Community work as women's work? The gendering of English neighbourhood partnerships.

Lucy Grimshaw

Abstract

This article contributes to debates about regeneration policy by developing a gendered perspective on neighbourhood partnerships. It explores the gendered nature of partnership working within regeneration policy in England by using a case study of a New Deal for Communities Partnership. Empirical data is used to explore the experiences of women working as unpaid community activists and paid community professionals. The article seeks to place women's perspectives and their everyday lives at the heart of debates about regeneration policy and partnerships.

Key words: women; community; partnerships; neighbourhoods

Introduction: Neighbourhood renewal and community participation

From 1997 until 2010 the Labour Government placed neighbourhoods, partnership working and community participation at the centre of its urban policy. This focus is not unique to the UK and can be found across Europe and elsewhere (Geddes, 2000). In the UK the Labour Government's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (SEU, 1998) exemplified this approach. It sought to address the gap between the country's richest and poorest neighbourhoods, thus reducing inequalities and social exclusion, whilst also improving service delivery, creating active citizens and achieving democratic renewal. The importance of community involvement and empowerment was enshrined in regeneration policy, with the community described as 'the most powerful resource in turning around neighbourhoods' (SEU, 1998: 68).

The New Deal for Communities programme was a major part of the strategy for neighbourhood renewal. Launched in 1998, thirty-nine partnerships were established in

the poorest neighbourhoods in England to tackle a range of policy agendas including health, employment, education, housing and crime. These partnerships included the public, private, voluntary and community sectors and were to mark a change from previous regeneration programmes' failure to give people from local communities a voice in regeneration. The partnerships were to be *led* by communities rather than *with* communities (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002).

Yet community involvement and partnership working still fell short of expectations (Robinson et al., 2006; Imrie and Raco, 2003). This article examines the shortcomings of recent regeneration policy through a 'gender lens'. It discusses the lack of a gender perspective on regeneration policy and using a case study NDC partnership explores the implications this has for the role of women in neighbourhood partnerships.

Gendering regeneration policy: community work and partnerships

Regeneration policy prior to 1997 was characterised by gender neutrality (Brownill and Darke, 1998; Riseborough, 1997) and the Labour Government continued this trend (Brownill, 2004). This lack of attention to gender in regeneration policies typified Labour's overall social policy approach (Annesley et al., 2007). The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (SEU, 1998) contained 'little systematic analysis of gendered disadvantage and gender inequalities' (Alsop et al., 2001) and neither did the NDC programme.

In the initial guidance concerning the establishment of NDC Partnerships gender is mentioned twice: first in relation to the need for desegregated data for men and women who are economically active in the neighbourhood; and second in relation to the level of women's dissatisfaction with childcare provision (note there is no equivalent data for men's dissatisfaction) (DETR, 2000a; DETR, 2000b). Only in later guidance did gender receive limited attention with the suggestion that partnerships should aim for a 40-60 gender split (which fell short international calls for of the 1995 UN Conference on Women's call for a 50-50 split in decision-making bodies). Guidance also suggested that the diversity of the black and minority ethnic population (in terms of gender, culture,

religion, ethnicity and age) should be considered and 'if appropriate' reflected on the Board (ODPM, 2004:32). Although the guidance mentions some of the issues facing women such as their lower incomes, their caring roles and their role as the majority of lone parents, as Brownill (2004) found in her analysis of urban policy, the NDC guidance gives no examples of nor mechanisms to address these issues.

The argument for a gendered analysis in regeneration policy is particularly important given the evidence about gender inequalities and the role of women in community work. Women are amongst the poorest in society and most active in the community thus 'shouldering the burden of poverty' (May, 1997; Brownill and Darke, 1998). The rise of neo-liberalism and the 'rolling back of the state' led to an increased reliance of the state on women's unpaid work in the home and community to fill gaps in public services (Smith, 2001; Hainard and Verschuur, 2001). Women were seen as the driving force in improving poorer neighbourhoods and communities (May, 1997; Brownill and Darke, 1998). Across the NDC programme more women than men were involved in NDC activity (Batty et al., 2010).

