



Deaf people from minority ethnic groups: initiatives and services

Research by Waqar Ahmad, Aliya Darr, Lesley Jones and Gohar Nisar notes a number of developments involving deaf people or their families across the United Kingdom. The authors note that while statutory and voluntary sectors are beginning to respond to the needs of deaf people from minority ethnic groups, many barriers to social inclusion and appropriate services remain to be tackled.

f A significant development is the emergence of cultural and social groups led by minority ethnic deaf people. These showed the importance of religious and cultural identity to deaf people, many of whom experienced racism from white deaf people and marginalisation within their ethnic communities.

f Deaf people and their families often lacked a common language in which to communicate. A number of initiatives focused on sign language teaching for parents.

f Deaf clubs and organisations were often regarded as hostile and slow to change.

f Many minority ethnic deaf people and parents of deaf children were concerned that deaf people found it difficult to learn about their ethnicity and religion. It was felt that schools for deaf children could play a stronger role in the development of a positive ethnic identity.

f Access to information and services was hampered by poor provision of both community language and sign language interpreters.

f The majority of initiatives focused on Asian and Afro-Caribbean deaf people and/or their families, and were based in large cities. Provision was poor for other minority ethnic groups. There was little provision for older deaf people and deaf-blind people.

f Most initiatives relied on short-term funding. Initiatives in the voluntary sector were particularly vulnerable to funding cuts. Rigid funding remits hampered the flexibility with which initiatives could respond to user needs.

f The mainly deaf workers in the voluntary sector lacked training, information, resources and organisational support to compete for funding.

f The mainly hearing minority ethnic workers in the statutory sector felt unsupported, often faced racial hostility from white colleagues and users and had limited prospects for career progression.

Introduction

Little is known about minority ethnic deaf people and their families, and how statutory and voluntary sector organisations are responding to their needs. This research aimed to provide a national overview of initiatives and services addressing the needs of deaf people and their families. The research examined a range of initiatives: in the statutory and voluntary sectors; new and established; ambitious and relatively modest; financially secure and minimally funded. The initiatives differed in their remits and the degree of deaf people's involvement. The initiatives ranged from social groups to sign language classes for parents of deaf children and provision of information and resources.

Identity and self-help

A significant development is the emergence of cultural and social groups largely led by minority ethnic deaf people. These can be seen as a positive example of assertion of ethnic identity. Many deaf people felt marginalised from their own religions and cultures. Equally, these developments may be seen as a response to marginalisation within the white deaf culture, which many felt did not respect ethnic and religious diversity.

Parents were concerned about ensuring that deaf children learned about family culture and religion. Schools were seen not to be sufficiently concerned about children having a positive ethnic identity. Many parents had relatively poor communication with their deaf children which hampered the children's full participation in family life. Consequently, many parents as well as deaf young people felt that deaf people had over-rigid views about cultural and religious practices. Many parents had a strong fear of deaf children losing their cultural and religious identity.

This fear was based on an understanding that deaf young people had limited access to family languages, customs and religion. That children were often better integrated into the deaf culture was regarded with ambivalence. Whilst valuing a positive deaf identity, for many parents deaf culture was simply an extension of the white culture.

I send my son to school and he comes back an Englishman. (Bangladeshi mother of a deaf son)

Many deaf young people resented not knowing enough about their cultures and religions for easy participation in family and community life. Equally they felt marginalised in the deaf culture which did not respect their ethnic identity.

Lack of deaf role models was regarded as a problem by parents, deaf young people and professionals. This was particularly acutely felt by Afro-Caribbean deaf people who felt there were few accessible written and other resources about African and Caribbean history, lifestyles and values.

Many of the groups were attended largely by deaf women, or hearing mothers of deaf children. Group leaders talked of members being non-assertive to begin with. With time, however, users became more assertive.

I feel that I can learn more from older women because I am a young girl, so how will I know what it's like to be an older Asian woman who is married or something? This is the place where I get an opportunity to understand and talk with them. (Seventeen-year-old Pakistani deaf woman who attended an older Asian deaf women's group)

Information and counselling provision around cultural and religious identity was regarded as important by deaf young adults as well as many professionals.

Deaf people and their families

As in white families, deaf young people and their families often lacked a common language in which to communicate. Many deaf young people thus became marginalised within their own families.

