue after the sessions finished as project leaders ‘didn’t have the links with people to take it forward’.

The importance of local links in bringing people together also became apparent in the Sahara project, which initially aimed to involve women from Bradford. As a result of external political concerns the two project leaders were asked whether they could deliver this in Keighley instead and agreed they would try to do this. However, they had not realised that their local links in one part of Keighley were not helpful in the part where they were able to meet. They consequently struggled to recruit women to the project and had to transport some women from Bradford so that the group could run. Women who attended did benefit from the support provided by other women, all of whom shared the common experience of experiencing mental illness, and took part in activities that provided skills in how to manage their health. Nevertheless, it was clear that moving the activity outside the area in which project leaders’ networks were located adversely affected the number of women who could benefit from the project.

## **Key findings**

- The model developed from key informant descriptions of different kinds of ‘bridging’ activity provides a framework for assessing the degree to which social cohesion activity meets policy aims. The model is relevant to interactions between individuals and groups as well as between citizens and decision-making bodies, including local and national government.
- The ability to work at different levels of interaction needs to be considered in relation to the context in which cohesion activity takes place and ‘where people are’. A climate of trust is needed before conflicts and tensions can be discussed constructively.
- Women from minority religious backgrounds have reduced opportunities to lead or become involved in ‘bridging’ activity. Policy emphasis on interfaith activity does not take account of

the widely differing resources and capacity levels between diverse communities, some of which still need development within to provide a solid foundation from which to 'bridge' to other groups.

- Cohesion activity that addresses power imbalances can increase the social status of marginalised groups. The credibility of such projects is supported by organisational backing and policy support, which make the engagement of powerful groups more likely.

# 3 Faith and social cohesion<sup>3</sup>

## Policy context

Faith groups have often been at the forefront of social cohesion activity and are perceived as an important resource in terms of implementing cohesion policy (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008c). However, faith representation is often absent at strategic levels of local decision-making (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008a). A variety of faith and interfaith networks have been established in recent years in recognition of the role faith groups can play in neighbourhoods (Home Office, 2004b). These have overseen a range of interfaith activities (Local Government Association, 2009), mostly at Levels 1 and 2 of the model for bridging activity presented in Chapter 2. A public place for faith has been called for in relation to mainstream models of health and social care as well as more attention to faith-related issues in staff training (Home Office, 2004a). Recent policy acknowledges that policy-makers have been unsure about the propriety of commissioning services from faith-based groups but that such barriers to commissioning will be removed to support the development of interfaith social action (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008b).

Cohesion policy also refers to the importance of shared values (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008c), which are clearly relevant to the issue of faith, and the need to link such values to shared ideas about citizenship and 'Britishness' (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008d; Home Office, 2009; Home Office, 2004a).

## Key informant and focus group views

### *Bonding and rebonding*

As highlighted earlier, findings indicate that bonding within communities is a prerequisite

to effective bridging rather than a parallel or separate activity that can be set aside in relation to building social cohesion. Barriers to bonding within faith communities appeared to mirror those that influenced bridging between communities. Key informants spoke of unequal relationships between different population subgroups and membership criteria that operated to exclude some individuals from community activities:

*very often faith communities can disempower women in particular, but lay people in general so that they can hold quite responsible positions at work and ... you know, walk into a faith community situation and I'm talking about very diverse faith communities here, the confidence evaporates at the door*

Research partner, Active Faith Communities

*in the beginning, I went to the other group and I felt it was only for the practising people and they wouldn't let anybody else participate without being a practising person first. They said you have to pray five times a day you have to do this you have to do that, then we will consider ... So, people like me wished to get involved and were willing but if we don't get a chance to do this then how are we going to become practising?*

Muslim key informant: community volunteer

Diverse subgroups within a faith community could engage with each other in ways that demonstrated different levels of power and openness to each other's perspectives. The importance of inclusion and finding common ground between different subgroups of the same faith community was felt by some key informants to be as important as building bridges to other religious groups. Indeed, the model for cohesion activity presented previously seemed to be relevant within as well as between groups.

Exclusion within religious communities could be a result of longstanding practices that had not

adapted to changing contexts. This kind of exclusion could particularly affect women, young people and converts to a faith group, who might be isolated from others within the faith community except on special occasions such as religious festivals. Faith values (as opposed to cultural values derived from other sources) could, however, be drawn on to challenge such exclusion. Converts to Islam, for example, could have a better understanding of religious teachings than individuals born into Muslim families and challenge cultural practices that were felt to limit their involvement within the Muslim community. Distinguishing between religious teachings and such traditional practices was a means of rallying support for new relationships between community subgroups.

*there are certain statements in the Qur'an that don't gel with the culture that we've married into. For example, the rights of the woman and the way the women are treated – this kind of whole thing of being treated as though you're someone who does nothing more than perform a series of tasks and this ... on the periphery of your husband's life. And you're not really valued as actually a human ... an intelligent human being who is more to them than someone who cooks etcetera*

Muslim converts focus group

At the level of the family, as well as the community, there was evidence that traditional approaches and values were being redefined to take account of the current context within which faith was practised. This redefining of relations within a faith group, which might be termed 'rebonding', was seen as a necessary process of adapting to changes in the UK context and the new situations this created:

*You know some people think, you know, you can't, somehow you're watering down your own faith to [engage in interfaith work], though other people would say it's a significant part of faith to do this. So you've got both voices happening and I think it's true in any community you've got different voices saying this is okay and this is not okay.*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

Thus, the diversity within faith communities could be seen as a resource on which community members could draw to support the process of rebonding. However, there could be a lack of internal community space to discuss such issues and influence community attitudes. Where this process was facilitated, it was an important means of challenging exclusion and negotiating the repositioning of different groups within the community:

*there were two people that were against [a women's centre] and they kind of fuelled everybody else ... And they really didn't have a reason. Basically, they [inaudible] that "Our women are going to be exploited". And we said "How? In what way do you think they are going to be exploited?" and they really didn't have an answer.*

Muslim key informant: community worker

### **Engaging with faith values**

For a number of key informants, faith was the motivating force for their activism, which they conceptualised as contributing to society and social relationships both for their own and future generations. The values promoted through religious teachings were considered important for cohesion and many key informants linked these values to their personal interest in cohesion activity:

*my faith teaches me to be a positive contributor to society ... to take an active role, to be a good neighbour, to be a good citizen, so I think the faith is a big driver for me in terms of taking that lead in community cohesion. ... you know, hopefully make a better future for our children.*

Muslim key informant: interfaith volunteer

At the same time, there was diversity within faith communities in terms of the significance of religious values, which were not important to everyone:

*these days for young people, computer, discos, night clubs, friends ... these sort of values I personally think are more important. Religion – they do value religion, but I think religion comes second. Their friends, computer, games, Nintendo, nightlife, or you know, going out,*

*holidays ... for majority of young people that I think personally is number one priority, but for the elderly people religion is number one*

Hindu key informant: community worker

Religion could also be seen as part of an individual's or community's cultural heritage rather than a set of religious beliefs or practices related to ritual practices or institutions. Affiliation to a religious group and the actual practice of religion could thus be an aspect of diversity within faith communities.

While morality and the aim of trying to 'live a good life' was not seen as the sole preserve of those with a formal religion, some key informants felt that individuals from religious groups could fail to understand this. Our evidence indicated that people with and without religious affiliation often worked together on activities that involved similar aims in terms of cohesion but an 'interfaith' label could make those who were not part of a religious community feel excluded.

As highlighted earlier, common ground was often sought between diverse groups during cohesion activity, and shared values formed part of this. The concept of 'shared values' is promoted in cohesion policy (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008c) and is also described as 'British values' (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008d). However, the failure to adequately involve diverse faith groups in defining these values and how they are applied in practice was highlighted:

*[they] say we've got faith communities involved but they don't want to hear about faith ... it was a speech of Tony Blair's that was about civil society and the common good and ... shared common values. And about well-being and justice and peace and my response in my head was "Yes we have common values about justice and peace but if I were a Muslim I would be thinking where's justice for the Palestinians? And does the justice and peace extend worldwide?" ... he seemed to imply loyalty to country first. But I think that most faith people will say loyalty to God first.*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

Faith representation in decision-making bodies has been highlighted as providing a 'valuable

corrective' to government values and priorities (Home Office, 2004a). While such correctives may be expressed, they may not be given sufficient status to merit a response, however. Representations to the Commission for Integration and Cohesion about the government's refusal to acknowledge the impact of its foreign policy on cohesion, for example, were relegated to a supplementary report (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007b) and not reflected in the Commission's final report, which stated that 'the Government rightly takes a particular approach when working with Muslim communities to prevent extremism' (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007a).

At a local level, the framework of ethnicity rather than faith was used by some cohesion workers within neighbourhood forums. This was seen as overlapping and satisfying the need to involve faith communities, although the faith backgrounds of participants were not formally identified. However, key informants reported that some individuals leading faith or cohesion activity might not understand the difference between ethnicity and faith identity. One of our own key informants was unclear about whether the Polish community was a religious group, and the following extract highlights assumptions made about a white Muslim child by an interfaith education worker:

*He was stood there in the hall with all Muslim children in front of him and he noticed the little white face, walked straight up to the little boy, asked him to stand up, took him out of the hall to the headmistress and said "This boy's in the wrong place".*

Muslim converts focus group

A small number of key informants could also fail to recognise the exclusion that minority faith communities experienced and also questioned the attention paid to including faith groups in decision-making bodies. Two key informants felt Muslim communities were more empowered than Christian or non-faith groups. For example, one claimed 'there would be hell to pay' if a Muslim were told he shouldn't be going to a Christian school, whereas her son had been told this for saying he did not believe in God. Yet a Muslim key informant

described a similar situation when she complained about a poster showing lack of respect for the Qur'an in a mainstream school. Muslim focus group participants similarly detailed a range of ways in which they had experienced discrimination and exclusion on the basis of their religious identity.

