

**POWER Inquiry Witness Session – Manchester**

**Witness Session  
12.20-4pm, 28 April 2005**

**Manchester United Football Stadium  
Sir Matt Busby Way, Old Trafford, Manchester, M16 0RA**

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***New Sources of Power: exploring the role of  
supranational institutions, corporations and grassroots  
activity in the democratic process***

**Witnesses****Grassroots activity panel**

Gaafer Ali – Sudanese Cultural Association

Mandy Powell – activist in East Manchester

Nasima Rahman, Community Organiser – Salford Community Empowerment Network

Anne Stewart – Community Pride Initiative

**Abbreviations**

<b>AM</b>	<b>Audience Member [individual names indicated]</b>	
<b>BF</b>	<b>Ben Freeman</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>
<b>BM</b>	<b>Bano Murtuja</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>
<b>EB</b>	<b>Emma B</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>
<b>FM</b>	<b>Ferdinand Mount</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>
<b>HK</b>	<b>Helena Kennedy</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>
<b>GA</b>	<b>Gaafer Ali</b>	<b>Witness</b>
<b>MP</b>	<b>Mandy Powell</b>	<b>Witness</b>
<b>NR</b>	<b>Nasima Rahman</b>	<b>Witness</b>
<b>AS</b>	<b>Anne Stewart</b>	<b>Witness</b>

## Grassroots Activism

### **Why did you get involved in trying to make a change for your community?**

MP: I got involved in working in my community as a single mother with other women who also survived on low incomes or had concerns about what activities their children wanted to do. We got together and developed something called The Moss Side One Parent Play Scheme and basically it ran up until last year. It was quite successful, we did fund raising, doing car boot sales and getting the odd bits of funding and being supported through the placement schemes that were operating from social services.

GA: I came to this country about 16 or probably 17 years ago as an asylum seeker. It wasn't a deliberate decision on my part to get involved directly in community affairs. It happened because I knew English better than the others, and I was being asked by many of the community members, refugees and asylum seekers, to help them go with the solicitors, social security offices, health centres and GPs. Gradually I found myself involved in much structural sort of assistance, having to attend some meetings, having to speak to people from different agencies. Then it led to us forming some sort of an organisation to offer help in more organised and structured way. And then it just picked up momentum.

AS: I spent most of the early part of my life in formal education, and I wanted to be able to offer those skills in a more informal setting in the community. The second reason is I'm a registered blind person. I have always had a job and I felt that there was a perception about disabled people, that they are dependent. I wanted to challenge that and I wanted to be involved in helping colleagues to develop their own strategies for better organisation.

NR: I started working as an interpreter first. I left school in 1985 and before I left school I was working as a volunteer helping out local people to go to visit their doctors and encouraging ladies to have a physical with their doctors and helping them with midwives, health visitors and general women's sessions. So this is where I started. When I left school I started working as interpreter, with the One Parent Association.

### **Do you agree that there is this lack of participation by people from low income backgrounds, people from ethnic minority background and if so, why? Apologies for the generalisation across communities.**

AS: It's not about the people themselves, it's not that they don't want to participate or can't participate. I think we always imagine that the problem is with the people. But the system sometimes makes it really difficult. People want to be involved, they want to participate but the structures that we have and the systems that we have often exclude people and if we would address the barriers and address the issues, people will participate, people want to be involved. I think we tend to perpetuate a myth that it's somehow about the people, whereas it's actually about the structures and the discriminatory structures that we have and the fact that we don't often take certain groups of people seriously or their views.

MP The real relationship that people are building, whether it be the political parties or whatever, we're talking about equity, equity of services, resources. I don't want nobody to tolerate me, I really can't, I find it quite disrespectful. We need to have a degree of respect and equity when we deal with each other and I think a lot of the

political parties do not come over that way, they come over very target driven and nobody wants to be a number, nobody wants to be a statistic.

GA: When I speak to many of the people from the community I am from. my people I find them ideally willing to participate, willing to take part in activities, especially those around the community where they live. But there are practical reasons for why they can't do that. Many of my community do very hard jobs and in very awkward hours, and usually the work they do is very demanding and they find it really difficult to cope in terms of time and in terms of effort, to find a suitable time to do that and make the effort to go there. Also, they lack of information. These days you get hundreds and hundreds of messages through your letter box and sometimes you have to have the right language, English skills to read them. It takes quite a lot of time for someone coming from a different culture altogether to come and find themselves completely in tune with this particular culture. It takes time to build sort of confidence because from my own experience, people find it very frightening to go into buildings and in institutions and speak to people. It's a very frightening experience for someone who is coming from a totally different culture.

