






The role of Black women's voluntary sector organisations

This study, by Sonia Davis and Veronica Cooke at the University of Luton, is based on a cross-section of Black women's organisations from 13 different local authority regions in England, Scotland and Wales. The research undertook a comparative analysis, examining factors that determine needs, types and structures of organisations. The researchers also considered the changing relationship between government and the voluntary sector; highlighting in particular, the relationship between Black women's organisations and the State.

-  The research found sufficient similarities between the principles of and services provided by Black women's organisations for this grouping to be identified as a clear section within the Black voluntary sector generally, and the voluntary sector as a whole.
-  The value of Black women's organisations was reported to be their ability to release benefits to Black families, Black communities and to Black women themselves.
-  Despite being valued in this way, Black women's organisations were not identified in local authority policies as a distinct section of the voluntary sector.
-  There were considerable discrepancies between the funding allocations to different ethnic and religious groupings. This resulted in differences between types of provisions for ethnic groupings.
-  The differences in local authorities' approaches to different ethnic groupings of Black women suggest that they do not understand issues of race, gender, faith and nationality within their area, and the complex interaction between these factors.
-  Black women's organisations saw fundraising and contributing to local (and in some cases national) policy debates as placing increased pressures on limited resources. Organisations with core funding from local authorities said that funding levels, which had been at a stand still for some years, did not take changing demands into consideration.
-  Black women's organisations across the country did not feel that they were sufficiently engaged with local and regional strategic partnership schemes. This was reflected in the limited funding given to Black women's groups by regeneration programmes like New Deal for Communities and Health Action Zones.

Background

The organisations of Black women in Britain could, with some justification, be described as being hidden from history. Straddling two marginalised groups, women and Black peoples, the ideas and activism of Black women in Britain can be summarily subsumed under the homogenised categories of either Black people or women. This study sought to give voice and visibility to this part of the voluntary sector at a time when government policy is emphasising the need for partnership between the government and the voluntary sector generally and the black voluntary sector in particular. In addition to examining the types and services of Black women's organisations, the research was also able to examine the extent to which Black women's organisations are being included in this new policy and practice drive. (See the following section for a discussion on the particular use of 'Black' in this context.)

The distinctive nature of Black women's organisations

The factors contributing to recognising Black women's organisations as a distinct section of the voluntary sector included unity in their principles, types, structures, and services. The majority of organisations in the study shared the following principles:

- Black political identity;
- self help, autonomy and empowerment;
- justice and social inclusion.

Of these principles the most contentious was that of 'Black' as a political identity. For most groups participating in the study, the notion of 'Black' included an acknowledgment of an anti-racist approach and a recognition of a shared political identity beyond ethnicity. In contrast, local authorities did not consistently share this political interpretation of 'Blackness'. Most used the concept of 'Black and minority ethnics' (BMEs) to make distinctions between people of African Caribbean and of South Asian descent. Within this usage, the term Black was used to refer solely to African Caribbean people. Importantly, even this application lacked the political interpretations of the term provided by the women's organisations themselves. In the context of local authorities' use 'Black' is effectively stripped of the political significance attached to it by the organisations.

On analysis, the researchers found the

assignment of the label to one grouping confusing. On the one hand it inferred that peoples of African Caribbean descent are without ethnicity, and that they are 'all the same'. On the other, affixing the label of 'Black' without political definition, suggests ethnicity; in this context, it can become a way of simply making yet another ethnic distinction.

Reasons for forming organisations

The impetus for Black women's organisations was relatively similar between different ethnic groupings. Irrespective of geography (and to a lesser extent political ideology) interviewees spoke of the initial incentives being about: accessing resources, addressing inadequacies in mainstream provision, developing culturally specific and politically appropriate services. These reasons were juxtaposed, in different ways, against the isolation, exclusion, confusion, deprivation, oppression and sense of injustice experienced by Black women.

Those serving the needs of Black migrant and refugee women formed a distinct group. For these organisations, the stimuli for organisation were both the experience of racism and the lack of understanding of their needs and experiences within mainstream provision. In addition, a wider geopolitical context than that provided by the longer standing African Caribbean and South Asian women's organisations, was also significant. Refugee women come out of situations of:

"... conflict within which they have suffered displacement, loss of home and property, loss of close relatives, poverty and family separation. They are ... often the victims of terrorism, torture, sexual abuse and forced pregnancy The refugee plight is compounded by having to cope in the foreign country and ensuing cultural shock these women are suddenly confronted with." (The African Women's Welfare Group (2001) 'Creating opportunities/fulfilling potentials', Annual Report 2000/2001)

In short, Black migrant and refugee women came together in organisations in order to deal both with issues that migrated with them and those created by British society.

Services and funding levels

The range of services provided by Black women's organisations is wide. Examples found by the research included: youth work, adult education

classes, employment training programmes, mental health provisions, care of older people, refuges, counselling, general advice and support work, and social and cultural events. Services centred on the needs of women in all aspects of their lives. Even in those cases where provision included services for male client groups, this was justified in terms of women's relationships to men as wives, mothers and sisters.