Failure to recognise exclusion on the basis of faith is likely to have most impact on Muslim communities, in which religion is a prime aspect of identity (Modood *et al.*, 1997). Furthermore, while Muslim communities are a focus of anti-terrorism policy (Home Office, 2009), Islamophobia is not acknowledged within this policy, despite evidence that mosques have been bombed and subjected to arson attacks (*Muslim News*, 2007). Discrimination on the basis of Muslim identity has been well documented (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 2004; Hamid and Sherif, 2002) and linked to high levels of poverty and unemployment, as well as low levels of health and social mobility (Nazroo, 1997; Mir and Sheikh, *in press*; Platt, 2005). Yet initiatives to address racism mentioned in the government strategy all use the framework of ethnicity rather than religion (Home Office, 2009).

The imbalance such discrimination creates in terms of community capacity was, nevertheless, overlooked by some key informants, and Muslim community members, rather than structural inequalities, blamed for the problems they experienced. Thus a Christian key informant in a paid interfaith post criticised mosques run by volunteers for not participating in bridging activity and felt the volunteers were in their 'own little worlds and don't want to reach out'. In other cases structural inequalities were recognised, but not given as much weight as factors internal to the community. For example, the underachievement of Muslim young people in schools was seen by one key informant to be most influenced by 'the pedagogical difference' and time that parents allocated to mosque-based teaching, more than by dynamics within schools themselves.

This approach, which continues an Orientalist tradition of viewing Muslim communities as problematic and having inferior values and lifestyles (Said, 1997), was striking among some influential figures in Bradford. These individuals acknowledged empirical evidence that undermined their views about Muslim communities almost in

passing, while focusing on negative dynamics as though these were exclusive to Muslim groups (see, for example, Lewis, 2002; Macey, 2005). Worryingly, at least one such figure was regularly asked to contribute to discussions about the Muslim community as an 'expert' authority, acting as what might be termed a 'pseudo-bridge' that served to reinforce negative stereotypes and negatively influence social cohesion in the process. This individual conceptualised Muslim communities as guests of the majority host community, reliant on goodwill and generosity in order to be accommodated, rather than outlining expectations of equal citizenship.

Key informants noted similar representations of minority faith groups in the media, where criminal or oppressive practices were portrayed as though they were religious practices, again contributing to the exclusion of minority faith groups from wider society:

*there was a whole front page thing about forced marriage ... And they quoted Uncle Tom Cobbley and all about how terrible it was. And my question was, well who's arguing with you? And where are your quotations from leaders in the Muslim community and the Hindu and the Sikh community condemning forced marriage because their voices are saying exactly the same thing ... But to pretend that this is something that white people have to make statements about, is patronising rubbish because every faith community objects to forced marriage ... it is not a religious question. It is a question about people behaving badly and ascribing that to a particular community or a group is extremely unhelpful.*

Non-faith key informant: interfaith worker

Our evidence highlights that faith communities may thus be perceived as an important resource for implementing cohesion policy (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2007) while faith perspectives are marginalised in practice and within policy development, where 'experts', who have no mandate to represent minority communities, may present these communities in a negative light. The need to 'step up a gear' (Home Office, 2004a) in terms of engagement between decision-makers and faith groups was echoed by

key informants. Findings indicate a call by many key informants for Level 4 interactions so that decision-making about social issues could be developed with the direct involvement of faith communities to create a deeper understanding of shared values.

The consequences of marginalising faith perspectives were also highlighted by key informants and included denial of resources, with exclusion of faith groups from some funding opportunities and from being able to use community facilities for faith-based meetings. Even where faith groups were included in decision-making, a difference in the capacity of people from minority faith backgrounds to engage with arenas where power was exercised was noted by some key informants. For example, the skills and confidence needed to contribute to decision-making about how a large community centre should be run was mostly found among Christian members of the management committee and there was a need to support the development of this capacity and confidence with other groups, who formed the majority of the centre's users. Social class was noted as a factor in such imbalances between faith communities, with higher levels of education promoting the skills that support involvement in decision-making bodies.

As highlighted above, the majority of key informants felt that faith values added to a more complete understanding about what may be important in relation to social issues and that diversity between faith groups could add further to this understanding. A fear of opening up such discussions has been highlighted earlier. This was linked by a number of key informants and focus group participants to the divisions that could be caused by differences in belief and suspicions about a 'hidden agenda' of trying to convert individuals to a different religion. Focus group participants also identified concerns about being challenged in relation to their faith and about being placed in the role of faith representative without having adequate knowledge to live up to this role.

Key informants recognised that such fears were based on real concerns and would take time to overcome. Indeed, there could be a negative emotional impact in moving too quickly to the topic of faith where individuals or groups were not prepared for this. This could be a justification

for beginning activity at Level 1 where people from diverse backgrounds might come together without any discussion about their beliefs or values. However, key informants, including those of no faith, felt that it was necessary to move to a further stage of interaction where faith identity could be acknowledged rather than avoided. For this to be possible a 'safe space', where dialogue could take place for the purpose of increasing knowledge about each other, was required. Openly addressing the reasons for engagement, and allaying fears about attempts to convert, was recommended along with sensitivity to accommodate difference.

Even in groups where discussion about faith was deliberately avoided, the value of such knowledge, developed in a context of respect and sensitivity could be recognised. The following discussion, involving women from two faith backgrounds who met on a regular basis and a researcher from a third faith group, demonstrates that making space to discuss religion could support the development of views about its relevance and move members of the group to a deeper level of engagement with each other:

*A1: You shouldn't talk about religion.*

*A2: It's not friendly ... when we leave home we should leave as a human being and return home as a human being and keep our religion to ourselves, rather than criticising anybody else's religion.*

*A3: Well I don't know – it's ok that we should just meet as human beings but we should know about each other's religion. Who is doing what and how, we should know about their religion. Whether you have a discussion or not.*

*Interviewer: So how do you get to know if you don't talk about it?*

*A1: Sitting here are Hindus, Sikhs and you're a Muslim. If we just want to get to know your religion then that's ok, but if we begin to criticise then that's wrong. That shouldn't happen ... you should respect each other's religion.*

Hindu Cultural Centre focus group participants

Bonding could thus be seen as more possible if religion was excluded from discussions and the focus was on commonality. However, acknowledging faith values in a climate of respect could help to overcome this barrier to deeper engagement and bridge the diversity that might exist within a group that also had common interests.

A 'safe space' where people, including those without a faith, felt comfortable to 'be themselves' was sometimes perceived to exist at neutral sites such as schools. Fieldwork showed that buildings themselves were only one factor in creating such spaces, however, and venues associated with a religious community, such as a temple or church, could also be seen as 'safe' by people from other backgrounds if they had been made to feel welcome and included at these sites.

Relegating faith to the private domain and avoiding discussion altogether was seen by key informants as preventing an opportunity for individuals to learn from each other and for people to 'come together in integrity'. Where faith was discussed, it could lead to members of one faith community feeling inspired to emulate good practice from members of another and such engagement could provide a revival or reassessment of values within and between diverse groups.

Shared values could develop through learning from each other's beliefs and values, as diverse faith perspectives were brought together to formulate solutions for social issues:

*when I set up a multifaith [group], it struck me that we learned a lot from one another as teams, talking together about what's our understanding of sickness and health and dying. Which actually affects quite a lot of how you see life ... we could learn from each other about our faith understanding specifically in areas of community care, you know how do we care for our elderly ... how do we care for them in this particular time in their life?*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

This approach points to values that are renegotiated through the process of engagement in relation to specific issues (i.e. Level 4 interaction)<sup>4</sup> and so differs significantly from

policy formulations of shared values that appear to focus on identifying 'common ground' in relation to existing values (i.e. Level 3 interaction; see Local Government Association, 2009).

It has been suggested elsewhere that fears about the existence of Muslim communities in Europe are linked to the potential change in values that such communities might introduce (see Modood, 2008). Key informants recognised that the potential for Muslims to influence social values could make people 'scared'; however, in terms of ongoing 'human dialogue and living together', negotiating such values was seen as essential for the sustainability of communities. Indeed, Muslim key informants often felt that it was not an option for them to keep faith in the private domain, given the negative media and policy portrayal of Muslim communities. Addressing the stereotypes on which these could draw and increasing the understanding of Muslim perspectives was sometimes seen as essential to the future of Muslim communities in the UK.

All key informants described the aim of interfaith activity in which they were involved as increasing understanding rather than proselytising. However, it was recognised that the impact of discussing deeply held beliefs might persuade individuals to convert. This was not seen by key informants as taking away individual agency or something that should necessarily be feared:

*I think there is always that possibility there, you can't engage with ... to be genuinely open to the other and not recognise that you could be so compelled by what someone else is saying, someone else's experience, that you want to go to that place as well. I don't find that threatening, I just think that that is the reality and um, that's fine!*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

Focus group participants, most of whom were not involved in activity to promote social cohesion, were less confident and often felt they needed more knowledge of their own faith before they could engage at this level. Faith-based education and knowledge could thus provide the confidence to bridge and reduce fears about exposure to conversion. As highlighted earlier,

however, the space to acquire such knowledge and organise faith-based groups could be denied in both faith and non-faith settings.