Within policy discourses community work is consistently linked to the family and the private sphere (Wilson, 1977; Fremeux, 2005; Brownill, 2004). The principles of communitarianism, which reiterated the importance of the 'family' to the renewal of community and society, underpinned Labour's turn to 'community' (Imrie and Raco, 2003; Smith, 2001; Newman, 2001). Parents were meant to be active in preventing a series of social problems and contributing to the revival of local communities, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods. This link between the family and community is central to understanding the gendered nature of community (Gosling, 2008). Mothers, particularly single mothers, were often denigrated for raising 'broken families' whilst being charged with mending their own family and the communities within which they lived (Gosling, 2008). This is not to say that only women take part in community activity but that community rebuilding continues to be a gendered experience (Smith, 2001) and one which relies on the traditional roles of women and men (Brownill, 2004).

The gendering of community work is extended to the type of work which women and men do. Women are said to participate in different ways to men, taking up more informal roles such as organising 'shared childcare' or improving neighbourhood environments, whilst men prefer to sit on formal committees and decision-making bodies (Lowndes 2004). The national evaluation of the NDC confirmed this conception. It found that more men than women were likely to take part in Board activities and that community representatives on NDC Boards are 'disproportionately male, over 50, white, in households without children, employed (if of working age) or retired, middle class, highly qualified and long standing residents.' (Batty et al., 2010: 7)

Despite this predominance of men amongst community representatives. More women are taking up formal roles in community activity and particularly in neighbourhood partnerships (Beebeejaun and Grimshaw, forthcoming). Yet neighbourhood partnerships provide a contradictory potential for inclusivity (Brownill and Darke, 1998) They can open up opportunities for a range of people from local communities to participate but unequal power relations between the public, private and community sectors still characterise partnerships (Imrie and Raco, 2003). Since women are concentrated in the community sector they often lack power to influence decision-making (Lowndes, 2004; Brownill and Darke, 1998).

There are general barriers which prevent people from participating in regeneration partnerships including the culture, rules and working practices of partnerships and unequal power relationships between participants. Community members must learn the language and the rules of the game before they are able to be taken seriously (Foley and Martin, 2000). Lack of time, skills, money, confidence and motivation, as well as having to deal with poverty and social exclusion within their daily lives also limit involvement. In addition structural inequalities such as age, class, gender, disability, sexuality and the ability of organisations to address these also influence the ability of citizens to participate (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). These factors combined with a lack of childcare provision; location and time of meetings; and language barriers act as particular obstacles to the

participation of women and particularly women from BME communities (Brownill and Darke 1998).

Partnerships do not always enable the inclusion of groups of people under-represented or marginalised in traditional governance spaces (Gudnattonir et al., 2007). Regeneration partnerships have often failed to fully reflect the diversity of local populations (Beebeejaun and Grimshaw, forthcoming; Brownill and Darke, 1998). NDCs provide for some optimism since the national NDC evaluation found that partnerships were diverse and overall 40% of Board members were women and 20% were from BME communities (Batty et al., 2010).

The gendering of community work in partnerships is complex and contradictory. There is a danger, recognised in feminist debate of reproducing gender stereotypes and essentialising the contributions of "women and men into dichotomies of 'masculine' – confrontational and competitive – and 'feminine' – nurturing and empowering." (Martin, 2002: 334). When using a gender lens we cannot ignore differences amongst women and men, the complexity of identity and the intersection of gender with, for example, race, class and age. The next section explores the views and experiences of women involved in formal community work in neighbourhood partnerships. These women challenge the stereotypes of women as unpaid, informal community participants yet deal on a daily basis with the construction of community work as a gendered activity.

Women's experiences in NDC regeneration partnerships

The following discussion is based on a case study of an NDC partnership in the West Midlands in the UK. It draws on ten semi-structured interviews (of one to two hours) with women working for the NDC in 2005. The women were employed in the NDC as paid regeneration officers, paid community development workers and unpaid community representatives on the main decision-making Partnership Board. Participants were asked questions about how and why they got involved in the partnership; the role of the community; and their participation in and influence on decision-making processes.

The case study forms part of a wider research project which explored the role of women and gendered processes in regeneration organisations. Based on a feminist methodology the research addressed a lack of gendered analysis in regeneration and sought to provide a voice to women who have been neglected in previous research. This case study positions women's everyday lives, experiences and views at the centre of the discussion of the NDC programme thus filling a gap in the regeneration literature. The research paid particular attention to the complexity of women's roles and experiences and the diversity amongst women as a group.