NR People will participate if they get more information. Also, the language is a barrier for many people. Sometimes it demotivates people thinking that we're not going to do any change. When it comes to making a change, it's only politically minded people who get involved and then local people who are not even politically activated, they wouldn't bother to ask me.

**What could be done in your view to remove some of those barriers and to make it easier for people to participate? Do you think for example that the media within the local community could be a way of bringing in people who at present feel excluded?**

GA: I think the difficulty is the assumption that we're all like sort of one body. Within us we are as different as you might get. So if we had a broadcaster with certain programmes and certain issues, that's not necessarily going to cover the whole set of interests.

AS: In Manchester and Salford, we've had short sharp inputs of local radio and they have been trying to train local people so I think those things are all very, very useful but I don't think anything matches the work that needs to be done on the ground with community people in very in-depth ways through the kind of programmes that some of us are probably involved in. So yes we can use all these aids but what we really need is people on the ground working with people.

**Is the lack of money a barrier as well?**

MP: It's not just about resources it's also about continuity and the kind of steep changes that are happening so rapidly. You get used to one kind of funding regime and one kind of way of working and all of a sudden you've had a one year pilot or you've had regeneration, new deal and people adapt to those and there's only so much adapting people can do, we're human people not computers, we can't just keep going like that. Eventually people get burnt out very, very fast and in terms of just the changes to those mechanisms, those changes themselves cost an enormous amount of money, so sometimes it's nice to say okay, we've got the wheel there already, let's see how it

works, let's give it a chance. You don't swap your child because it doesn't do what you want in the first 15 years, you stick with it.

NR: If people are not going to get anything they won't participate, so they have to have that confidence that they are going to make a change.

**How could political parties and other power structures to connect or re-connect with the least engaged?**

AS: We're trying to change cultures and it's the same with the community. We often talk about the Councils and the Councillors and we're saying we need to change all of that culture, it needs to be more open, more transparent etc. At the same time I'm sure my colleagues here would agree, we've also got to change cultures within our own communities, we know we've got things we've got to do. So I think it's got to be some mutual dialogue about how we need to change in order to move things forward.

GA: To a great extent political parties are looked at as something for people who have probably made it and who are prepared to put up with the sort of system. If I were a member of a certain political party, I think that I would feel a little bit more alienated from my own committee policies.

AS: I think it's almost like reclaiming a public political space. It almost feels like you've given away all of that power somehow and we should be using it but we have to work, there's a lot to do before we can reclaim that public space. I think, which is a political space but maybe we let it go too easily. But I think it's a big challenge to us as well.

MP if you look at English history, you've got networks to get there, that's something that's embedded in your culture, there's certain places that people go to. When you haven't got that, you haven't got no social fabric, you haven't got anything that you can then say, 'This is who I am, I am aspiring to something'. It's not even resource because, it's about the ability to live and let live.

**Responses to Q&A session**

MP: We have to look at having a meaningful process, a meaningful conversation that is long term, not something that happens today and gone tomorrow. To me there's no quick fix solution. Until we have conversations that people, people who are working on the ground, young people in schools, show our children we're having those conversations, it doesn't matter how many policies our community write, because those kind of values are transmitted from person to person, family to family.

GA: Sometimes you have a few things which you would take for granted here, sometimes you just don't value or appreciate the value of that certain virtue. Voting is something I feel very special about because in my own community where I come from I didn't get the chance to do it, it's a value in itself and I think all other forms of participation will be just run dry if you take that value of what it is out of it.

- AS: I think learning should be organised around the issues that we're passionate about, we have to try to build on where people are passionate about issues and just create spaces where people can start to organise more effectively again.
- NR: We need people, people feel that when they are needed, if I want to vote, I want to feel how important is it to me to go and vote, is my vote going to make any changes, this is what people are looking for. People want to feel that they are voting for the right changes and like somebody was on about the war, saying that so many people were against the war, still the Government went for it, so you see it's demotivating our community.