## Findings from cohesion projects

### **Making space for faith**

Within the Sahara project the group focused on common ground in relation to being women (i.e. Level 3 interaction) but the issue of faith was not raised either in planning discussions between the two project leaders (who were Christian and Muslim) or at a group level within the sessions run for women. Faith was very important to the Muslim project leader and some of the Muslim participants, but the lack of discussion left both project leaders unsure about how to deal with the diversity within the group. Ultimately, each decided to leave the issue of whether or not to talk about faith to individual choice rather than facilitating group-level discussion (i.e. Level 1 interaction). This was partly because of concerns about offending or excluding those in a minority position but also because it was recognised that views about the importance of faith might not be the same:

*because most of us were Muslim, we felt that we didn't want her to feel you know a bit excluded ... So we just kept that as a thing that you know maybe might offend her or she might not come or whatever. So we just kept religion out of it really ... when we talked about it, it was our own personal thing ... So we just thought well they don't want to talk about it, or it's not as in the forefront as it might be for me or one of the other ladies.*

Sahara: Muslim project leader

Different levels of interaction consequently operated in relation to different aspects of identity within the group. While discussion about their experiences as women was given space and legitimacy by project leaders, a similar dynamic had not operated in relation to faith identity which was an area of diversity among participants. This resulted in guessing about the faith identity of the non-Muslim participant, who was assumed to be Hindu, and about how important or unimportant faith was to her in terms of her mental health. Faith

identity was thus an issue even though it was not the focus of the group's interactions. As a project leader for the Young Families in BD3 project also noted, 'some faith has come into it' even when the focus was on being mothers with children.

In practice, the position adopted by the two project leaders did influence the dynamics of the group. The Muslim project leader felt faith was an important resource for mental health and encouraged Muslim participants to draw on this. The Christian project leader 'felt unsure' about giving such direct advice but noted that the women themselves did not seem to have a problem with this. On reflection, project leaders felt that a more open discussion to negotiate the place of faith within the group would have taken place had there been more time. This suggests that the 'safe space' that had been created in respect of the 'common bond' participants felt as women was not yet safe enough to tackle areas of difference that involved going 'quite deep' and dealing with an issue that was perceived as potentially divisive. Whereas in the Young Families in BD3 project providing a place for faith was taken for granted by at least one of the project leaders, more open discussion between project leaders was needed in the Sahara project to negotiate their different positions before this could be explored with women in the group.

### **Identifying shared values**

In contrast, within the Sharing Stories project, faith was seen as a means of exploring common ground between women from diverse backgrounds. The sessions were advertised as a chance to 'engage with women from different faiths' and were attended by Christian and Muslim women as well as women of no faith. Group discussions began with presentations by project leaders on Christian and Islamic perspectives, following which participants discussed the theme from their own perspective, without necessarily mentioning faith beliefs.

The discussion enabled women to express personal values relating to the topic and related social concerns that they felt should be addressed. The common ground that was developed in relation to promoting individual and social action on climate change, for example, evolved from both faith and non-faith perspectives, suggesting that the initial focus on religious perspectives was not necessarily

exclusive and helped stimulate and contribute to discussion about wider social debates.

Although operating at a lower level of interaction, the Lyrics 'n Friendship project similarly aimed to promote 'universal shared values' through the medium of music. Evaluation showed that children felt positive about the experience and the activity promoted 'positive messages' that increased mutual understanding between children from different faith backgrounds. The artist was a Muslim convert but the songs did not refer to Islam specifically, having been adapted to suit a wider audience:

*You know you don't have to say I'm here to talk about community cohesion, you can be talking about values, you can be talking about issues, addressing issues that affect communities and bringing communities together on that basis ... we all share those values, and everybody who has a faith or who doesn't have a faith, we uphold truth, justice and peace.*

Lyrics 'n Friendship project leader

These two projects identified shared values through the existing common ground of participants, which, as highlighted earlier, is how such values are conceptualised within current cohesion policy. Moving beyond common ground, potentially conflicting values were addressed within the Stepping Stones project, in which a session on 'Sex Education in Schools' was arranged by the project leader as a means of informing parents and stimulating dialogue about the school's approach. The session was led first by an external facilitator, who initiated a dialogue about the women's own experiences of learning about their bodies in which they discussed the difficulties they had faced as a consequence of cultural (rather than religious) practices that withheld adequate information. The school's deputy head teacher then outlined the process by which plant and animal lifecycles and aspects of human biology were covered in the curriculum, drawing legitimacy for this from the external context of the national curriculum rather than the school's own value system. Content was also related to an impersonal fact-based education rather than touching on a value framework for human relationships.

School staff acknowledged parental concerns on this issue but placed considerable emphasis on the school's efforts to be sensitive to these and to negotiate ways of delivering the curriculum that did not conflict with religious teachings. Parental control was recognised through the ability to exclude children from such sessions, while at the same time the problems of not having enough information, for example in relation to young girls dealing with menstruation, were discussed. The project leader's report on the session indicated that parents within the group recognised the need to change cultural practices that had disadvantaged them while they were growing up and that religious integrity was not necessarily damaged by such changes:

*As social values and needs of the change with time, it is important for us to have changes in our thoughts because it is important that we change ourselves according to the needs of society. That is the only way we will be able to guide our future generations correctly. Every woman in the group felt this way.*

Stepping Stones project report

The atmosphere of trust that had been established during the sessions between the women and school staff was instrumental in this renegotiation of positions. An important element of this was the school's movement towards a position of accountability to women in the group, which generated the necessary climate for open and constructive discussion to take place.

Findings from projects thus confirmed that religious identity had the capacity to stimulate consensus or 'common ground' (as in the case of Sharing Stories and Lyrics 'n Friendship) as well as conflict (as in the case of parents at the school) (see Furbey *et al.*, 2006). Conflict arising from diverse perspectives had the potential, however, to be used creatively as a means of constructing shared values. Arriving at these values involved sensitivity and a sense of accountability by a more powerful group to a less powerful group, that is, the school staff to women from minority faiths. This in turn led to openness about the need to change cultural norms by these women.

## Key findings

- Attitudes towards interacting on the issue of faith can help explain why individuals and groups may choose to engage with each other at different levels of the model presented in the first section of this report (pp9–11), and the concerns that may inform these decisions.
- There is a need to take account of existing positions in relation to faith when undertaking bridging activity, and both ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ are influenced by context and by multiple identities. This may mean that diversity is not discussed immediately. Priority may instead be given to the creation of a ‘safe space’ where faith identity can be acknowledged and discussed and where the values held by people from diverse backgrounds can be negotiated constructively.
- The exclusion of social groups from bridging activity can be caused both by avoiding as well as focusing solely on faith perspectives. Faith-based perspectives need to be given space and legitimacy by facilitators if they are to be addressed within intercultural discussions. This negotiation will need to take place not only within the group setting but also between facilitators themselves in terms of creating a safe space for discussion.
- Bridging may be needed between diverse subgroups within faith communities as much as or even more than with other social groups. While common bonds may exist within a faith community in relation to religious identity, there may be a greater need to bridge within the faith community than to other groups in terms of, for example, gender, ethnicity and social class. Internal bonding or ‘rebonding’ to adapt to new circumstances is a prerequisite for effective bridging.
- A space for faith has yet to be fully realised within policy so that faith perspectives can influence the values promoted to inform practice. Interaction between policy-makers and faith groups needs to move beyond information giving and receiving or identifying existing common values to the ‘level playing field’ that would allow shared values to be negotiated. This would ensure that policy aims are influenced, and therefore supported, by those who are currently marginalised within this process.
- A climate of trust is essential to this negotiation and this would be supported by a level of accountability on the part of policy-makers to faith groups. This is particularly relevant to Muslim communities which are adversely affected by current policy positions on national security.
- Both within and between communities there is a need to recognise that maintaining traditional practices can exclude disempowered groups and damage social cohesion. The values on which these practices are based need to be renegotiated and space as well as legitimacy is required for the process of dialogue through which such renegotiation can take place.

# 4 Women, faith and social cohesion

## Policy context

Government policy on community cohesion emphasises the inclusion of women and faith groups in work that links diverse communities and creates equal life chances (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008d). Women are underrepresented in formal decision-making structures and recent policy promotes a number of initiatives to encourage and support women to take a greater part in such structures (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008b). While the need to include women from minority backgrounds within such initiatives is recognised, this is formulated in terms of ethnicity rather than faith identity (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008d). Support for developing Muslim women's capacity is linked to the 'Preventing Violent Extremism' agenda (Home Office, 2009), in which 'real and perceived grievances' within the Muslim community are considered primarily in terms of racism and poverty. The government has established the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group to advise on issues such as violent extremism, economic participation and education.

## Key informant and focus group views

### Women as peacemakers

Women were described by many key informants as having particular qualities that supported and promoted peace within society; these played a role in educating the next generation and passing on values that were important for social cohesion. Involvement in cohesion activity could consequently be motivated by concerns about improving children's experiences and futures.

*women [are] more sensitive, women [are] more concerned ... She's more peaceful actually, she's*

*more patient, she can work patiently on [these] peace issues ... we can work wonders ... It will eliminate any social evils*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

*I teach them respect to the elders, teach them respect that the person is a person it doesn't matter what colour of the skin you've got, it's a person where the heart is, if he's a good person he's a good person and you should respect that, that's how I bring up my children, and I think if all mothers would bring up children like that I wouldn't see any problem.*

Polish Centre focus group participant

Women recognised their own multiple identities and the fact that these could overlap and influence each other:

*we talked about our experiences of being a woman and it was interesting to ... so many different perspectives that were defined by age culture or religion or geographic context and families and how some of those overlapped and some of those worked down certain lines of just faith or gender, they were down lots of different lines.*

Christian gender and interfaith focus group participant

Key informants did not necessarily feel that women were more involved in social cohesion activity than men but they did feel that women were more likely to have the communication skills, passion and empathy needed for such work.