Placing women in partnerships

The Partnership Board had twenty-nine members from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors. The Board was split 41% women and 59% men. 38% of the members were from BME communities and this approximately reflects the size of the BME population in the NDC area. The high number of women and BME members is only achieved through community representation. The majority of women (75%) and BME members (90%) were community representatives compared to 41% of men. All of the BME women on the Board are community representatives and represent half of all BME community representatives. The NDC was successful in engaging BME women who are often under-represented on partnerships (Alsop et al., 2001); 17% of the Board members were BME women. The NDC Partnership Board was very diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity but this was achieved through community representation.

Community representatives became involved in the NDC Board in one of three ways: eight community representatives were elected through neighbourhood elections, six BME community representatives were elected through BME organisations and two representatives (one male one female) were elected through a Youth Forum. At the time of fieldwork six out eight neighbourhood representatives were women; two were BME women. Two out of the six BME representatives were women.

Motivations: community work as women's work?

The NDC brought a substantial amount of money to the neighbourhood (£56 million over ten years) which was to be used in an innovative and holistic way and appeared to offer

the potential for community led regeneration. For those involved it presented a real and unique opportunity. Most of the women interviewed (paid staff and community representatives) were motivated to work in the NDC because they wanted to *"make a difference to people's lives"*.

All of the community representatives interviewed had a history of community activism within their own or nearby neighbourhoods:

> *"I used to do a lot of voluntary work anyway. Childminding, play groups, short term fostering. I used to do a lot of other things… Things we did off our own back. We did them with other neighbours, friends"*

The older community representative quoted above had been reluctant to take part at first, because she *"didn't want labels"* or formal recognition of what she did but paid staff told her that it would give her more power in decision-making and a *"bit more push and pull"* so she decided to stand for election.

Women's experience of community activism prior to the NDC often helped them to get elected to the Board. Another community representative described how her involvement in the community had helped her get elected:

> *"When I went for elections I was really ill and I couldn't do any publicity but I won the election which showed that, since the age of twelve I've been involved in the community… I've been involved in groups and set up community groups in the area."*

The networks built up in a neighbourhood through informal community activity and neighbourly acts are often associated with women and are said to enable them to 'get by' and *"provide a resource for their own and their families' well-being"* (Lowndes, 2004: 59). The women here were able to use their networks to get them elected onto the NDC Board so that they could also support the wider community.

This NDC challenges the notion that women are unlikely to get involved in formal community activity but it still draws attention to the gendered nature of community. When asked why women were predominant in community activity most interviewees saw this work as intrinsically linked to gender roles, as one community representative illustrated:

> *"... it was also the women in the community seeing the problem because the men were getting up in the morning and going to work. And it was the women at home who were actually seeing the problems in the community because they're actually the ones who have to deal with it. They'll go shopping and they'll see the problem…. They have much more interest in their children and their grandchildren…."*

This community representative portrays the lives of women as being rooted in the neighbourhood, family and home. She sees the daily activity of women at home and in the neighbourhood as the route into community work. Women are still 'located' within the community as a result of their 'everyday life' (Brownill, 2004; Lowndes, 2004; Smith, 2001).

Most of the women interviewed also linked community work to the distinct and 'feminine' characteristics of women which made them more suitable (or perhaps more willing) to take part. The paid staff described women community activists as more active and *"quick to roll their sleeves up and do something"*. Most interviewees referred to women's 'innate' ability to work within communities since they were more sociable; better able to relate to people and their needs; and more *"maternal and caring"*. They link women's work in the community firmly to the role of women in the private sphere and the 'emotional labour' carried out by women (Newman, 2005). The interviewees did not often challenge or confrontation of gender stereotypes.

Prior to the elections which brought a majority of women to the board, all the community representatives had been selected rather than elected and were all male. These men subsequently failed to get elected through neighbourhood elections. Interviewees reflecting on this attributed their failure to a lack of social networks and reinforced the view of women as networked community activists whose everyday lives were embedded in the neighbourhood. In contrast men were well represented amongst the six BME community representatives. At the outset the BME representatives were all men but this changed over time. A female neighbourhood representative who was also from a BME community acknowledged the unique position of BME women on the Board:

> *"Yeah… they struggled to get any woman on there so I was being approached from every direction to actually join them at that time. Then* [after the elections] *there were quite a few* [women] *elevated but I was still the only Asian female there."*

Two BME women community representatives both felt that BME women were constrained by culture at times although they had both managed to transcend these barriers. They attributed this to the support of their families. They recognised the difficulties faced by some BME women but also acknowledged culture as a dynamic and contradictory process:

> *"… if you look at those organisations it is mostly men if you look at the management committees it is mostly men. Women, we've got a long way to go still. Even though we can vote! There is a long way to go but it's all related to culture."*

> **'***there are a few of us now it is changing'*

Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) suggest that women in paid work in regeneration partnerships act as role models and give women confidence and encouragement to get involved. In this NDC at the outset the community empowerment manager was an Asian

woman and a couple of interviewees said she had given huge support and encouragement to BME women in the area. This could explain the relatively high number of female BME representatives on the Board when BME women are usually under-represented on partnerships (EOC, 2006; Alsop et al., 2001). In turn the BME community representatives also felt that part of their role was to support and empower other women in their particular BME communities.

Paid female community development workers played an important role in engaging and sustaining the involvement of the community representatives. Female community representatives tended to talk to women staff most, and described the female community development staff as *"more peopley-type people"* who were *"happy to sit and have a cup of tea"*. This reflects ideas about the gendered divisions within community development work where women are often said to be concerned with 'softer issues' such as caring and the routines of daily life whilst men are seen as able to deal with 'hard issues' such as managing projects (Dominelli, 2006).The high proportion of women in the community development posts within the NDC may have helped to increase the number of women involved in formal decision-making within the partnership, but it may also have reproduced rather than challenged gendered divisions of labour within regeneration.

Reconciling community, work and family

Both paid staff and community representatives talked about the difficulty of reconciling family life with working the long hours and evenings required in regeneration, relying on family support in order to take part. Some of the paid staff had chosen to enter regeneration once their children were older or at least of school age; two with children said they had curtailed or delayed their career ambitions in order to strike a work-life balance:

> *"… home life balance is actually something that's extremely difficult to achieve in regeneration and certainly I would not have gone into regeneration until I knew I could afford to spend the nights not at home, because of the evening meetings. I think when I moved over my kids were in their teens. … with two*

youngsters I would not have contemplated coming into regeneration because I could not have managed the work."

The paid officers often expressed amazement at the amount of time the community representatives spent on NDC business. The community representatives were also surprised by the long hours involved in their roles, as one explained:

"They said it was six to seven hours a fortnight but I'm never in the house. It is a full time job."

Some of the community representatives did work full-time as well as volunteering for the NDC. Although this representative quoted above was not employed in paid work she did cope with ill health as well as her NDC work. These women do not have a lot of time to spare and yet combine what has been called the 'triple burden' of paid work, family and neighbourhood activity (May, 1997; Hainard and Verschuur, 2001).

Changing gender relations facilitate some of the women's community activity although women still seem to be taking up more of the domestic responsibility. Community representatives described their responsibilities as follows:

"I like to put things in place for my husband otherwise he won't eat. So I like to go back between meetings otherwise he'll eat crisps…. My husband does some cleaning but just without moving the furniture so I have to move that and the dust is that thick."

"I've got a very supportive family. My younger brothers, I drop [my son] *off at school and then my younger brother picks him up and takes him to the shop… I look at my diary and if I've got an evening meeting tomorrow I do the cooking tonight… so I've just got that to warm up. It's planning it all in advance so you're not in a mess straightaway."*

Gender roles are clearly changing and being negotiated on a daily basis but for the female representatives interviewed their gendered roles in the home are inescapable, as they organise a range of activities for themselves and their family, their community and often their employer on a daily basis. Whilst time poverty is recognised as a key issue for and barrier for women's participation (Blakeley and Evans, 2008) so too is the 'infinite elasticity' of women's time (Smith, 2001). The female community representatives interviewed were particularly driven to contribute to and support their communities. They did not see combining paid work, community work and caring work as the necessarily rather negative 'triple burden' implied earlier but, rather, did it for the *"feel good factor"*.

Community empowerment or powerlessness?

However, although the community representatives all reported enjoyment and satisfaction as a result of working in the community, they often expressed frustration at not being listened to or taken seriously by other Board members and staff. They explained that they did not feel that they had the power to make decisions:

> *"You get 56 million pound but it's other people that are in control of... usually who don't even know... about the area."*

> *"If a decision is being made... and you get two or three community reps saying no we don't think it's a good idea then you get loads of agencies putting their hands up the projects do go ahead. But I think that's one of the criticisms I've actually heard is you know you community reps you don't have much influence"*

Community representatives said that professionals dominated decision-making and the Board experience was not an empowering one. These experiences are not unique and evidence suggests NDC partnerships are dominated by professionals and still struggle to fully involve local people (Batty et al, 2010; Robinson et al., 2005). In the case study NDC the language used and the style of the meetings and the Chair prevented community representatives from being fully engaged. The women community representatives

interviewed all felt confident enough to "speak out" and challenge but still felt that they were listened to and that conflict was "brushed over".

