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# 1

## Introduction

### **Ethnicity and gender at work: the background to this book**

This book explores the position of women from minority ethnic backgrounds as workers in contemporary labour markets. What jobs do they do? Do they work full-time or in 'non-standard contracts'? Are they clustered in particular sectors or occupations? How does their pay compare to workers in other social categories? Are they benefiting from recent processes of social and economic change or are they among those losing out as neo-liberal economic policies seek to secure 'flexibility' in the highly competitive global marketplace? How do they view their jobs? Are they committed to developing careers? What problems do they face? Are they experiencing racism and sexism within their jobs and how are current governmental and organisational policies on equality and diversity addressing this? How do they combine their jobs with their family responsibilities? What can trade unions do to assist them and cater for their specific needs? How can unions work more effectively with minority community organisations and agencies? How are these women's experiences affected by their differing class backgrounds and ethnic affiliations?

We seek to answer these questions by drawing both on secondary sources, such as official statistics from Britain and other advanced industrial economies, and by presenting material from our own research studies. In particular we report findings from a study we carried out between 2000 and 2002 exploring the 'double disadvantage' of gender and ethnicity or multiple discriminations faced by women workers who were also active within their trade unions.

The research, which was part of the Economic and Social Research Council's *Future of Work* programme, was carried out in conjunction

with four trade unions: UNISON, the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), the Communication Workers' Union (CWU), and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), who assisted us with their full collaboration and helped us find women to take part in the research. We interviewed women from four of Britain's minority ethnic communities: those of African, African-Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani backgrounds. We tried to interview 15 women from each union, from a mix of ethnic backgrounds. In some of the unions it was quite hard to locate any minority ethnic women who were activists; in the end we carried out lengthy semi-structured interviews with 57 women, including three as a pilot study. We also attended meetings, workshops and union conferences for black workers, spoke with equality officers from all the unions and looked at their documents and policies on equality.

As well as this research, which is used as the basis for much of the book's discussion, we use some examples from other research carried out with young minority workers (both women and men) in London and Bristol over the past ten years and from a recent project looking at minority ethnic women's experience of workplace cultures, which we carried out for the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in 2006–7.

We believe that this book is especially timely for a number of reasons. First, the report of the Women and Work Commission, chaired by Margaret Prosser of the Transport and General Workers Union, has highlighted the continuing disadvantages faced by women in the labour market, especially in regard to pay, and made a number of recommendations to address these disadvantages (Prosser 2006). Our research can bring the dimension of ethnicity into the picture. Second, the terrible recent attacks, first in New York and then in London, have led to worldwide tensions between Christian and Islamic populations, and have exacerbated racist attitudes to Muslims in Britain and elsewhere (Modood 2005). It is crucial that women from Muslim communities do not become the subject of increased discrimination as a result of these events. Moreover, at the same time, the increased focus on young Muslim men, seen to have replaced African-Caribbean young men as a 'social problem' in the eyes of the public and the police, means that Muslim women's specific needs and problems are in danger of being overlooked. Third, in the broader context, international employment relations are in the throes of some monumental changes. Especially within the European Community there is a continued trend of feminisation, with women's participation in the labour market increasing relative to men as a result of de-industrialisation and the replacement of manufacturing

with service jobs (Bradley, Erickson et al. 2000; Jensen, Hagen and Reddy 1988). At the same time, the freeing up of labour mobility within the European Union (EU) alongside the processes of international migration produced by the workings of global capitalism are producing new patterns of ethnic relations and an increasing and contested climate of multiculturalism. Thus there is a need to review the changing intersections of gender and ethnicity in the labour market. Finally, the EU enjoins on its member states a 'duty of equality' in regard to pay, which has led to a wealth of new Equal Opportunities (EO) and anti-discrimination legislation. There is a general acceptance in the industrial nations of the West that social diversity is a desirable thing and is helpful to the economy. Thus governments across Europe are to varying degrees attempting to ensure that citizens, old and new, are being treated with fairness and dignity. Many organisations have developed their own programmes to address these issues, under various names such as 'Dignity at Work', 'Positive Working Environment' or 'Equality and Diversity'. Such developments have an almost obligatory nature in the public sector, where legislation such as the Race Relations Amendment Act (RRAA), the Special Education Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) and the recently introduced Gender Duty have a binding status.

Despite these developments, there is still surprisingly little research into the work and lives of Britain's minority ethnic women. Recent research (Dale et al. 2002; Ahmad, Modood and Lissenberg 2003) has tended to focus on the various British Asian groups (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi), perhaps as a result of the fears of racism and Islamophobia. Partly, however, this is also to do with the increasing recognition that the different ethnic groups are very differently located within the nexus of socio-economic relations. It is no longer safe to make sweeping generalisations about racial discrimination and disadvantage. As in the case of the analysis of gender, it may well be that all minority ethnic citizens do face common problems, but there are also, as we shall see in Chapter 1, some dramatic differences. In this book we seek to explore both commonalities and differentiation. We also seek to explore how the various processes of change described above are affecting the position of the various minority groups. While there is increasing interest in the workings of the 'new economy' or 'knowledge-based economy' (Walby, Gottfried et al. 2007; Sayer and Walker 1992) we still know little about how patterns of gender and ethnic segmentation are currently evolving.