This notion of women as peacemakers was weakened, however, by a small number of key informants in positions of influence who expressed views that undermined the values of minority cultures. This apparent conflict with their employment as facilitators for 'bridging' activity

appeared to arise from principles related to other aspects of their identities. The relationship between conflicting principles did not appear to have been resolved by the individuals concerned. Nationalism and concerns about their own cultural values could consequently override their bridging role so that they privileged their own values or became confused about what position they should take on particular issues.

Such conflicting principles were demonstrated in the issue of women-only space:

*should there be gender division or not? And how do you manage that sensibly? It's a very, very difficult question ... it's actually quite a lot of fun and a nice bit of respite to be able to talk to a bunch of women and often you naturally orientate to talking to women, but our culture, the majority culture here in Britain is that you mix genders and in a professional environment you mix genders ... there's lots of ways of bringing women together, but the hard question is, is our direction integration? If it is, what does that mean? Are women a stumbling block to integration, or not? Are they an asset?*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

At least part of the confusion expressed in this quote appears to derive from the idea that bonding as women is a barrier to bridging with other social groups. However, most women did not conceptualise women-only groups in this way, although their reasons for supporting single gender activities varied. Group dynamics were recognised as different in mixed and single gender settings; interaction between women was seen as more relational and linked to common experiences:

*as women you have a lot more in common than sitting with men ... I think women talk about the day-to-day issues ... it's more personalised you can get to know each other on a more one to one basis and share aspirations and worries and concerns ... 'Cos every women has that same problem, you know, family, work community work, how do you balance it out, how do you juggle it all? And I think every woman you speak to has those concerns.*

Muslim key informant: interfaith volunteer

Whereas for some women single gender activities were 'fun' and 'more comfortable', for others they could be essential in terms of inclusion. For example, in terms of supporting women to build their self confidence and address social problems such as isolation and racism, working as part of a group of women was considered a means of removing 'internal barriers'.

Group activities such as craft, poetry, arts and media production were used to support women to develop such confidence by allowing them to build on their existing talents. This approach was particularly relevant to non-professional women who might not be attracted to engage in discussion groups that often did not have an impact at grassroots community level.

At the same time, generalisations about women from particular faith groups were felt to be unhelpful by most women. One focus group participant, who had attended a masters-level session on 'Women in Islam', felt that her own experience and that of many other Muslim women was not reflected in the homogenous picture depicted, which did not represent the diversity of experience within the Muslim community:

*I was feeling a lot throughout, well actually we don't have that kind of Islam in my family we don't, you know our relations are not like that, women are not treated like that.*

Muslim gender and interfaith focus  
group participant

### ***Inclusion within faith communities***

Women sometimes described guest/host relationships in certain contexts within faith communities that they felt needed to be addressed. Failure to recognise the contribution that women could make, which was 'partly untapped', limited women's ability to self-organise in ways that increased their 'bonding capital' and ability to act as bridges between social groups.

Some key informants felt that finding a way into male-dominated structures required alliances with men and that it was important for men to be involved in discussions about gender. Establishing a relationship of trust with male-dominated committees could be an important step to enabling inclusion:

*They got positive feedback from the people especially what we did in this Ramadan [month of fasting] everyday. After that they said now you are in charge or whatever you do ... they trust us with what we are doing ... the mosque called us and said they needed us and we needed to come back because "you've done such a good job and I think you should carry on" ... they said they missed us and "the place is not the same without you".*

Muslim key informant: community volunteer

Two key informants gave examples of organisations that supported women to take a lead, both of which had flat management structures and a culture of collective support. These had helped women to organise, network and develop their skills through hands-on training, being 'thrown in at the deep end' and learning through experience.

*there's no hierarchy: "I'm a man and you're a woman", and it's all the work, we work equally with each other and we support and help each other in taking those projects forward ... there's not training given it's just learning through you know different projects we've carried out. Learning the mistakes and moving forward.*

Muslim key informant: interfaith volunteer

Attitudes towards women within Muslim communities were felt to be 'influenced more by culture rather than religion' resulting in women being excluded from mosques and views that 'a woman should be at home, she shouldn't be seen outside'. The exclusion of women was seen as hampering beneficial change within the community in terms of the practice of faith as well as general development.

Interfaith activities were usually undertaken by a minority of people within faith groups. Communication skills, confidence, 'a certain amount of tact' and an understanding of one's own faith were considered necessary in order to share one's faith with others. Those with professional standing were therefore seen as more likely to undertake such activity.

One key informant felt that women who were from working-class backgrounds and had moved into professional settings were more likely

to work for change along with women who 'see the work as something that concerns them'. Personal involvement in the issues was thus seen as an important driver for cohesion activity.

The personal development of women was consequently considered an important issue for cohesion. As highlighted earlier, within focus groups, where non-professional women were more likely to be represented within this study, some women felt they needed more knowledge of their own faith and more space to develop themselves before they could feel equipped to engage in interfaith activity. Developing such knowledge from within the faith community could thus be a vital preliminary to an 'outward looking' perspective.

A number of key informants drew on religious teachings to challenge community norms that resulted in gender exclusion:

*I mean why can't women go into a mosque to learn something? At the time of the Prophet that time was completely different ... Girls are going to cinemas, watching films, why aren't they allowed to go to the mosque and to learn something? ... somewhere along the line people have got lost on why ... the reasons why they are not allowed to go.*

Muslim key informant: community volunteer

Through education and experience of activism women had been able to break cultural traditions and younger women were seen as being at the forefront of this change. Resistance to this could, however, be strong and external support was helpful to those driving change forward. Mobilising support from various sources, including internal support, could help to counter this resistance:

*So we got the support of the people who were for [a women's centre] and like we said we got the politicians involved, we got these local people involved.*

Muslim key informant: community worker

### ***Involvement in formal structures***

Key informants described a lack of representation at higher levels of formal organisations, including faith organisations, which meant that the

spokespeople for faith communities might not reflect women's perspectives:

*in a hierarchy, which [is] predominantly male ... at that level women's voices are not always heard ... I think it's who the spokespeople are for communities*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

An assumption within formal faith structures that 'women feed into all the work of a group' and did not require a specific focus was felt to be a further way of marginalising women and 'often means that a woman's voice isn't actually heard'.

Despite the fact that more women than men tended to work within community projects, key informants reported that women were not generally involved within the decision-making structures for regeneration programmes. It was suggested that this was because these were male-dominated and women lacked the confidence to feel their contribution would be valued. In one area a women's network with themed meetings around issues of local concern to showcase services was a successful way of engaging with women; however, this was not exploited to feed into decision-making structures (see Skidmore *et al.*, 2006). Women were more likely to be active at neighbourhood level meetings where a variety of meeting times were organised to ensure these were accessible:

*certainly a number of the women I've got are mothers whose kids have grown up a little bit, you know, sort of past being infants and they're at school and they have a bit of time during ... and maybe they're not working and have a bit of time during the day, or only working part time, or you know, that kind of stuff.*

Non-faith key informant: community worker

Providing childcare and avoiding meeting times that conflicted with school times was thus important to involving women in local decision-making. Some key informants also described ways of bringing women into the formal management structures of an organisation via less formal women's activities such as discussion groups.

However, the point was also made that existing structures helped to maintain the status quo

so that even when women got involved this did not lead to great differences in the way power was exercised. This suggests that rather than simply encouraging and supporting women to take part in existing structures as current policy does (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008b), traditional structures for decision-making need to be reviewed with input from women as a more effective way of creating sustainable change. Relying on existing structures to change themselves was unrealistic as change required women's active involvement.

*... we've been saying this over 20 years. We haven't moved forward we're still there in that rut.*

Muslim key informant: interfaith volunteer

Being involved in such structures, however, was not necessarily the solution as existing models of leadership and decision-making could involve a predetermined agenda and processes:

*Yeah, but, well it shouldn't have been set up in the way that it was, but ... that's what they had and that's how they had the money to do it. What can you do?*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

Evidence from key informants suggests that styles of leadership and decision-making to which women feel more able to relate need to be considered: these are explored further below.

### **Women and leadership/influence**

Key informants illustrated a number of ways in which women exercised influence to bring about change within their own contexts. This could be change in individual or group relationships or the introduction of new activity that supported change in attitudes. Such influence was a form of leadership that women exercised sometimes individually, but primarily on a collective basis, 'bringing people together who can take action in some way'.

