findings

Young Bangladeshi people's experience of transition to adulthood

During the last few decades, one of the major demographic, social and cultural changes within the UK has been the development of a diverse range of minority ethnic communities. In contrast to the latter's high profile in major multicultural cities, a number of communities in predominantly white majority regions remain culturally 'invisible'. This research, by Mairtin Mac an Ghaill and Chris Haywood of Newcastle University, focuses on one such group, providing an insight into young Bangladeshi people's experience of growing up in Newcastle. It also compared these experiences with those of young white people to show similarities and differences between their transitions to adulthood. The study found that:

- The combined effects of Bangladeshis' relatively recent migration to Britain, high levels of poverty, under-achievement at school, radicalisation and gender stereotyping result in social exclusion and accompanying limiting life-course opportunities.

- White institutional figures such as teachers and employers tend to work with stereotypical images of young Asians as being 'caught between two cultures', thus assuming that they experience cultural conflict and identity crisis.

- There is a serious anomaly between their parents' high expectations and their teachers' low expectations of young Bangladeshis' school achievement.

- In terms of future internal migration within Britain, compared with the Bangladeshis the young white people tended to understand their future lives as more likely to be living away from Newcastle.

- The younger generation of Bangladeshis are not actively involved in representing their community and there is an acute lack of Bangladeshi youth leaders to support Bangladeshi young people.

- Young Bangladeshis spoke of the early death of a parent or a relative as combining a sense of trauma and increased maturity. A main traumatic experience for young white people, which was also experienced as developing maturity, was their parents' divorce.

- Service providers report that they have difficulties accessing and providing services to the Bangladeshi community and, more specifically, to Bangladeshi young people.

- Due mainly to the lack of detailed ethnic monitoring, there is a serious lack of official information about the needs of the Bangladeshi community in Newcastle.

JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

Background

The lack of knowledge of 'invisible' minority ethnic communities in predominantly white regions is a major issue for policy-makers. This report is a response to this under-researched area. It addresses the absence of information and explanations of Bangladeshi young people's transitions from childhood to adulthood. Alongside interviews with Bangladeshi young people, the report also uses the experiences of white young people to consider the specific impact of 'ethnicity' on transitions. At the same time, it highlights a number of issues that need to be addressed by policy-makers, support workers and other professionals working with the community.

Family life and inter-generational relations

The research found that Bangladeshi young people presented a complex response to their parents' demands upon them. It combined an acceptance of traditional ways of life alongside the demands of western society.

> "We're all going through lots of changes and it's difficult, for our parents and us. But there is a lot more pressure as you grow up. You've got a lot more people to look after, and that is right. But in some ways it doesn't fit into Western ways. Maybe it would be better if the Western ways changed and they looked after their families. Maybe they're the real problem, not our way of life. That's what our generation have to sort out." (Nadia, a 17-year-old student)

Bangladeshi young people provided insights into a more uncertain reality, marked by internal (generational) tensions, complexity and ambiguity. Most importantly, they suggested that issues of youth transitions rather than cultural traditions were the most important questions that they face on a day-to-day basis. They felt that the latter needed to be addressed within minority ethnic communities themselves, while the former required urgent support by outside agencies, such as the local authority. In the eyes of the young Bangladeshis, leaving home and starting work were not a strong indicator marking a shift to adulthood, whereas, for young white people, leaving home and starting paid work were major indicators of gaining adult independence.

> "I think it's important, leaving home, 'cos it would make you realise what you have to do on your own... I do not know any older people that live at home. When you think of Asian people, their parents are pulling them back into the house, while our parents are pushing us out." (Patricia, an 18-year-old trainee)

Transition through education

As a result of more recent migration, young Bangladeshis have spent less time than any other Asian group within the British education system. The young Bangladeshis in Newcastle identified several key elements that have affected their schooling, including the use of English as a second language, adjusting to new schools through changes in their parents' search for work and accommodation, poverty and overcrowding. These elements may be a central contributory factor to the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities' continuing position at the bottom of league tables on academic achievement.

