

Society: Gender equality: Regeneration/employment: New shoots are a route to improvement: Regeneration is benefiting many deprived communities, but women are often left out. So what is being done to include their perspectives?

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Balancing precariously on high-heeled plastic sandals, her greying hair tucked neatly beneath a transparent white veil, Shazia Chowdhury gestures proudly at a bed of freshly upturned soil and smiles.

"This my six year," she explains in faltering English, as she tiptoes carefully around the edge of her allotment plot in Birmingham's Small Heath Park. "I like garden work, green vegetable, Bangladeshi vegetable. It is getting together, it good exercise."

Chowdhury is one of 40 Bangladeshi women who make up Concrete to Coriander, a project run by CSV Environment and the Bangladesh Women's Garden Club in east Birmingham. The project encourages women from ethnic communities to regenerate their local environment and also gives them the opportunity to learn new skills, reduce isolation and improve their general wellbeing. One of the key reasons why Concrete to Coriander was conceived was because Asian women were not participating, to the extent they might be, in decision-making processes that affected their local area and the city.

"I've been on for months about wearing proper footwear and gardening gloves, but it makes no difference!" laughs the Russian-born coordinator of Concrete to Coriander, Irena Iwegbu. "They come as they want, whatever the season, with their beautiful saris covered under their overalls, wading through the mud in their sandals and flip flops."

Amanda Ariss, head of policy and research at the Equal Opportunities Commission, says that many deprived communities are currently undergoing regeneration, but women's voices are often not heard.

"Gender should be at the heart of regeneration because if it's not taken into account it results in unequal representation of men and women," she says. "Community involvement is essential to sustaining regeneration activity in deprived areas. However, men and women interact with their neighbourhoods in different ways. Women are more likely to spend time in their neighbourhoods but their needs can be overlooked."

Small Heath became home to many Irish immigrants during the first half of the 20th century, to be replaced by Bangladeshi and Pakistani families who settled there in the latter half. The constituency now has the highest proportion of people of Asian origin in the UK. Research carried out by the University of Birmingham in the 1990s revealed that unemployment amongst south Asian women was more than three times that of white women. The highest rates of unemployment were among Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, with 45% of Pakistani and 44% of Bangladeshi women unemployed. At the time, the average unemployment rate for the city of Birmingham was 14%.

Community and family

"For women, community involvement competes with family time. For Asian women, it's even more complicated," explains Amina Chowdury, project manager for the Bangladesh Women's Employment Resource Centre.

"In our culture, family responsibilities restrict women's opportunities to become involved, not just in decision making, but in many areas of public life and society."

CSV project coordinator, Irena Iregbu, says what's giving many of the Coriander women confidence is the fact that they feel comfortable and safe on the allotment.

"These are predominantly rural Bangladeshi women and they would have been used to having their own gardens and farms back home. But living here, often in built up housing complexes, they've been removed from that. Now they're closer to their former life and this is helping them. And since local men have seen how we've transformed a former dumping site for rubbish into an allotment, they keep asking if they can join in!"

Some women drop out, says Iregbu, because of pressure from their husbands or sons, but more keep joining.

"They're also getting involved in the wider community, for example as lunch-time supervisors in local schools and as creche workers."

Changing communities

Oxfam's ReGender project works with regeneration professionals across the country to ensure that they pay more attention to the differences in women and men's daily lives. From pilots in Wales, England and Scotland, the project has produced a body of evidence about what works, whether in transport, housing, paid work, or help with caring.

"I was a depressed single parent of three children in the poverty trap and I was getting fed up of living on an estate labelled the 'Mini Beirut' of Llandudno," says Annjennette Stephenson from Cae Mawr, north Wales. She got involved with a ReGender community project after the death of a young boy on her housing estate.

"I wanted my kids to live in a better place so I decided to do something to change my neighbourhood," she says.

ReGender involved Stephenson in a survey of how women and men on her estate were experiencing poverty in different ways. She began talking to other residents about how local service providers were not meeting their needs, then put their case to the local regeneration team and service providers. She recently started a part-time degree in community development at Bangor university.

"ReGender's shown me that women from all backgrounds, even if they're at the bottom of the scale, can have an impact on their surroundings. We used to have to chain down our outdoor Christmas tree lighting because it was always being stolen. Now we tackle the robbers, who are actually our neighbours' teenage children."

Back in Small Heath, two miles from the Bangladeshi Women's Garden Club, a great deal of work still remains to be done on the bleak housing estate Shazia Chowdhury calls home. As she waves goodbye to Iregbu after a morning's gardening, Chowdhury appears not to notice the stinking heap of rubbish in the centre of her estate, nor the piles of dogs' faeces next to it. Instead, she presses a yellow kumquat into Iregbu's hand, and kisses her warmly on the cheek. "We soon grow Bangladeshi fruit ourselves," she tells her emphatically. "Soon we be grow everything!"

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