A key aim of this book, then, is to open up this field of investigation, both providing our own account of what is happening and allowing the

words of the women we have interviewed, which have shaped our understanding, to be heard in their own distinctive voices. In constructing our account we are concerned to highlight the intersections of ethnicity, nationality, gender and class in these women's lives. We also relate the women's experiences to the various agencies that are involved in challenging the structures of inequality and disadvantage. We consider the role of the state, of trade unions and of the various community, voluntary-sector and private organisations that have become involved in the fight for racial justice. It is, we think, possible to contemplate the current political moment in the United Kingdom as constituting something of a revival of the tripartism (the collaboration between government, employers' organisations and unions as representatives of employees) which evolved after the Second World War but was crushed out during the Thatcher era. The Commission on Women and Work, for example, consisted of representatives of these three core groups. This provides an important opportunity for trade unions to reassert themselves as legitimate players in the political arena.

### **A note on terminology**

The study of race relations and ethnicity has long been known as a difficult area with regard to the choice of appropriate, non-offensive and non-stigmatising terminology. In this book, which has been written within a policy context, we have followed prevailing tendencies in the equality and diversity field as much as we can, while acknowledging that the terms we use are contested. As a general descriptor we use the term 'black and minority ethnic' (BME) which is used in many research and policy contexts.

However, within the trade union movement there is still a preference to use the term 'black' as a symbolic marker of unity across non-majority ethnic groups. Thus the unions arranged 'Black Workers' conferences'. We asked all the women participants what they felt about the use of the term 'black' in this context and, while opinions were divided, with some feeling that some British Asian women felt excluded by it, the majority stated that they supported its use as a political tool and that they themselves identified as black. Therefore, when we talk about relations within the trade unions we use black, and also white to convey its converse.

There are similar issues around the term 'race' which is seen as discredited by its link with essentialist racist theories (discussed in Chapter 4). We are well aware that the notion of genetically and biologically distinct 'races'

is a discredited social construct, so we prefer to speak of ethnicity and ethnic groups, concepts with cultural and political rather than biological referents. However, we do talk of race relations, racial discrimination and racialisation to convey the sense that these forms of social action derive from the fact that many people act as if race does exist. For the same sorts of reasons, the unions themselves talk of 'race equality officers' rather than ethnic equality officers. As this demonstrates, we have tried to use these terms as sensitively as possible in the way our participants employed them.

## Structure of the book

Our book starts with a general review of minority ethnic women's position in contemporary labour markets, drawing primarily on statistical material. We aim to give an overview of their situation in the United Kingdom and to briefly describe some of the distinctions between women from different ethnic backgrounds. The specific positions of recent migrants and of refugees will also be given some attention, as in many cases they will experience the greatest level of discrimination.

We then set out a framework for explaining the continuance of ethnic and gender segregation in the labour market, elaborating on a number of analytic tools. Drawing on the concept of intersectionality, we seek to explore how class, ethnicity and gender come together in the context of racism and xenophobia to create patterns of multiple disadvantage. Intersectionality was defined by the United Nations as follows, following the Durban Conference against racism in 2001:

An intersectional approach to analysing the disempowerment and marginalisation of women attempts to capture the consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of subordination. It addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, class and the like ... Racially subordinated women are often positioned in the space where racism or xenophobia, class and gender meet.

(UN 2001)

In Chapters 4 to 6, we turn to explore the role of the three parties in the tripartite alliance, government, employers and trade unions, in confronting racist and sexist practices in the workplace, looking at recent and current initiatives from these key actors. Here, we will begin to

focus on our own research as we describe the array of policies developed by the four unions who participated in the 'double disadvantage' project.

This leads into Chapters 8 to 11, which draw on the interview materials from the study and which give prominence to the stories and voices of the activist women. We have referred to them as 'inspiring activists' and we hope that readers will be as impressed and moved as we were by the strength of commitment and the tenacity of these women in their contributions to the quest for racial equality. These chapters deal with their experiences within their workplaces, their experiences of racism and sexism at work and elsewhere, their career aspirations and the constraints and opportunities they faced. We show how their union membership and activism constituted an alternative career pattern for them, helping them to channel their energies and talents into union work.

Finally, we explore the policy implications of our research and of our wider explorations of ethnic and gender segmentation. We live in a multicultural world, in which much lip-service is paid to equality and diversity. What can we do to ensure that all the citizens in our society, regardless of their social origins, are given a fair chance to enjoy the benefits of contemporary living? A great aspiration for the activist women we interviewed was 'making a difference' in the lives of the working people they represented and in their communities as a whole. We are convinced that the remarkable women whose stories appear in this book are indeed helping to improve the working lives of others, as they themselves believed. In the words of Ginette:

I know that I have made a difference to people. I have stopped people losing their job you know, I have stopped people getting into all sorts of difficulties. You think, I haven't done anything really, all I've done is listen, you know that sort of stuff, but you know you have made a difference.

If this book can make its own small contribution to the spread of relations of dignity and respect at work, we shall have fulfilled one of our own most important goals.

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