Communication often took place through one or two individuals in the family. Many parents felt that poor communication hampered 'normal' parenting. Deaf adults and parents of deaf young people also felt that the previous professional advice about not using the language spoken at home with deaf children, hampered the development of family relationships and ethnic identity. Although in some areas the policy is now to encourage communication in the home language, where children have some speech, this is not supported with speech and language therapy in appropriate languages. For older deaf people, there was little provision in lip-reading classes for languages other than English.

... the kids feel isolated at home because they can't communicate with the rest of the family and ... no one bothers to translate for them. That's how most kids feel. (Bangladeshi worker with parents of deaf Bangladeshi children)

He sees us pray, he sees the other kids going to the mosque and he asks us why we are doing all these things but how can we explain it all to him when he can't hear? We feel it more now that he asks when we are fasting [during Ramadan], he asks 'Why aren't you eating your dinner?' (Pakistani mother)

A number of British Sign Language (BSL) and sign-supported English classes for parents were identified. Users were largely Asian women. Few Asian fathers or parents of other ethnic groups attended. Such groups helped develop valued communication skills. They were also an important source of information on deaf culture, services, procedures such as cochlear

implants, access to benefits, other advice and social support. Successful signing classes provided transport. Unlike in much BSL teaching, most classes were taught by hearing tutors, sometimes assisted by people skilled in Asian languages.

Sat at home you think you are the only one with a problem but when you venture outside the home you find that you're not alone, you find out about a lot of things. (Pakistani mother of two deaf children)

Inclusion and exclusion

Deaf people and their families felt marginalised in a number of ways. Services were not always responsive to their needs. Access was hampered because of limited provision of BSL and community language interpreters. The community language interpreters, when available, were not always knowledgeable about deafness and services; some users found them insensitive. Sign language interpreters were often not aware of certain cultural practices. Information about deaf culture, services and procedures, and support to parents was difficult to obtain, especially for those who did not use English.

Many deaf people had a strong deaf identity. However, they accused white deaf people of racism. Deaf clubs were regarded as not welcoming. Few minority ethnic deaf people held senior positions in deaf organisations.

... it's a very white deaf club, so what's the point of going there if they're not very welcoming. (Deaf woman at an Asian deaf women's group)

I'm not objecting to white groups or deaf clubs or white organisations like the [British Deaf Association] or the [National Deaf Children's Society]. But personally, I always feel the bottom of the pile... (Afro-Caribbean deaf respondent)

Afro-Caribbean deaf people felt that Asian users were better served. They related this to better self-organisation of Asian people and to ready acceptance by professionals that Asian users had distinct cultural needs. In contrast, the feeling that Afro-Caribbean and white British culture had much in common disadvantaged Afro-Caribbeans in obtaining resources and services.

Asian people have [different] religion, language, culture ... If you asked a Black person, [their culture is] the same as the white...they can go out, meet boys, go in clubs. Asian people can't, women only, different things. (Afro-Caribbean deaf woman)

Deaf people from other minority groups were particularly poorly served. Outside of London, there were very few initiatives focusing on groups other than Asian and Afro-Caribbean. The initiatives

involving Jewish, Irish and some refugee communities were mainly located in London, and a few of the larger cities. Equally, initiatives focusing on deafened and hard-of-hearing people were rare.

Deaf media, with a few exceptions, were regarded as largely representing white deaf people's concerns. Equally, schools for deaf children were not regarded as doing enough to introduce minority ethnic children to their religions and cultures.

Funding

Funding placed major constraints on services in both statutory and voluntary sectors. Few initiatives had mainstream budgets; most were supported through short-term funding. Initiatives therefore had uncertain futures. Initiatives in the voluntary sector were especially vulnerable to funding crises. Tight remits often hampered flexibility and thus the ability to respond to user wishes.

Voluntary sector workers lacked the training, information and skills to compete for funding. Many found the funding system over-bureaucratic with ever-changing criteria. To provide flexibility, some voluntary sector initiatives obtained funding from several sources. Perversely, this required even more time, information and energy to ensure continuity.

