



# Case study: Breaking Boundaries in Birmingham

## Facilitating Social Mixing and Connectedness

Bolly Bhangra

September – December 2021

### Detail of the Activity.

This case study focuses on the development and delivery of a 12 Week programme involving elements of Bhangra fitness activities and All Stars cricket sessions, developed in collaboration with Bolly Bhangra. The activity was aiming to facilitate mixing between women from different South Asian ethnic groups, to tackle underlying tensions between different groups of South Asian women from Bangladeshi, Gujarati, and Pakistani backgrounds.

### How Activity Developed.

The leader of this activity had been involved in delivering Bhangra sessions and youth cricket programmes in the area, through which she met a Breaking Boundaries ambassador who linked them up with the co-ordinator in Birmingham. The activity leader highlighted that there was a strong link between their philosophy towards getting women active and the focus of Breaking Boundaries on using sport to improve cohesion. This led to them working with the programme to develop a specially designed activity using elements of Bhangra fitness activities, and All Stars cricket sessions.

## Delivery.

Originally scheduled for 6 weeks of delivery, the activity was extended to 12 weeks at the request of the participants (17) because they were so well engaged. There had been no hesitation around a return to face to face after lockdown and plenty of space was available at the chosen venue. It was intended as an activity that could act as a 'gateway' for South Asian women, mainly stay-at-home mothers, to emerge from Covid lockdown and engage in activities out of the household.

Recruitment happened through word of mouth with participants inviting other contacts as the weeks progressed. Organisers Bhangra Blaze publicised the activity via their Facebook group. As the activity developed the women also began to bring their daughters to sessions, which built inter-generational connections.

## What Happened?

The activity was aiming to facilitate mixing between women from different South Asian ethnic groups, specifically Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani and evidence suggests this has been achieved. The leader felt these participants had been easy to bring together because the use of dance provided something that was familiar as a gateway into cricket which was less familiar to them.

The activity has had an impact on several key cohesion areas for those it has worked with, although it is not yet clear how sustained these impacts have been given delivery concluded in Dec 2021.

"I think getting the ladies in with the bhangra, and then introducing them to the cricket slowly has been the key here. They've enjoyed it, they don't realise their talents, when they think of cricket, they think it's a man's sport or they've never had an opportunity to play. Then [working together]...we'd incorporate bhangra moves and cricket moves together, and they really loved it." (Project Lead)

## What's Happened – Impacts on Cohesion.

The activity lead did identify that the areas of impact included:

**Improved social connectedness.** As different groups were brought together on their own terms connections between them soon developed:

"For all of them after lockdown just any social connectedness was good, they're all mothers and have big extended families, so it gave them the opportunity to connect with others as just themselves on their own terms, not as a mother or a daughter or a caregiver." (Project Lead)

Participants did not identify a significant impact on their attitudes to diversity as they were positive at the outset of the activity, it was more important for the group connections to be made. The leader also noted that despite the women starting the sessions as strangers, by the end they

became a bit of 'family'. This positive group dynamic was attributed in part to the women having the space to have open conversation – being out of their usual social circle or extended family. The local Coordinator also identified that good links were made to celebrate festivals relevant to participants increasing understanding of each other.

**Feeling empowered.** From some participants there was a sense that they had been empowered to be open with others in the group about their challenges and issues, to women from other South Asian groups they had not met before:

"I enjoy it, even though I have a busy schedule looking after kids etc. it gives me the chance to get out the house to meet new people and do exercise." (Female, Pakistani)

Whilst others felt comfortable to bring other family members along:

"It has been amazing, it's given me that adrenalin rush to go and do that one hour just for me, with Covid and lockdown, personal circumstances meant it was good for my daughters to give it a go with me, it was good to have a chit chat and a work out." (Female, Bangladeshi)

Therefore, in these ways the participants were given a stronger voice in the community of the group though there were no specific examples to date of this voice being extended to their communities outside of the activity.

**Community participation/sense of belonging.** The leader was surprised that the choice of Edgbaston for delivery was not a deterrent to participants because of the travel distance involved. The venue seemed to act as a spur for their sense of belonging to something 'special':

"At first I was a bit worried people wouldn't want to come to Edgbaston because it was quite far for them. To be able to have the lovely space and the lovely views, we started off quite early in the evening...so we got the daylight and could see the views. It just made them feel important that they got to use the space and...they kept coming back, there were a lot of people who came to all 12 sessions" (Project Lead)

"It was such an amazing platform for women to come together to a place where we could talk and comfort each other, it was a relief, it was our time, it was for us...many women, they didn't have that opportunity before" (Female, Pakistani)

**Wellbeing.** There was evidence not only of improved confidence in the women, but the wellbeing benefits that come with it. The leader reported the activity supporting the mental health of participants that had worsened during Covid-19 lockdowns.

"They were so confident by the end. They came and they spoke about their own personal lives, they became a bit of a family, experiences. It's easy to share things with people who aren't your family, even though it's strangers it's great. It's not easy to make friends out of your circle." (Activity Lead)

## The Future.

Participants and the activity leader are very positive about their experiences through Breaking Boundaries and are keen to identify ways that further activities could happen:

"It's good, it'll be good if it carries on, to bring people together, because of Covid it gives people the chance to come and do something together in a safe environment, especially for ladies." (Female, Indian)

There is a need to identify ways in which such activities can be built further using volunteers so they are less dependent on additional funding and more self-supporting. It was noted that having provision that was free at the point of access was key to making the activity open to all and including women for whom cost may be a barrier to joining in group sport or fitness sessions.

## Top Tips for Effective Delivery.

- ✓ **Seeking out specialist providers with pre-existing links with targeted communities** is shown to be the best approach for establishing projects working on cohesion. Those projects understand key activities that appeal to marginalised groups, using trusted activity leaders as ways of ensuring meaningful engagement.
- ✓ **Considering the location of the provision is key to encouraging participants to attend;** this may persuade participants to travel further to the 'right' venue beyond their local area, especially if they feel empowered to shape and contribute to delivery and move outside their usual day to day lives. In this case, the use of Edgbaston Cricket ground, a place none of the women may have accessed before, was a key pull factor
- ✓ **Supporting active social mixing in an informal group setting** may enable other cohesion outcomes to be attained, particularly a sense of belonging and confidence. This should be relatively unstructured in its approach though can be facilitated by the project resource packs produced by YST.
- ✓ **Targeted interventions, as exemplified in the above case study, are important for accessing harder to reach groups** who may have additional support needs or need persuasion to go outside their usual space and routine. In this instance, it was noted that the women didn't think that the sport activities were for they were specifically targeted.
- ✓ **Understanding the needs of targeted groups is key** to developing and delivering engaging activities that support engagement and moves towards cricket and community participation.