Interestingly, this use of influence differs from existing models of leadership that are characterised in much of the literature as being an individual activity (see Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1999; Northouse, 2007). Transactional and transformational leadership models focus on

individual charisma and highlight the particular qualities, abilities, aptitudes and behaviours of individuals (Bryman, 1992; Bass and Avolio, 1993). In contrast, key informants conceptualised and exercised leadership influence less conspicuously and more collectively. Such an approach is more in keeping with the notion that leadership can be an emergent activity, distributed throughout particular groups with shared interests (Gronn, 2000; Raelin, 2003). Such leadership does not rely solely on individuals or necessarily on formal leadership positions or responsibilities:

*Nobody's taking the lead. We've got to battle it out between us how we're willing to work together, which, you know, I hope we do really. And I hope we don't agree on everything too.*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

The voluntary nature of involvement for women who could not attend in paid roles was highlighted as a barrier to the emergence of such leadership, however, particularly as a minority of women were often called on to fill numerous such positions:

*"Oh you never attended the last meeting why didn't you come?" I said "I wasn't well I didn't have childminding facilities, so I wasn't able to come." He goes "We need that fresh blood in there", I says "Yeah, I'm drained".*

*... We're forming our own committee and getting people involved from outside the organisation as well. I mean it's very slow because we're all voluntary workers er, we do it on a voluntary basis, so all in good time.*

Muslim key informant: interfaith volunteer

Role models who helped women develop self-confidence could be important in the 'journey' towards leadership and their capacity to carry out action despite the anxiety caused by potentially 'threatening' change. Some key informants saw themselves as undertaking roles that could encourage other women to do something similar in terms of making people rethink roles and religious assumptions:

*moving people's ideas away from [God] just being a male incarnation to being understood through the diversity of the human form.*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

This emergent activity to change the status quo reflected a dissatisfaction with those in more formal leadership roles, and work that involved 'ordinary people' was seen as important to progress on social cohesion:

*interfaith you know ... it can be the preserve of the elite, but not necessarily. I think some of the ... some good practices come out of just ordinary people at grass roots.*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

*a range of people who aren't community leaders ... who are just average Joes if you like ... one of the really nice women on our management committee ... was just a parent of one of the children who was playing [football] and you know got talking, she obviously had a local interest in what's happening and a lot of frustrations and she's been turning up at the management committee ... there are some advantages to having people who don't necessarily have a background ... in their ... in community ... politics if you like.*

Non-faith key informant: community worker

A number of key informants pointed out that formal processes presented restrictions in terms of involving such individuals who would withdraw because things became too structured or impersonal. Influence was thus seen as being relationship-based, such relationships developing from identification of joint interests but primarily from people being given the opportunity to interrelate in the right surroundings with an appropriate atmosphere to develop their own agenda of activity:

*I think the actual, the abilities, the skills are there in the community but, and it needs a skilled person to foster that and to encourage people and to develop that 'cos what you don't want is people coming in from the outside saying "do this" and going away again. The real people who*

*can bring about change in the community are the people who live there. I absolutely believe that. And I do believe skills do exist in the community to bring about change ... So it's a lot of work listening and confidence building and then enabling people to bring about some change.*

Christian key informant: interfaith worker

An a priori agenda did not therefore assist in developing relationships; rather, the development of relationships appeared to lead to the development of an agenda. This implies that civic participation and social action that furthers joint interests is more likely to develop in conditions that allow trustful relationships to develop. This mutual process enables individuals to come together to identify their own priorities to which they can then commit to take action.

Such trustful relationships appear to be just as important between state and citizens as between individuals and communities. Where the state and cultural influences predetermined acceptable spaces for inclusion and activism, this could exclude women's own perspectives and constrain their ability to tackle what they saw as the causes of social exclusion:

*pushing this government agenda – it's your foreign policy that is responsible ... yet you blame atrocities on religion ... I told [civil servant] unless you change your policies on Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, our young people will continue to be radicalised.*

Muslim key informant: interfaith volunteer

The picture presented by key informants was not exclusively one of collective leadership, and there were examples of individuals being key to maintaining momentum:

*I am committed. If I don't go the group will disintegrate because I am sort of a lead, a group leader there ... I am the organiser ... I'm some times so tired on Saturday and I think "I've got to go to the mosque now". For me it's an errand but they look forward to me.*

Muslim key informant: community volunteer

Overall, however, there was considerable evidence of the way women exercised leadership of the collective character of influence and decision-making. This appeared to be the result of conceptualising leadership as a grass-roots activity rather than a strategy-led or 'top down' system of influence.

## Findings from cohesion projects

### Empowerment

Project leaders in Stepping Stones, Sahara and UMMAH drew on their own personal experiences as women to develop projects that would help empower other women in situations they themselves had experienced. Developing the self-esteem of women was a focus for all three projects and participants were mostly already known to the project leaders. In the case of Sahara, the change of location had altered the project leader's initial idea to befriend individual women who suffered depression within their own home environment. Her own experience had been that 'if I didn't have the people around me just to give me that bit of a shove or a nudge, you know, I could be in this kind of state of mind for months or years even'. In all three of these projects, the focus on women's experiences and the common ground of family life and relationships was used to create a supportive and relaxed space in which women could come together on a regular basis for mutual support.

Within the Stepping Stones project, evaluation showed that women involved in both delivering and participating the sessions felt more confident as a result of the programme, mutually reinforcing each other through positive feedback. Session leaders felt that empowering this small group of women had the potential to impact positively on many others, including husbands, children and staff within the school. Evidence of this empowerment had become apparent as women from the ESOL class began communicating directly with a wider range of school staff, such as the deputy head teacher and class teachers, rather than relying solely on the school's liaison teacher as they had previously done.

However, the increased confidence of women led to one participant '[using] it to fight her husband', with repercussions for the project leader.

The fact that the project leader was separated was subsequently raised by the participant's husband with the implication that the project was promoting family divisions. As an active member of her local mosque the project leader felt her position within her faith community was harder to maintain because of her increased visibility, suggesting that women who empower others need to be supported to deal with the resistance their position might create. A second project leader felt that one had to be 'very careful' about the negative dynamics that such groups could initiate. In terms of the model for bridging activity presented at the beginning of this report (pp9–11), and indeed lessons from Stepping Stones itself, equipping women to mobilise support for their position and to create a constructive climate within which to challenge the status quo is suggested as the most effective means of addressing areas of potential conflict.

Confidence-building sessions built into the project drew on and developed women's existing skills and knowledge in ways that could be used in daily situations, an important criterion for success in the opinion of the project leader. Two sessions were included on using public transport, a situation in which women felt least confident. A session on 'Dealing with Racism' was also built into the project as the project leader felt 'every member of the group had faced racism'. A group-level confidence was created as women found a safe space to highlight their experiences in school:

*the women who were originally scared about saying anything about racism they had faced from school staff, explained it very confidently through role play in front of the head teacher and deputy.*

Project Leader, Stepping Stones

The project leader, herself a member of the ESOL class, felt this message had been delivered effectively via the project and believed it would make a difference to the way South Asian women were treated within the school.

Being taken seriously by the school sent an important message to women that increased their sense of self-esteem. The extent of preparation by session leaders and their competence to lead particular sessions was taken by the project leader

to indicate how seriously she and other women were being taken. Her own position within the class changed over the course of the sessions, reflecting her growing confidence, from being a member of the ESOL group to positioning herself alongside the session leader and co-facilitating the final sessions.

As highlighted earlier, the social capital available to the UMMAH project participants was limited so that they could not meet to develop knowledge of their own faith either in a community building or mosque. Their experience suggests a need for dialogue that could challenge the exclusion of not only faith groups from public space but also of women's groups within religious communities.

### **Barriers to cohesion activity**

Although the Lyrics 'n Friendship project focused on children, women were seen as the driving force in developing and delivering it. The project leader felt that women were more emotionally involved with the idea of contributing to positive change in society and had 'a greater passion than men in making a difference'. The passion and the emotional involvement of women was thus seen as relating to the promotion of positive interactions rather than being emotional per se. Men played a vital role in supporting this activity – for example, the musicians who visited schools to sing, some of the teachers who supported the project and the driver who transported the artists to each school. The project leader felt that, within the faith organisation backing her, religion was a liberating force for women and the common ground of faith promoted alliances between men and women so that everyone contributed to their full potential.

Nevertheless, voluntary activities were difficult for women to manage. The time and timing involved in delivering projects was affected by other priorities such as caring for children or sick relatives, particularly when cohesion activity was voluntary. During the course of the study, four women also had to cope with loss or threatened loss of employment – mostly related to work in the voluntary sector. Personal health problems also affected project leaders' ability to carry on, particularly as the 'bridging' partnerships between project leaders meant women had to make a special effort to keep in touch with partners outside their own usual

networks. There was consequently a danger of 'burn out' for those who did not have dedicated time in which to focus on the planned activity:

*if we were in a paid capacity you would still do them with that same passion but you wouldn't be burnt out at the same time ... You're juggling it as a woman with other things anyway, you're working, you've got your family life, everything else, on top of that you're doing the community work, but if it was just you know that job outside and you come home at least you don't have that extra burden of following calls through and whatever else that needs carrying out.*

Lyrics 'n Friendship project leader

Overlap between the project and a paid work role or membership of a formal organisation was vital to the success of projects and has been shown elsewhere to significantly affect the level of interfaith activity (Local Government Association, 2009). Two project leaders for UMMAH and Young Families in BD3 were able to use their work roles to dedicate time to the projects and so received organisational and administrative support. However, when this support was not forthcoming (over difficulties with payment of an invoice) the UMMAH project leader almost gave up as the other demands of delivering the project were already very difficult and she felt as though she were 'flogging a dead horse'. The impact of organisational backing was particularly noticeable in relation to the project leader for Lyrics 'n Friendship who was also involved in Sharing Stories but without the backing of her organisation. The infrastructure in place for the former project meant that it was delivered with very little input from the research partners; however, a high level of support and facilitation was needed for her involvement in the latter project.

Similarly, competing priorities affected participation by women who took part in the projects themselves, sometimes alongside other challenges such as controlling families who could restrict their attendance. Although not a condition laid down for the projects, almost all were delivered in women-only spaces (the exceptions being Lyrics 'n Friendship, which was delivered in schools, and Young Families in BD3, which attracted a father with a young child in the final sessions). Project

leaders chose this kind of setting deliberately and for the various reasons outlined by key informants (see p29). However, for UMMAH and Stepping Stones a mixed gender social setting would have prevented access for some of the women involved.