While this powerlessness was in part the result of the women's position as community representatives the women also felt that it was related to their gender:

> *"As community reps we've got three ladies that speak up. What I do feel is a gender bias is … I don't feel that they are perceived as knowledgeable or as eloquent or as challenging as the men… I get that impression about other female members of the Board that they are not taken as seriously as the men."*

Three of the community representatives interviewed were articulate and confident but still did not feel able to influence the Board decisions. They acknowledged that other women on the Board were not as confident as they were and one lamented that as a group the community representatives were not "*empowered enough to say this is exactly what we need"*. Yet they continued to participate and on a personal level felt more confident and had gained skills and knowledge. Furthermore although there perception was that they had little influence over NDC decisions they felt that they could support the community in other ways. Their formal involvement as community representatives provided them with a circular or parallel route back to informal community activity. The community representatives mentioned that they supported residents through their neighbourhood forums, they continued to run and take part in community groups and expressed a desire to set up further groups to help empower other women and members of their communities.

Conclusions and recommendations

Neighbourhood partnerships are places of complexity and contradictions regarding gender and the role of women. More women are taking part in neighbourhood partnerships but as seen in the case study presented here they often disproportionately represent the community sector and this means that they tend to lack power to influence decision-making (Lowndes, 2004; Geddes, 2000). Formal involvement does, however,

provide opportunities for personal empowerment and an in increase confidence, skills and social networks. The question is whether this is a sufficient outcome of community involvement in formal processes.

As a community-led programme the NDC programme fell short of expectations regarding community empowerment. Centrally defined and controlled objectives and the domination of professionals sometimes prevented community representatives from making a real contribution to the regeneration programme (Dargan, 2009; Imrie and Raco, 2003). There was a failure underpin the NDC programme with a community development approach and a process of empowerment which might have led to increased involvement (Dinham, 2000). Most people did not engage with their local NDC and the process of community involvement required more clarity over purpose and a "consistency, dedication and commitment" (DCLG, 2010b: 7). This process must also overcome structural inequalities including social, political and economic constraints if there is to be successful involvement in decision-making processes (Blakeley and Evans, 2008).

The gender neutrality of policy means that women's unpaid work in community goes unrecognised. Regeneration partnerships reproduce the gendered division of labour and naturalise the roles of men and women in the community (Brownill, 2004). There has been a significant failure to acknowledge the gendered nature of community work or incorporate a gendered analysis into regeneration policy.

Neighbourhoods and communities remain central to the UK's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government as it intends to devolve power to local government, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals (Cabinet Office, 2010a). The Government has a vision of building a 'Big Society' which will bring citizens, communities and local government together to 'solve the problems they face' (Cabinet Office, 2010b). It is not clear yet what this means in practice but 'community empowerment' is part of this vision (Clark, 2010). These policies will be implemented in the context of unprecedented public spending cuts, welfare reform and a reduction in public services. As argued above when

communities are expected to fill a gap left by cuts in public services it is traditionally women who take up the extra unpaid work (Women's Budget Group, 2010; May, 1997; Brownill and Darke, 1998). Assessment of the Government's first budget found that its impact would not be gender neutral and a reduction in public sector expenditure would impact disproportionately on women and particularly on low income mothers and BME women (Women's Budget Group, 2010; The Guardian, 2010). Based on this evidence and the available policy documents Government policy so far appears to lack a considered analysis of gender inequalities or measures to address gender equalities in relation to neighbourhoods and communities.

There is now plenty of evidence from both the UK and international development about the value of incorporating a gender perspective in regeneration and community development and how carry this out in practice (Brownill and Darke, 1998; Brownill, 2004; Shah, 2007). Indeed the Government has recognised the value of promoting gender equality and empowering women through its support of the Millennium Development Goals (Cabinet Office, 2010). It is now time for Government policy and neighbourhood partnerships to acknowledge the role of women in unpaid community work and to address gender inequalities directly.

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