Key questions emerge in this sensitive policy area concerning the specific impact of introducing multicultural education in schools with only a few minority ethnic students, who may feel highly vulnerable. There is also the issue of teachers' understanding the cultural practices of minority ethnic groups. These may include family visits to their parents' place of birth during term-time, arrangements for fasting during Ramadan, demands on young people's time as a result of attendance at the mosque after school (reading the Koran and learning languages), as well as support that is expected of young people within the family, such as accompanying mothers or fathers to official meetings with representatives of the local authority.

In contrast, the profile of young white working-class students confirms the strong association in Britain of low socio-economic family status, disinterest in formal schooling and low academic achievement. This is most evident in relation to expectations and aspirations to higher education. The report found that schools also need to develop more effective partnerships with parents in order to enable full support for all young people.

Further education, training and work

The research found a specific socio-economic relationship of the Bangladeshi community's migration and settlement in Newcastle. Compared with the usual migration pattern of minority ethnic groups into Britain, the Bangladeshi community has not operated as a replacement workforce in relation to their white counterparts in the lowest paid jobs in the city. Rather, Bangladeshis tended to have a different relationship to the local economy than other minority ethnic groups, with a high proportion of men working to service their own community.

> "I think a lot of people in that community want to work in their community. The main objective is to get community development work. A lot of them have a real empathy within the Bangladeshi community. Rather than go on and get rewarding jobs, Bangladeshi young people tend to take side-steps, just to get in on the community work." (Work and Skills Training provider)

For an older generation, this community is much more insular and segregated in terms of their work, housing and leisure. Many of the young people reported that their parents worked within close proximity to their

family, friends and neighbours, thus providing a picture of community self-sufficiency. However, the young people in this study represented themselves as less segregated. For example, a proportion of the young people travelled across the city to attend different schools.

Although there is a positive feeling towards further education among young Bangladeshis, data by the Learning Skills Council reveals that minority ethnic groups report a highly disjointed experience of further education. This report reveals the picture that is not shown in official descriptions of young people themselves who demonstrate diverse patterns of participation in further education. Bangladeshi women were much more likely to describe themselves as being in education in comparison to Bangladeshi men - or, indeed white women and men. Also, both male and female Bangladeshis reported that they combined being registered for further education courses alongside long hours of domestic work or jobs in family businesses.

Cultural belonging

A major finding that emerged from young Bangladeshi and white people was the complexity of the impact of race and ethnicity on their everyday lives. Most Bangladeshi young people shared a mutual sense of difference with white people, having grown up in ethnically segregated areas involving separate housing, workplace and social activities.

"You go to some places… I don't like ... they remind you of a ghetto. But in Manchester and Birmingham, our relations live there, they seem to be the best ... a good mixture, a good attitude by everyone, all different communities. You go into town there and you feel safe." (Kasim, a 16-year-old student)

They also saw themselves as the bottom of the minority ethnic hierarchy in Newcastle. Young white people's experience of ethnic segregation was marked by a lack of interest in minority ethnic cultures, including that of Bangladeshi peers with whom they mixed at school. Hence, there is a need for multicultural policies to be inclusive of the indigenous population alongside minority ethnic communities, in contributing to an emerging notion of citizenship.

Lifestyles: gender matters

Major debates are taking place about the changing roles of men and women, particularly with reference to the relationship between family life and the workplace. Within this more general context, there are few institutional policies and little professional development to challenge gender stereotyping of Bangladeshi young people. At the same time, young people spoke of changing ideas in society about what it means to be a woman or a man, which need to build upon values within the Bangladeshi community. The study suggests the continuing

constraints on young women's lives that served to close down future opportunities, while young men told of peer pressure to act out particular styles of masculine behaviour to prove their manliness.