Policy and funding

Local government policy

Despite the range and depth of possible services that Black women's organisation could offer, the research found a lack of clear policy from local authorities relating specifically to Black women and Black women's organisations. Interviews with local authority officers also revealed considerable confusion in understanding of Black women's organisations. For example, one officer explained the absence of funding for African Caribbean women's groups as due to her view that women themselves placed more emphasis on race issues than on gender issues. There was also a lack of funding for Black women's organisations with religious affiliations and those from Black migrant and refugee communities. As this respondent stated:

"Traditionally in a place like this there has been an extreme stock divide in, particularly, Asian organisations where they have been seen as being faith based; where the local authority has seen it as totally impossible to fund them. The fact that [the local authority] are funding local church groups and that kind of thing ... at one level there is no reason why [Black women's organisations] shouldn't get that funding, apart from some local authority officers have got it into their heads that because they are the Islamic Institute that the women's groups will, de facto, have to be religiously based". (Anjona)

During interviews, one local authority official explained the tendency to differentiate between the types of provisions funded for different groupings as follows:

"For Black women, Caribbean African women, the issue will be race first, gender second. For Asian women obviously it is different. So, consensus [is missing] around what the issues are for those women - which issues should they tackle, should they be race should they be gender? For lots of Black women, race

is the only uniform feature if you like ... how they experience issues because of their gender is going to very different, which is probably one of reasons why we don't necessarily have any Black women's groups in terms of African/Caribbean women's groups."

Not surprisingly, the range of dedicated organisations for Black women's faith-based groups and African Caribbean women was limited. The groups that did exist found it difficult to develop and diversify their service provisions.

Government policy

The effects of current central government policy were primarily reflected in all organisations having to allocate a considerable proportion of their time to fundraising from a wide variety of sources. The introduction of multiple funding agencies and the gradual displacement of local government as the single funding agency have also meant that organisations must develop new contacts and networks. Communications with external agencies were further increased by demands from local and national government for groups to comment on different strategic policy issues. In most cases, organisations spoke of such work taking away resources from services to client groups, as project workers' roles changed in order to facilitate the process.

Funding

There was also considerable ambivalence shown towards funding partnerships. The research found that few Black women's organisations had benefited from regeneration programmes. Only one organisation had, for example, gained funding from the Health Action Zones regeneration programme. Interviewees spoke of not having the resources to contribute to all the meetings for partnership programmes or not being fully aware of such programmes.

Conclusion

The individual organisations that participated in this study came in different shapes and sizes; and at times, considering the obstacles they and their clients faced, often achieved a great deal with very few resources.

The researchers conclude that the majority of organisations are still adjusting to the changing climate, which has involved an increase in activity that does not include direct work with client groups.

Consequently this has left some organisations vulnerable to cuts in their funding.

They also suggest that the absence of policies relating directly to the needs of Black women and the low levels of funding received by these organisations from the larger funding partnerships indicate a need for government strategies, policies and practices to reflect the pivotal positioning of Black women's organisations within their communities. Similarly, facilitating inclusion of Black women's organisations more fully in policy and practice could require government to review and clarify its analysis of the relationships between race, nation, religion and gender. That these factors often intersect and cannot be arbitrarily divided was, more often than not, missing from local government analysis of Black women's organisations.

Some areas were developing policies to include Black women's organisations. Joint projects between local authorities and Black women's organisations were enabling the principles, working practices, knowledge and expertise of these organisations to operate within the mainstream, providing a community base from which Black women could better access mainstream services. Similarly, the research also found examples of local authority staff and workers from wider voluntary sector organisations being seconded to work within Black women's organisations. The researchers viewed this sharing of skills and expertise as a mechanism of not only heightened interagency collaboration, but also of strengthening the basis for partnership. An extension of the principles underlying such initiatives, could it was concluded, also benefit wider policy and practice developments.

However, most respondents were ambivalent about the possibility of having equal partnerships with local and central government. Partnership between the Black voluntary sector generally and Black women's organisations may be one way of increasing inclusion. Such partnerships could enable Black women's organisations to share the responsibilities of participating in the different strategic partnership programmes as well as engineer stronger strategic positions for Black women's organisations.

About the project

The researchers identified a cross-section of organisations. The criteria guiding the selection were:

- currently operational organisations, longevity of organisation, mixed user group in which African Caribbean and South Asian women were major users and managers of the project, specific issue-based organisation, refugee communities, organisations with local and international remit;
- all the above criteria were placed alongside the need to reflect a reasonably wide geographic spread in relation to patterns of black community settlement.

Using in-depth interviews with 14 organisations and interviews with officers from 13 corresponding local authorities, focus group meetings and questionnaires to map the clusters of black women's organisations in the 13 locales; the research was also able to undertake a comparative analysis between local areas as well as gain a nationwide overview.

How to get further information

The full report, **Why do Black women organise? A comparative analysis of black women's voluntary sector organisations in Britain and their relationship to the state** by Sonia Davis and Veronica Cooke, is published for the Foundation by the Policy Studies Institute (price £11.95, ISBN 0 85374 800 4).

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- **The role and future development of black and minority ethnic organisations**, Mar 01 (Ref: 311)
- **Black and minority ethnic organisations' experience of local compacts**, Jan 02 (Ref: 122)
- **Mental health advocacy for black and minority ethnic users and carers**, Mar 02 (Ref: 352)