Workers' experience

Statutory sector initiatives were led largely by hearing workers, usually with professional qualifications (e.g. social workers). In the voluntary sector, deaf people were more involved as workers. Here, most initiatives were led by minority ethnic deaf people, or by parents. Workers in both sectors often felt marginalised. Very few minority ethnic deaf professionals were identified; for example, there are few sign language teachers or workers with deaf people. However, a few minority ethnic deaf professionals are now emerging in social work and education support.

Workers felt that delivering a sensitive service to minority ethnic deaf people or their families required extra resources and flexibility. For example, the lack of information about deafness, deaf culture and services among users meant that workers often had to provide this information. This task was often beyond their remit; managers did not always appreciate the extra demands on workers.

I always say to people, 'My post is not only social work, I am a development worker, I'm a social worker, I am advisor, I am everything'. (Asian social worker with deaf people)

Workers in the statutory sector experienced additional problems. Many faced racial hostility from colleagues and white users who perceived minority ethnic users to be using up scarce resources. White colleagues often abdicated responsibility for

providing services to minority ethnic users. Workers therefore often felt marginalised. Struggling against organisational hurdles was felt to have both emotional and career costs. Networking with minority ethnic workers in other localities was an important form of social support.

I'm sick of now struggling all the time, sick of fighting all my life ... And then ... you are the one who becomes a bad person ... 'She's the one who's always making a fuss ...' (Asian social worker)

Workers in the voluntary sector were particularly poorly supported and dealt with demands for which they had neither training nor resources.

... women came to me with problems, problems, problems. They thought I'm a social worker, a knowledgeable computer person. I'm not, I'm nothing, I'm a mother person ... I did a lot of work and all the problems ... telling me ... telling me ... and I became emotional and stuck. I've got no one to share it, nobody ... (Deaf mother with a deaf child)

Conclusion

Deaf people from minority ethnic groups are organising around issues of cultural and religious identity and challenging marginalisation from white deaf organisations. Education, training and social support are being organised through informal networks. Alongside this, there is an increasing awareness of problems of access to and appropriateness of services among professionals. Approaches to provision, however, reflect an emphasis on short-termism and 'special needs'. Further, focus is largely on Asian and Afro-Caribbean deaf people and families. Hard-of-hearing, deafened and deaf-blind people are poorly served, as are deaf people from other groups. Despite some welcome developments, little is changing in mainstream provision and developments are not based on a coherent strategy.

About the study

This was a national study of initiatives with minority ethnic deaf people with three stages of data collection. First, a postal survey of a range of statutory and voluntary organisations in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland was conducted. Second, telephone interviews were conducted with identified initiatives. Finally, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 85 people. Of these, 45 were workers, line managers and volunteers; 37 users; and 4

researchers. Overall 45 respondents were deaf, hard of hearing or deafened, and 40 were hearing. Deaf respondents were interviewed by: a deaf interviewer using British Sign Language; a hearing interviewer with a BSL interpreter; a hearing interviewer using sign-supported English; spoken English or other languages. Hearing respondents were interviewed in English, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati or Bengali. The study was supported by a Project Advisory Committee largely made up of minority ethnic deaf people. One of the researchers was deaf; three were hearing.

How to get further information

The full report, *Deafness and ethnicity: Services, policy and politics*, by Waqar Ahmad, Aliya Darr, Lesley Jones and Gohar Nisar, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 088 5, price £12.99). It is available from Biblios Publishers' Distribution Services Ltd, Star Road, Partridge Green, West Sussex, RH13 8LD, Tel: 01403 710851, Fax: 01403 711143 (please add £2 p&p).

A related Directory of projects and initiatives with deaf people from minority ethnic communities, by Aliya Darr, Lesley Jones, Waqar Ahmad and Gohar Nisar, is published by the Social Policy Research Unit, University of York and the Ethnicity and Social Policy Research Unit, University of Bradford (ISBN 1 871713 22 6, price £5.00). It is available from the Ethnicity and Social Policy Research Unit, University of Bradford, BD7 1DP (Tel: 01274 233179; Fax: 01274 235295).

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- Care management and assessment from an anti-racist perspective, Mar 95 (**SC65**)
- Deaf people's participation in local services, Jan 96 (**SC77**)
- Housing and mental health care needs of Asian people, Jan 96 (**SC79**)
- Deaf and hearing people working together in statutory organisations, Apr 98 (**F428**)

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