"Here, in Britain, there are lots of stereotypes of Muslim women. They've all got worse recently. So, if you go for a job or try and get decent housing, you will not be treated equally. Or, even walking down the road in a lot of cities in this country, you are not going to be safe. You are a target of all their stereotypes, which holds us back all the time. This is true for a lot of women but it's even more so for Asian women. You are a target of all their prejudice. So, if you go out of your own area, you have to ask, 'Am I safe here?' " (Sajjad, an 18-year-old in sales)

Alongside this, young people reported a paradox around gender stereotyping. For example, teacher gender stereotypes of Muslim girls were accompanied by teacher expectations that girls would achieve better examination results than boys.

Relationship between local policy-makers and local communities

Service providers have serious difficulties in gaining access and providing services to the Bangladeshi community, more specifically to Bangladeshi young people. The research identified several explanations, ranging from young people's general lack of knowledge of the local agencies and their aims, to one of lack of funding and resources to sustain existing initiatives. At the same time, the study revealed several differences of how young people were perceived. These perceptions were crucial to how different agencies were relating and working with the young people. In other words, understandings about the nature of young people themselves determined the types of support being offered to young people.

Alongside this, the researchers found that young youth workers from the Bangladeshi community wished to be actively involved in representing their community in relation to local planning, the provision of local authority support and other community-based issues. Participants in this research have emphasised that they are a younger generation that are experiencing a strong sense of vulnerability and risk. Existing relationships between their community and local government officials exclude them. For young Bangladeshi people, making these concerns central to future policy initiatives is crucial.

"Every community changes over a few generations. We'll work out among ourselves all the traditional stuff. But there's a suspicion that that's all those outside the community really care about. Teachers, local government people, whoever, they should come and ask the young people. We can tell them lots of ways

of supporting us, through schools, training, preparing for university, bad housing, health, everything. And our parents, the Bangladeshi community, has not been in England long and need support." (Haamid, a 17-year-old trainee)

In contrast, no evidence was found among young male and female white people of interest in local politics from which they were seriously alienated.

There is also an urgent need to appoint youth leaders from diverse minority ethnic communities to support young people. The latter often see existing structures of official support as inter-related with their families and community. As a result, interactions with various agencies and community structures are often understood as making private concerns public. This means that disclosures, whether emotional, physical or even financial, may be interpreted as highly problematic. At the same time, young people, while respecting the older generation of community leaders, feel that they often do not fully appreciate the specific pressures of growing up in Britain today. Young people claim that younger community and youth workers could play a central role in mediating their particular needs in relation to official agencies and parental demands upon them.

Conclusion

Several interconnecting issues are identified as resulting in cultural invisibility. These include:

- the absence of official categorisation of minority ethnic groups;
- the size of the community;
- how recently it has settled in Britain;
- its geographical location within a predominantly white region; and
- its level of political representation.

The concept of cultural invisibility is critical, as established minority ethnic groups are being displaced by high-profile media stereotypes about refugees and asylum seekers. At the same time, the notion is of significance for inter-ethnic relations among minority groups, who operate with their own internal social hierarchies that can result in a reinforcement of cultural 'invisibility' and accompanying social exclusion for those at the bottom.

In the report the researchers have addressed key local issues of concern arising from the study of Bangladeshi young people's transition into adulthood in the Newcastle region. At the same time, while carrying out the research, several issues emerged that have significance for other 'invisible' minorities in other contexts and the national policy agenda. These include:

- ethnic monitoring;
- living with ethnic difference;
- diversity of Muslim community;
- multicultural education in 'white majority' regions; and
- the relationship between local policy-makers and the younger generation in local communities.

About the project

The investigation documented and explored young people's experience in three ways. General information (statistics and trends) was collected on the changing local and national socio-economic trajectories of young Bangladeshis. The testimonies of sixty Bangladeshi young people (30 men and 30 women) aged between 16 and 18 were collected with semi-focused interviews. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a comparative group of 40 white 16- to 18-year-olds, 20 of each gender.

For further information

The full report, **Young Bangladesh people's transition to adulthood** by Chris Haywood and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill at Newcastle University, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 271 5, price £13.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk (ISBN 1 85935 272 3).

Read more *Findings* at www.jrf.org.uk
Other formats available. Tel: 01904 615905, Email: info@jrf.org.uk

JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION