Routes and barriers to citizen governance

This study explored the realities of citizen governance through the testimonies of 50 women from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities actively engaged in Birmingham and Wolverhampton, and participants from selected affluent and disadvantaged Birmingham wards.

Key points

- Engagement with governance structures mostly stemmed from a combination of factors, such as personal interest, exposure to the community and voluntary sector, and background influences like faith, upbringing and life experiences.

- Overall, there were more similarities than differences between the experiences and views expressed about governance by participants from disadvantaged and more affluent wards. Participants from all wards often felt a strong sense of commitment to the area where they were actively involved.

- Lack of broader community engagement was attributed to factors such as the complexity of local governance structures and excessive bureaucracy as well as lack of time, awareness, confidence and expertise.

- Most participants felt positive about their personal contribution and were committed to engagement in governance. Such participation was viewed as important, although often frustrating and challenging.

- Over three-quarters of the BME women had experienced gender, race and/or faith discrimination. They believed that race and gender stereotyping and the existence of 'glass ceilings' made it harder for them to access and progress within governance structures. Community attitudes and beliefs also impinged on the ability of some women of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi background to participate.

- Lack of confidence, not lack of skill or desire, was perceived to be a major barrier for BME women. Despite the challenges, nearly all of the women interviewed were determined to succeed.

- Participants believed that strong frontline leadership, both appointed and elected, was vital for effective community governance. Leadership by recognised, visible and known individuals was viewed more positively than that seen to be 'institutionally' led. Local leaders were expected to be connected to the communities they served, appropriately skilled and of 'good character'.

The research
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Background

Government policies for neighbourhood and civil renewal, community cohesion and devolution emphasise participative governance. Local government and other public bodies are increasingly required to develop local partnerships and other structures that enable communities to participate in and influence local decision-making.

Increasing participation at community level improves local service delivery, raises local accountability, empowers communities and develops cohesive communities. It is also vital for reconnecting citizens with the process of government and improving satisfaction with electoral democracy.

This study examined the realities of citizen governance from the perspective of participants living and working within six Birmingham wards, and 50 women from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities in Birmingham and Wolverhampton. BME women refers to Asian women from Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds and black women, including black Caribbean and black African.

Motivations and governance

"I realised that I as an individual could represent the less fortunate but also just be a mouthpiece … I think that's where it all started." (Councillor)

Although civic involvement had its challenges nearly all participants felt that contributing to civic life was important and envisaged a future within community governance. Participants identified several factors that led to their involvement in governance. Personal aspirations often led to engagement in formal and informal governance structures, including wanting to 'make a difference', 'giving back' to the community, concern about a specific issue and political ambitions.

Upbringing, cultural background and life experiences often shaped participants' views of community engagement. A survivor of domestic violence, for example, pursued governance because she believed something positive could come out of her experience. Childhood participation in clubs influenced civic involvement in adulthood. Some participants believed that growing up with a strong sense of community

contributed to their later engagement. Participation frequently started through volunteering in the community. As social capital was built, this often led to opportunities to engage in other capacities.

As numerous jobs require engagement with communities this inevitably created opportunities for ongoing involvement within formal and informal governance structures. Working in areas such as social work, health care, youth work, community development, housing and education often led to a desire and opportunity to engage further within community structures.

For a third of participants, their faith was a highly motivating factor that underpinned governance participation. In other cases, participants' involvement began with a personal invitation from active family members, friends, colleagues or acquaintances.

Barriers to governance

The study found that the culture of citizen participation was often ill aligned with public bodies' ambitions for local governance. Although participants were committed to involvement, they often expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with the operation of local governance structures. Some preferred informal structures, which were perceived to be more grounded in the community, less bureaucratic and more accessible. Those choosing to participate through formal structures were sometimes viewed as having joined 'the establishment' and abandoning their community roots.

Participants highlighted poor communication channels, hierarchical structures and conflicts of interests between community needs and personal and organisational agendas. Some pointed to lack of community confidence in the process of engagement, which was considered to be largely futile.

"There is a process locally that people can engage in, but they feel very cynically that people don't listen." (Primary Care Trust member)

General barriers included lack of time, lack of awareness, and practicalities such as the timing of meetings and inadequate childcare facilities. Some participants from faith backgrounds highlighted ideological differences, which limited the scope for faith groups to play a more active role.

BME women's experience of governance

Nearly all the BME women interviewed displayed a positive attitude towards engagement in governance. A majority believed that they made a difference and aspired to broaden their participation and sphere of influence. Qualities required were felt to be self-confidence, a good education, a strong personality, determination and assertiveness. Almost all the women believed, however, that targeted support was necessary to increase engagement by other women from their communities.

Over three-quarters of the women had experienced prejudice, discriminatory practices and race, gender and faith barriers. The negative attitudes and behaviour of some people leading and participating within governance structures made it harder for the women to fulfil their governance roles, and limited their access to and progression within all types of structures.

> "Yes, there is racism! I may wear a headscarf, people think I'm thick or incompetent, or oppressed, or all of these things. It's people's stereotypes … you have to work hard to break these down." (Primary Care Trust member)

Women from both Asian and black backgrounds felt that they suffered from negative stereotyping. Muslim women highlighted negative connotations associated with wearing a headscarf and general anti-Islamic prejudice due to perceived links to terrorism. Even highly educated, experienced participants felt underlying pressure to justify their involvement within governance structures. They felt frustrated at constantly having to try much harder to be heard than their white and male counterparts. Some believed that there was antipathy to confident, outspoken BME women accessing positions of influence and power, and felt that the 'glass ceiling' was firmly in place.

Cultural factors impacted on the ability of some Asian women to participate within civic life. More than half felt that engagement in community structures or having political views was at odds with cultural norms, leading to indifference, suspicion and some outright hostility from their communities.

Role of place

Across all wards the correlation between civic engagement and sense of commitment to the area where participants were involved was strong. As participation broadened and deepened, so did the connection to an area.

Similar views were expressed by participants from disadvantaged and affluent wards. Communities were generally perceived to be apathetic towards governance. Residents from affluent wards were more likely to perceive dealing with community issues as being the state's responsibility, not that of the local community. Governance participation was also seen to be easier for individuals from middle class and certain socio-economic backgrounds and dominated by professionals, elected officials and well-educated people.

While community cohesion and equality were perceived as important, inclusive governance was not considered a reality in many areas. Challenges highlighted included parochialism, neighbourhood polarisation, disproportionate power and influence, and language and communication issues.

> "One of the hardest things for people to do is to build relationships between the cultures." (District Strategic Partnership member)

Leadership challenge

> "... there is something about having people who live by a moral code, who work for the good of the community and who can bring about that cohesion." (Voluntary and community organisation member)

Participants viewed the role of frontline leadership, such as councillors, chairs, appointed officials and community-based leaders, as vital for their communities' well-being, engaging citizens in local governance and developing effective partnership structures.

The defining components of strong, effective leadership were seen as **character, connectedness and competence**. Leaders were expected to be of 'good' character with high standards of personal conduct, particularly trustworthiness, integrity and honesty. Conduct most likely to cause concern was the appearance of questionable ethics, hidden personal agendas and duplicity.

Being connected to the communities they served was also considered an important aspect of community leadership, whether through residency in the area or having an emotional or spiritual association. Leadership perceived to be driven by officialdom and bureaucrats through impersonal institutional structures inspired less confidence than that by known individuals such as councillors and community leaders.

In addition to technical competences, softer 'people and communication skills', particularly the art of listening, were considered most important. These skills were needed to motivate others, resolve conflict and bring together disparate groups.

Conclusion

The study found a mismatch between ambitions for governance and the reality of governance. To address this imbalance the following areas are highlighted.

Governance leadership – strong frontline leadership is vital for increasing trust and widening local governance's reach and impact. This requires leaders such as councillors, chairs and appointed officials who are empowered and equipped for the task and fully committed to working in partnership with communities. Building confidence also depends on leaders displaying exemplary character and behaviour, maintaining the highest ethical standards and development of strong public accountability structures.

Building inclusive governance – skilled leadership is integral for achieving co-operation by communities and increased representation by all ethnic groups. Priorities include counteracting discrimination, promoting equality and ensuring that the values and principles of inclusive governance are reflected within local structures. Other measures needed are:

- open, honest dialogue to increase understanding of the specific challenges faced by faith groups;
- mentoring programmes and positive role models to support engagement by BME women; and
- appropriate capacity building and training support.

Strengthening engagement structures – a more positive environment with a 'listening, can-do' culture is needed to increase community confidence, underpinned by an effective communication strategy. This includes highlighting success stories, providing opportunities to learn about the aims and processes of local governance, timely feedback on consultations, a more focused agenda for meetings, and ensuring that communities' needs and concerns are taken into account in the planning stages.

Harnessing motivations – people with aspirations and potential to engage in governance exist in all ethnic communities and all types of neighbourhoods. However, different communities face different obstacles, and structures that might be appropriate in one neighbourhood might not be appropriate in another. To ensure that everyone has the equal opportunity to participate, local government and partners need to more clearly identify and challenge the specific barriers existing within their localities and communities.

Governance definition – greater clarity is needed about what encompasses local governance.

About the project

The study explored the reasons for civic engagement, routes taken and the personal challenges faced by participants. It also examined views on governance leadership and barriers preventing wider involvement. The sample included 50 women of black and Asian backgrounds from Wolverhampton and Birmingham. Nearly all were active within formal and/or informal governance structures in the education, regeneration and health sectors. In addition, 60 individuals from three disadvantaged and three affluent Birmingham wards participated, nearly all of whom were active within local structures. Their ethnic backgrounds represented the wards' demographics.

The consultation programme involved interviews with councillors, council officers holding governance positions, Primary Care Trust members, representatives from Local Strategic Partnerships and other local partnerships, members of neighbourhood forums, and representatives from the voluntary, community and faith sectors.

For further information

The full report, **Routes and barriers to citizen governance** by Santosh Rai, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

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