



rota
Race on the Agenda

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

Guest Speaker: Dinah Cox OBE 20 years of ROTA

It's lovely to be invited to speak as an ex-employee. Andy I hope you will forgive me if I still say 'we' though when discussing ROTA as it still feels like my baby in some ways!!

It's really great to see so many people supporting and celebrating the work ROTA has engaged in over the last 20 years. Having started work as a policy officer in 97 I find it hard to believe that that so much time has passed – but I only have to look at my 21 year old son Max to realise that's true.

Victor has outlined many of the policy debates important to the organisation. From the work Brian Richardson did in regard to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry in 97, via Carlene Firmin's ground breaking work on the Female Voice in Violence in 2010 to Active Lives, Healthy Minds, which is working with community groups in developing activities to support the mental health and wellbeing with the Nepalese, Somali and Tamil people in West London – Much has been achieved.

Ali and Andy have focused on how ROTA works as an organisation to engage with the policy debates.

I certainly cannot compete with the eloquence of Karima describing the strength that BAME communities and individuals have.

So in this section I will be brief and focus on my belief that ROTA's ethos of lived experience and partnership has supported 20 years of amazing work.

As Ali and/or Andy have said - ROTA is a social policy research organisation. It was set up to take over from Greater London Action on Race Equality which started in 1984 so was building on the shoulders of others from the start.

Its vision has remained constant – to help bring about an inclusive and equal society where people from **all groups** can develop their full potential and the voluntary and community sector is fully participating in serving them.

But how has it carried out this work?

ROTA has always been inclusive in its use of the term BAME to refer to all groups who are discriminated against on the grounds of their race, culture, colour or nationality not just skin tones.

It has always punched above its weight in how much it delivers with a small team of workers and some amazing volunteers (including experts such as Richard Stone and Kamila Zahno on its Board).

And as Government support for equality and the voluntary and community sector has moved down the agenda since 2010 and the fragility of hard won gains is evident - the importance of working with the funders (such as CBT, TFL and the Lottery) who can see the importance of an equitable society is key. As is partnership with policy makers from local, regional, national and at times international government with the vision for unity in our communities and societies.

For me it is this ability to work in partnership – with these funders, policy makers, and other voluntary and community organisations and of course essentially - communities on the ground, that has always been key for ROTA in achieving social change.

When I returned to ROTA as its Chief Executive after a four year break, one of my proudest moments in terms of partnership was working to set up HEAR – a network of equalities organisations (which as Lisa Redding and Christine Goodall who are here can tell you), is still connecting and supporting those working in equalities across all equality characteristics.

For me, as a working class, Black feminist the intersectionality of race with other issues such as class, disability and sexual orientation was always self-evident. People who discriminate against one group often oppress others so organising together can help challenge that.

However, just because one belongs to one group it doesn't mean one understands the nuances of the inequality faced by a group one doesn't belong to. I have not always heard the voices of others as strongly as I should of in developing my own policy views. As a feminist I sometimes saw marriage as a bit of a patriarchal flummery to tell the truth. It took a Lesbian friend of mine to explain why the rights and privilege that it bestowed in terms of next-of-kin and finances were relevant as well as the social importance of normalising same sex relationships - for me to become an advocate of and supporter of the LGBTQ fight for gay marriage.

To look at it from the other side - I suspect that no woman in this room will be surprised to hear that even some one as vocal as me has been spoken over, side lined, mansplained and hepeated by men whose experience of racism should have made them far more aware that that is sexism.

I truly believe that specific organisations representing BAME people, women etc are needed rather than us only having generic organisations claiming to represent everyone. Whilst many are excellent and the majority have good intentions - we should be enabled to represent ourselves and ensure the voices and expertise of the lived experience is used to shape social policy.

Within BAME voluntary and community sector organisations the need to hear all voices from within our communities continues – ROTA walks this talk – as an organisation we have seen our diverse range of employees and volunteers with the lived experience they are researching as a strength. For instance, we employed someone who was living in a hostel for our research on the gaps in provision for BAME homeless people and hired an intern on day release from prison to support our work around the criminal justice system. ROTA's current project 'Active Lives, Healthy Minds' is being delivered in partnership with the Network of Eritrean Women. It will continue to work this way to ensure it is as representative as possible.

When writing this speech I looked at some old stats from over 10 years ago. I wanted to see how far we had travelled and in which direction! There was some good news – For instance, 13.4% of police officers in the Met are now from BAME communities compared to only 5.5% in 2005. (However, London does have a 40.2% BAME population – so not quite representative yet). Current figures also show that the stats aren't so good the higher one goes at the MET so at Chief Inspector and above only 5.7% of officers are BAME - does that help explain why Black people are now 8 times more likely to face stop and search rather than 5 times? That's a debate for another day...

So in ending I would like to say that I am sad that gains that BAME communities have undoubtedly made (such as being allowed in here in such numbers) are being eroded. I live in (perhaps a futile) hope that the future for my son and the generations to come is one where equality is a given. I know in my heart that without organisations such as ROTA fighting and supporting our communities every step of the way this will remain a dream rather than a reality.

There is so much positivity and strength within ROTA, within the BAME sector and within our communities so here's to the good fight!

Thanks for listening.