Access to space to carry out their projects could depend on the extent to which women could produce evidence of formal backing. In two cases space was made more accessible through the formal involvement of a member of the research team who contacted organisations on behalf of project leaders. Similarly, the UMMAH project leader drew on the fact that her group was being backed by a university and a nationally recognised funder to negotiate space within her organisation for the project to run.

## Key findings

- Although women often possess qualities that make them particularly effective in cohesion activity, they can also hold perspectives that favour their own cultural values and undermine those of other social groups.
- 'Women-only' space is helpful and sometimes essential for the personal development of women, which is a vital issue for social cohesion.
- Support for women to be more included within their faith communities and knowledgeable about their own faiths is an important means of increasing their confidence to bridge to other faith groups. In order to fulfil their potential contribution to social cohesion activity, women need more control over space within local community settings. Access to space for women often relies on permission and negotiation both within and outside faith communities. This may be facilitated by trust, external support, and reciprocal benefit for those who control the space. However, the guest/host relationship in places where women's activities take place means that such support is vulnerable to withdrawal.
- The inclusion of women in decision-making structures both within and outside their faith

groups requires recognition of their multiple responsibilities and time. Such structures have most often been developed without the input of women and need to be reviewed rather than continued in their present form to make the participation of women more likely and effective. The space within which women can contribute should be broad enough for their perspectives to be heard rather than narrowly defined by pre-existing policy concerns.

- Women often conceptualise leadership as a grass-roots activity rather than a strategy-led or 'top-down' system of influence. Civic participation and social action by women is more likely to develop in conditions that allow trustful relationships to develop between individuals and communities and between the state and citizens.
- The personal experiences of women and their ideas about how to address problems relating to social cohesion are an important resource for local communities, with the potential to impact on future generations. Barriers to their ability to contribute include caring responsibilities and the voluntary nature of such work. Findings suggest that the value given to women's contributions should be increased so that their activity can be carried out in dedicated paid time rather than in addition to, or instead of, paid work.

# 5 Evaluating our methods

## Participatory methods: a model for local facilitation

Participatory research methods have an established record of empowering disadvantaged social groups and allowed women to engage with the study at various levels. Our aim was to ensure that the women involved in the project and the ideas they generated for activity built on existing work and had local relevance. Our approach followed the most empowering model of participatory research outlined in the review of this method by Rifkin *et al.* (2000), which corresponds with the Level 4 interaction outlined in our own model at the beginning of this report.

Part of the research funding was used to provide:

- workshops to support and equip women involved to implement and evaluate their projects; and
- resources necessary to deliver projects, including payments to the women acting as project workers.

Research partners were involved in decisions about the type and number of activities that could be delivered and payments were negotiated with project leaders for work carried out and resources needed for delivery.

Financial support for those not in paid employment was offered following feedback from women themselves that it would be helpful. Interestingly, some women who were in paid posts from which they could carry out intercultural activity did not support such payments and felt that this should be done voluntarily or that faith groups themselves should fund such work. As highlighted in this report, however, not all faith communities have equal resources and the funding we provided was important to project leaders:

*The added value for me was the funding as well ... it did help ... I would have tried everywhere to get the financial support to make our work happen.*

Lyrics 'n Friendship project leader

For women in minority faith organisations, we found that even paid posts did not necessarily provide capacity since these organisations were often short staffed and relied on specific staff funding for each piece of work they carried out.

## Partnerships

Following the model for bridging activity developed from key informants (see Chapter 2, pp9–11), we encouraged partnerships between project leaders from different backgrounds who wished to work on similar projects. While many had aspirations to involve diverse communities, only one had thought of working with someone from another community to achieve this. We learnt important lessons about partnerships from the dynamics between these project leaders.

The support project leaders provided each other was important in the Sahara project, which had no formal organisational backing. However, while each project aimed to share decision-making between partners, stronger partners could take control, sometimes at the request of those with fewer resources, and who had less capacity to take on a leadership position. In terms of the research partnership, we found the same situation paralleled with our own community partners. Womenzone formally withdrew from the partnership about halfway through the study, following problems with its own funding and inability to support the work. The departure of our main contact at Active Faith Communities (AFC) led to various other staff members taking on this role, but the subsequent lack of continuity adversely affected the contribution that AFC could make.

By the end of the partnership their involvement was limited to attending advisory group meetings and taking on specific pieces of work rather than being involved with the project as a whole.

As highlighted earlier for project leaders, maintaining contact with each other to plan and deliver projects could be difficult since people did not usually move in the same social networks. The research partners consequently had to get involved to mediate or re-establish relationships because planning or delivery had come to a halt. It became clear that these relationships needed facilitation in the same way that interaction between participants in the projects was facilitated by project leaders. This involvement or ‘knocking heads together’ was appreciated by project leaders who could sometimes blame each other for lack of progress and not openly discuss or take enough account of the difficulties that their partners might face.

Reciprocity was an important aspect of partnerships – all partners needed to feel they were benefiting in some way from being involved in the projects or the overall study. This applied not only to our partner organisations, who were funded for their involvement in the study, but also to partners in the six projects:

*fantastic for our school and fantastic for our children as well, and of course it meets a government agenda which is working towards community cohesion.*

Deputy head teacher, Stepping Stones

We aimed to become partners with project leaders in terms of working with them and supporting them to plan and deliver their projects. Project leaders felt the lead researcher had managed to create a level playing field with them; indeed, a number felt they had developed a friendship rather than a professional relationship because of the emotional support that this included. In some cases the support received was seen as vital to projects getting off the ground:

*I started from the problems I faced. Five years ago when I came here first, I was not allowed out of the house on my own, had lost all confidence in myself. I know there are a lot of women like me and I wanted to help them but I didn't really know*

*how to do it. [Lead researcher] spent a lot of time talking to me and helped to show me what to do and how to do it, I have learned a lot how to proceed.*

Stepping Stone project leader

However, one project leader also pointed out that, realistically, a university team with resources, funded by a nationally recognised body, would always be seen as more powerful than a grass-roots organisation or individual project leader. Questions or suggestions to project leaders from the research team or funder could therefore be seen as directives or ideas that should not be rejected. This clearly has implications for how more powerful partners negotiate issues, and ensuring that project leaders felt in control of their projects was an important aspect of this:

*nobody's been ringing every five minutes and saying this that and the other or don't do this or don't do that, I don't think there's been any of that, it's just been, it's happening and just periodically when you have the workshops you have a little check and it's "Oh no, that's fine, somebody else is feeling that", or somebody else is struggling with that.*

*... one of the things that was really helpful was that as it changed that it was able to change and that it wasn't locked in to saying "No you definitely need to meet these kind of six sessions", and that's really important ... that's something I think that often happens with funding is you end up trying to make something happen when it just isn't quite right.*

Young Families in BD3 project leader

## Workshops

Four workshops were organised over the course of the study to provide opportunities for project leaders to share their experiences and resources and to have access to relevant speakers and materials. Workshops covered themes relating to the projects or identified by project leaders, including Evaluation, Conflict Resolution, Report-Writing and Sustainability. The workshops were also used to informally discuss papers sent out previously by email or post – for example an

accessible chapter based on the Asset Based Community Development model (see Kretzmann and McKnight, 1996).

Workshops were valued as a way of ‘genuinely sharing problems and trying to find solutions together’. The support network created by the research study enabled women to pass on ideas and contacts to each other and to get involved in each other’s projects. For example, Sharing Stories was reinvigorated after months of inactivity during one workshop when two participants offered to help with planning and delivering the sessions at the suggestion of the lead researcher.

The ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1973) created by the workshops allowed project leaders to access support from each other as well as the research team and partners, key informants, advisory group members and the contacts of each person within these groups. Again, the parallels with the women’s own attempts to create wider networks for the people involved in their projects were apparent.

## Ongoing support

Support for project leaders was also offered by the research partners, particularly the lead researcher, via visits, email and being ‘on the end of a telephone’. It became clear that using different styles of communication could be important, partly because of preferred communication methods, such as a project leader who described herself as a ‘telephone person’ and found it harder to respond to email. In some cases, project leaders had patchy or no access to computers and so could not receive emails giving information about funding opportunities or relevant events, which were sent out by post instead. As described earlier, university and Joseph Rowntree Foundation backing could also be important in gaining legitimacy and space for projects to run.

The kind of development we wanted to support takes time to achieve and we therefore tried not to underestimate the resources needed to build up trust and agreement and to follow ideas through into practice and learning. We allowed a nine-month period, following development of plans, for project leaders to deliver and evaluate their projects. Nevertheless, one of the most valued kinds of support we could give was extended

deadlines to deliver projects and reports. Only two projects met the original deadline for completion. Three others took around 15 months to complete and one which had been starting and stopping for around nine months was finally delivered a year after its original timetable. The multiple pressures project leaders sometimes faced, including personal and family health problems, family breakdown as well as caring and work/study commitments, all required extension of original deadlines to make delivery of the projects possible.

## Evaluation

Writing up the findings from the projects was the most difficult aspect of the study for most project leaders, confirming findings from other participatory studies (Khanna, 1996). We supported those who struggled to write reports in various ways. Workshops covered a sample report structure and ways of evaluating community-based activity. Apart from extending deadlines, we interviewed and tape recorded project leaders, using a report structure as the basis of our questions. We then had the interviews transcribed and edited so that women could select sections for their reports and formatted these selections along with any other information project leaders wished to include. The lead researcher also passed on notes from her observation of events she had attended when project leaders had failed to keep a record themselves. We translated and typed up one report which had been written in Urdu, the project leader’s first language.

*It was such a relief ... I was panicking ... It was really burdening me doing the report ... With the transcription, I was so glad to have had that support.*

Sahara project leader

Evaluation of community-based work by voluntary sector groups is often far from rigorous (see Aspinall and Jackson, 2004) and there is a risk it can become a public relations exercise because it has the potential to impact on reputation and future funding. We encouraged project leaders to provide an honest account of their work, assuring confidentiality for their reports and

emphasising our wish to learn from what they had done. Project leaders who engaged with the reflection and evaluation process appeared to gain most in terms of this learning:

*So many community events never get written up. But this made us sit down and evaluate what we had done.*

Sahara project leader

Our own focus groups with project leaders were a further way of supporting people to reflect on and evaluate what they had achieved and recognise that their own ideas could develop according to what they had learnt:

*It's been a good experience for not just myself – for my colleagues and parents as well and we've learnt a lot and it's given us some new ideas ... today's helped just to re-evaluate and you know, going back through things. ... we felt this would be really good and they'll do this and actually it's pants because they didn't want to do it they just wanted to be in each other's company.*

Young Families in BD3 project leader

*Writing up – it was teaching me more but in a different way.*

Stepping Stones project leader

In contrast, project leaders who had not engaged much in the reflection and evaluation aspects of the study did not seem to have taken any lessons to carry forward from their experience and considered this a 'one-off activity'. In one project, involving three very experienced interfaith actors, evaluation forms that had been completed by participants at each session of the project were lost, and only one session, containing very little reflection, was written up. Nor had the women attended many of the workshops, so they had not been involved in sharing experiences with other project leaders. Our focus group evaluation with these project leaders identified that working with a partner from a different background to plan an intercultural project was a new feature for the women. Yet one said 'we were doing all this anyway' and that it 'was nothing new'. In terms of future work the emphasis

of all three project leaders focused on pursuing their own particular interests. While there was a general sense of value in what they had achieved together, this was not translated into valuing such partnerships for planning future intercultural work.

## Sustainability

The issue of sustainability was raised early on in the study by project leaders and revolved primarily around funding. The lead researcher passed on details of funding opportunities when they arose, and a member of staff from AFC with responsibility for supporting people to apply for funding ran a session at one of the workshops. This staff member was herself the victim of short-term project funding, however, reflecting the constant struggle for resources within the voluntary sector.

Sustainability has taken various forms in terms of what will continue after the projects finish. New relationships have been developed through the various projects and the overall study, linked to new and wider networks for project participants and project leaders. Lessons learnt from each project are expected to affect the way in which future work is carried out, and it is to be hoped that the model developed from key informants (pp9–11) will influence the way those working in this area evaluate their work and the direction it may need to take. The study has also introduced 'new blood' into the pool of people carrying out social cohesion activity and helped them believe they have a valuable contribution to make.

Summaries of all the project reports have been produced (see Appendix 2), identifying the key learning from each project. One of the project leaders of Sahara is exploring funding to do more intercultural work to build on her project experience.

In terms of our research partners, Womenzone secured more funding and planned to work with the project leaders involved in Young Families in BD3 on a project relating to elderly people from different cultural backgrounds and intergenerational activity. By contrast, AFC has now closed as a result of difficulties in securing funding for its activities.

Stepping Stones, Young Families in BD3 and the Lyrics 'n Friendship projects all intend to

carry on and build on the lessons learnt through participating in the study. The two latter projects may well have been carried out in any case but project leaders felt the learning from their work with the research partnership would influence how they continued this work in the future.

In the case of Stepping Stones, however, it is clear that this work would not have happened without the project leader's involvement in the study. While all the projects have contributed to the overall lessons from the research, the learning from this particular project is perhaps some of the most valuable:

*We will be continuing – the project has had its own momentum and does not depend on the research. We are going to evaluate each unit ... There is greater motivation to continue.*

Deputy head teacher: Stepping Stones

## Replicating the participatory approach

Participatory methods offer a valuable way to engage local people who are motivated to become involved in social cohesion activity and correspond to Level 4 interaction outlined at the beginning of this report (pp9–11). The following guidelines for using this approach are based on findings from the study:

- Work with local community organisations to recruit people you can work with and to generate an overview of what is already happening in the area. Speak to people who are experienced in social cohesion activity as well as ordinary people who may have different views.
- Try to identify ideas for projects based on the real experiences of people and bring 'new blood' into the pool of people carrying out social cohesion activity. Help those with little previous experience to believe they have a valuable contribution to make.

- 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 project leaders feel in control of their projects. Be aware that project leaders may understand suggestions from more powerful partners as directives and it is important not to lose project leaders' 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 relationships between these project partners, particularly when some are more powerful than others.
- Encourage project leaders to develop Level 4 relationships with each other and with project participants.
- Support and equip project leaders to plan, deliver and evaluate their work. Provide institutional backing to help them gain legitimacy and space for their projects to run.
- Provide ongoing support in the form of workshops and regular contact, using preferred styles of communication. Use the workshops to widen the contacts and resources of project leaders and as a way of sharing problems and trying to find solutions together.
- Allow sufficient time for activities and extend deadlines when necessary to allow project leaders to succeed in delivering their goals.
- Address evaluation early on in the process so that project leaders can gather data for this. Encourage an honest assessment of the work, assuring confidentiality if required and emphasising a wish to learn from what is done.

- Ensure project leaders engage with the reflection and evaluation process so that they gain from the learning. Use a variety of methods to support them to evaluate their projects including focus groups and individual interview transcripts.
- Pass on details of funding opportunities and information/accessible papers about social cohesion activity to project leaders and support people to apply for funding, if necessary.
- Produce summaries of all the projects with a description of the process and key learning outcomes and make this easily accessible to others who may be interested to learn from the work carried out.

# 6 Conclusions

Contact between people from diverse backgrounds provides an opportunity for initial engagement, but sharing the same space does not contribute to community cohesion to the same extent as developing awareness and understanding, or addressing areas of difference so that shared values can be developed. Findings from this study indicate that ‘strong and positive relationships’ (see Department of Communities and Local Government, 2007) involve those that move beyond contact and consensus to resolving conflicts and addressing social injustice. A more equal distribution of resources, capacity and power is needed to enable women and faith communities, particularly those from minority backgrounds, to fulfil their potential contributions to cohesion activity. A climate of trust is needed for interaction that can lead 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.

This report suggests that faith communities and women are social groups with whom a deeper level of dialogue is needed – both within communities and within decision-making bodies. In order to lead to a new equilibrium in social relations, this dialogue will need to be 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 social relations and equal citizenship in every context.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed with the input of project leaders and members of the study’s Advisory Group:

- Social cohesion policy should promote the model developed in this study, and particularly engagement at Level 4, for bridging activity

between diverse groups and between citizens and local/national bodies. Policy that addresses social injustice and promotes a more level playing field between dominant and less powerful groups is more likely to address the root causes of social exclusion.

- Policy support and resources should be made available to enable people from excluded groups to identify local problems and work on solutions based on their own experiences. Specialist cohesion teams and others with responsibility for cohesion activity should adopt the participatory approach used in this study as a model to support local activity.
- Dedicated time for such cohesion activity should be resourced, particularly for women from minority faith backgrounds, who are less likely to be employed in such roles.
- Faith communities and women need to be involved in decision-making processes about local and national policy, not as ‘guests’ whose input can be defined and limited without negotiation, but as equal partners.
- Policy support and resources are needed for bonding activity within faith communities that enables the inclusion of women and gives them a stronger base from which to bridge to other groups. This support is particularly needed for women from minority faith groups.
- Within mainstream settings, a place for faith needs to be legitimised so that women from faith backgrounds can draw on their beliefs as a resource. Faith-based activity should not be excluded from public space, particularly if it supports the outcomes which mainstream organisations wish to achieve or gives women knowledge that would make them feel more confident to take part in intercultural activity.

- The climate of trust needed for policy debates involving faith communities to lead to shifts in position on both sides has yet to be established. This is particularly the case with Muslim communities that feel targeted by policy-makers in ways that increase social exclusion.
- Policy on the participation of women in formal structures should be reviewed to accommodate women's conceptualisation of leadership as a grass-roots activity rather than a strategy-led or top-down system of influence. Policy that supports the development of trustful relationships between individuals and communities and between the state and citizens is more likely to increase civic participation and social action by women.
- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation should use its influence at national and local levels to ensure the recommendations from this report are implemented.

# Notes

- 1 The term 'volunteer' is used to indicate that individuals led cohesion projects in unpaid time.
- 2 The term 'worker' indicates that individuals were in paid roles within which they could carry out cohesion activity.
- 3 The terms 'religion' and 'faith' are used interchangeably within this report to refer to people who are either affiliated to a religious community or who practise the teachings of a religion. It is recognised, however, that these terms may be distinguished (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 2004; Furbey, 2009).
- 4 See the model of 'bridging' activity in the report's Introduction.

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# Appendix I: Key informants and focus groups

<b>Christian key informants</b> (= 8; 7 in paid posts)	Anchor Project, St Clement's Church Bradford Cathedral Bradford Diocese Touchstone Methodist Centre Bradford Faiths Forum Bradford and District Women's Forum
<b>Christian focus groups</b>	Christian Interfaith Group
<b>Hindu key informant</b> (paid post)	Hindu Cultural Centre
<b>Hindu focus group</b>	Women's Group, Hindu Cultural Centre
<b>Muslim key informants</b> (= 10; 3 paid posts, 2 with short-term project funding, 5 voluntary activity)	Islamic Relief Communityspeak, Women Working Towards Excellence Islamic Society of Britain Chaplaincy, St Luke's Hospital Accent Community Partnerships Interfaith Education Centre Thornbury Mosque Khidmat Centre Byron St Mosque/Pollard Park Centre
<b>Muslim focus groups</b>	Womenzone Multimums: Muslim Women Converts – service users and staff Womenzone service users/management committee and staff
<b>Key informants without religious affiliation</b> (= 5; 4 paid posts)	Diversity Exchange BIASAN Women's Group/Drop In University of Bradford Bradford Vision
<b>Mixed affiliation focus groups</b>	Peace Studies, Gender and Interfaith group Newly arrived communities – Bradford College ESOL class
<b>Sikh key informant</b> (voluntary activity)	Guru Nanak Sikh Temple
<b>Sikh focus group</b>	Women's Group, Guru Gobind Singh Sikh Temple

# Appendix 2: Project summaries

## Lyrics 'n Friendship

### Overview

A programme of musical, educational and participative performances involving eight Bradford schools.

### Duration

14–17 November 2007

### Summary

Eight Bradford schools were selected to be part of a national programme of performances by Dawud Wharmsby and Idris Phillips, two Canadian Muslim singer-songwriters. The performances drew out the themes of valuing uniqueness, tolerance and accepting difference, accessing inner strengths, the importance of charity, social awareness and promoting community activism. Songs and interaction with the children were used as a way of promoting positive messages about these themes.

### Process

The programme was co-ordinated on a voluntary basis by a Muslim project leader working with the Islamic Society of Britain and Education Bradford. The original idea was to bring school pupils together at one venue for the performance at the beginning of Islam Awareness Week in 2007. However, through negotiation with schools and performers the final programme of events was based on the interests of particular schools. A large amount of practical and logistical work went into accommodating the artists and scheduling the programme.

### Key findings and outcomes

- Schools showed a great deal of enthusiasm and interest in inviting artists to help them build cohesion and understanding.
- School pupils were enthused and motivated by being engaged in this way and gave very

positive feedback on what they had learnt and on their general enjoyment of the performance.

- Engaging schoolchildren in this way around the theme of peace, tolerance and understanding, can form an ideal setting in which to bring together pupils from different backgrounds in a positive and progressive atmosphere.
- More work could have been done to ensure that the teachers were engaged; for example, providing preparatory and follow-up work with children through classroom activity before and after the performance to build on the themes promoted.

## Sahara Support Group

### Overview

Group work to support individual women from different backgrounds to overcome isolation and mental health problems.

### Duration

November–December 2007

### Summary

The project was based in Keighley but open to women from across Bradford District. The idea was to recruit women to the project by inviting them to a series of gatherings held every two weeks and facilitated by the two project co-ordinators. This was achieved through weekly sessions, and with a variety of different activities.

The sessions included planning the programme, sharing experiences in a safe setting, relaxation techniques and exercises, moral and practical support and guidance to access leisure opportunities and a shared meal. Participants were supported by the facilitators and encouraged to support each other and plan sessions according to their own needs and wishes.

### Process

A Muslim and Christian project leader combined their ideas to support women with mental health problems. The project was initially planned to run in Bradford but project leaders agreed to a request to run the sessions in Keighley instead. This adversely

affected recruitment, even though the sessions were held at a key community association in Keighley. Meetings were held on a weekly basis.

### **Key outcomes and findings**

- Small group work was helpful in creating a safe space for isolated individuals who related positively to each other as women despite their diverse backgrounds.
- Practical support for individuals was valued, as was sharing experiences within the group.
- Location and the project leaders' own networks were important in encouraging participation.
- Participants valued the sessions, which helped them to feel less isolated and able to learn from each other's experiences.

## **Stepping Stones**

### **Overview**

Providing a programme to bring Asian mothers and school staff together in a programme fostering greater understanding and communication.

### **Duration**

January–April 2008

### **Summary**

The project leader, a Muslim parent at the school, worked with women and staff from the school and a local mosque to develop a programme of nine sessions. These aimed to equip Asian women with the skills and confidence to interact with school staff on issues relating to the education of their children. Facilitated sessions covered various themes including confidence building, supporting children at school, dealing with racism, halal food and dietary issues, and sex education.

### **Process**

The project leader had no previous experience of planning and delivering projects and was supported through the process by a researcher from the University of Leeds. She held a series of planning meetings with Asian mothers, school and mosque staff to prepare the basis for the

programme. Through these meetings, topics and the format of sessions were agreed. The sessions were run on a weekly basis, facilitated by school and mosque staff as well as the project leader. The entire programme was then evaluated, detailing the feelings and expectations of participants and satisfaction with the outcomes of the programme.

### **Key findings and outcomes**

- There was interest and enthusiasm among both school staff and mothers to engage and learn from each other. Being taken seriously by school staff gave a positive message to Asian mothers.
- Building on the personal experiences of women was vital to helping women feel more confident about themselves. Learning about school policies and systems dispelled fears and confusion. Women also took the opportunity to raise the issue of racism in the school.
- The voice of Asian mothers in the school has increased. The project leader is now a member of the Parents' Forum and women from the group interact with a wider range of staff than before the programme, when they relied mostly on bilingual liaison staff.
- The school has organised IT classes for the women and is planning to re-run the programme next year. The work that has been done is being disseminated to other schools in the area.

## **UMMAH Project: Understanding Multi-cultural Marriage and Achieving Happiness**

### **Overview**

A six-week course for women in multi-ethnic marriages aimed at addressing issues and concerns, providing support and producing information and advice for the benefit of others.

### **Duration**

October–November 2008

## Summary

A confidence building and conflict resolution course was set up to equip women with skills they could use in their daily lives. The course provided a platform for the production of a booklet that recorded the participants' stories so that these could be made available to other women in similar life situations and professionals who could support them. The work aimed to provide a voice for women converts to Islam and help them overcome isolation and gain increased access to support.

## Process

The project leader built on her own experience and previous work with a support group for women in multicultural marriages. The group suggested ideas for possible activities that would help them develop more positive relationships within their own and their husbands' families and communities. An unsuccessful attempt to engage with husbands led to the decision to run a six-week course for the women themselves through the local relationship counselling service, Relate. After lengthy consultation with the participants, a booklet based on their stories, written up during the short course, was to be produced.

## Key outcomes and findings

- Within faith communities, women and converts may face barriers to inclusion that can be addressed through targeted projects.
- Taking time to consult and pilot different ideas with participants is important in making sure the project will be successful.
- Attempting to work with people who do not wish to be involved can be difficult and may mean that a lower level of awareness-raising activity is more feasible.
- Equipping women with the confidence and skills to deal with conflict themselves is an important first step to supporting change to happen.
- Such work relates to deep-seated issues within communities and a single project is unlikely to achieve all the changes needed. However, it can provide a small step to addressing these.

## Young Families in BD3

### Overview

A parent and toddler group to encourage local mothers and children from diverse backgrounds to meet and develop friendships.

### Duration

October 2007–October 2008

### Summary

The programme was designed to encourage greater communication and understanding between mothers and children from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Two mother and toddler groups met each week and friendships were developed between women of different backgrounds in a safe environment for people to learn from each other. The two groups organised a joint trip to the seaside and also enjoyed joint celebrations.

### Process

Interest in the project was expressed by six centres originally and included project leaders from Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian backgrounds. However, the minority faith centres did not have an existing mother and toddler group or people with dedicated time to set this up so found it difficult to play an equal role in delivering the project. A strong link between two Christian centres helped encourage an existing toddler group to become more multicultural and built on the success of one project leader in developing an inclusive group.

### Key outcomes and findings

- Parent and toddler groups can be used successfully as a platform to develop intercultural and interfaith relationships.
- Joint planning with partners from diverse communities needs to take account of their existing capacity and resources if they are to remain involved. Supporting those with less resources to develop their capacity may be an important first step in such partnerships.

- Learning from the success of an organisation that has developed an inclusive approach can help spread good practice within communities.
- Trying new approaches to develop intercultural work takes time and needs to be built into project planning.

## Sharing Stories

### Overview

A series of meetings for women to explore the issues of neighbours, families and climate change. The project used the faith perspectives of Muslim and Christian women to stimulate discussion about common ground between women from diverse backgrounds.

### Duration

Three sessions during June 2008.

### Summary

Around 20 women, many of whom had never met before, came together because of their common interest in sharing views about the themes of the meetings. Discussions drew on the personal experiences and concerns of women and the things they could do individually and collectively to make a difference. The group identified an issue relating to social justice and climate change; two group members agreed to take this forward to the local government Equality and Diversity forum.

### Process

Project leaders were very experienced in intercultural activity involving women but it was a new experience for all of them to plan in an intercultural group. This aspect of the work took extra time. It was also difficult to deliver the project in voluntary time and funding was used to pay a development worker to organise the meetings and publicity. Evaluation forms were developed and completed by participants but project leaders did not have time to fully write up the meetings or analyse the evaluation feedback.

### Key outcomes and findings

- The sessions provided an important opportunity to establish common ground and take social action. This built on the shared experiences participants had as women living in the same city.
- Faith perspectives helped draw out commonalities and did not exclude the participation of people without a faith view.
- Having someone with dedicated time to write up the discussion from meetings and evaluate the sessions would have increased the learning from the project.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the author[s] and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

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