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Ethnic Minority Women: Routes to Power

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Ethnic Minority Women: Routes to Power

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Fawcett
closing the inequality gap
wo race & **men** gender



ETHNOS

RESEARCH AND
CONSULTANCY

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Foreword

The women in this report are an inspiration, and I celebrate their achievements in making it to the top of their professions.

The research provides a valuable and fascinating insight into how these women, from a range of ethnic minority backgrounds, successfully reached positions of power. It explores everything from educational expectations and family background, through to discrimination they've faced and caring responsibilities they have juggled.

The report shows that this country has achieved a lot and we have much to be proud of, but it also shows that we must do more to change the stark under-representations of minority ethnic women in all walks of life.

There are 2.3 million black, Asian and minority ethnic women in England, but there are only two black women MPs and there has never been an Asian women MP. Only around 168 out of 20,000 councillors are minority ethnic women. And in the private sector, just eight out of 961 FTSE100 Directors are of non-European descent.

The Government is committed to playing its part to change this. Empowering black and minority ethnic women is at the heart of the Ministers for Women's priorities. And we have just launched a new taskforce which will help more black, Asian and minority ethnic women to become councillors.

We can support more women to reach positions of power by working alongside communities, businesses, and institutions. This research will improve our understanding of how best we can do this, and will help determine the shape of Government support.

The findings in this report bring together months of important discussions with women – both individually and in groups – from a range of ethnic minority backgrounds. I am grateful to the women who took the time to speak candidly about their experiences, and hope that these findings will help more ethnic minority women to achieve their full potential.



Barbara Follett
Deputy Minister for Women and Equality

Executive summary

The need for this report

Ethnic minority women are under-represented in positions of power and senior decision-making authority. This is true across the public, private and voluntary sectors, as well as in politics. The specific reasons for this under-representation are not well understood beyond generalisations about all women or all people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Importantly, the experiences and insights of those ethnic minority women who have managed to negotiate their way to the top are rarely heard.

This report helps plug the gap. The research aims to understand better why ethnic minority women are so under-represented in positions of power by exploring the experiences of ethnic minority women who have succeeded in making their ways to the top. It discusses:

- The motivations behind their achievements;
- The professional trajectories they followed;
- The barriers and challenges they met along the way;
- The strategies they employed to overcome and handle these;
- The added value they bring to organisations; and
- Their suggestions on how to support more ethnic minority women into senior decision-making roles.

The report concludes with policy recommendations on the steps that are needed to increase ethnic minority women's access to power.

Methodology

The findings are based on twenty-three in-depth individual interviews with senior ethnic minority women and three focus groups with ethnic minority women who are currently becoming more high profile as local councillors, grassroots activists and in public appointments. The research participants were chosen to reflect a diversity of ethnic backgrounds and to provide insights into different sectors. Many of these women have received a range of awards (including honorary doctorates and professorships, life peerages, MBE, OBE and CBE awards and various professional achievement awards) in recognition of their outstanding and innovative contributions.

Fieldwork took place between July and October 2007, in London and Birmingham.

Findings

Family background: stability and love prove pivotal

“Somehow my parents just instilled in me the feeling that I was special. They believed in me so much that I ended up believing in myself. I still do!”

The research explored the family background of the research participants, in order to identify whether there are socio-economic and domestic patterns that account, at least in part, for the success of ethnic minority women in reaching positions of power.

The majority of the women described their families as “middle-class”, at least in terms of their aspirations, values and lifestyles, if not always in terms of their economic position. But a significant minority described their family background as “working class” and recounted difficulties linked to poverty, isolation, discrimination, and so on. Two thirds came from families that had a strong humanitarian and philanthropic ethos, and a third came from families that had a strong race consciousness and were concerned with changing economic, social, political and legal structures in favour of greater equality. Nearly all the women in the study claimed to have been raised in stable and loving families. They saw this as key both in shielding them against discrimination and in empowering them to achieve their full potential.

Education: stereotypes and assumptions influence experiences and trajectories

“I was taken out of school because my mother perceived the attitude to be racist.”

“I had this one teacher who really believed in me. He saved my life.”

The research explored the educational experiences and trajectories of ethnic minority women in order to identify any pattern that may underline their distinctive achievements. It found striking differences between the educational experiences of women as a function of their ethnic backgrounds.

While most Black women felt very strongly supported at home, most Asian women reported barriers against education and career ambitions either at home or in the wider community. And while most Black women experienced a systemic failure of expectations in school, most Asian women felt empowered and supported in school.

The educational trajectories of ethnic minority women are much less clear. Many only pursued higher education after having started a family or begun their career. Very few attended prestigious universities and business schools. The disciplines they chose are also extremely varied, with a slight emphasis on the social sciences. The sheer variety of trajectories seems to be what is typical of ethnic minority women's educational careers, perhaps reflecting the individual strategies they had to enact in the absence of institutional support and established pathways.

Motivation and professional trajectories: equality and social justice drive careers

“The main thing has been a passion to change the world.”

Above and beyond their common motivation to excel, nearly all the women in this study were driven by key values around equality, social justice, empowerment and human rights. More than anything else, it is this commitment to values that structured their careers, leading them to move across organisations and sectors in search of opportunities to bring about greater equality and to give voice to vulnerable people. This commitment to values leads to unusual career paths in many cases. The only exceptions were accountants and lawyers, all of whom experienced a more traditional career progression.

In work: organisational discrimination is taking on new forms

“We may have the legislation but we have not won hearts and minds”

Research participants discussed how the impact of sex and race equality legislation has been to eradicate the most blatant forms of racist or sexist discrimination, to put equality, diversity and inclusion on the agenda, and to create more opportunities for ethnic minority women. However, they also strongly felt that the legislation had not entirely succeeded in changing “hearts and minds”. In fact, they claimed that it had contributed to creating two new forms of organisational discrimination:

- **Tokenism:** Ethnic minority women are being used as tokens so that organisations and individuals can be seen to be “valuing diversity”. Even where this is not the deliberate intention in any one circumstance, ethnic minority women are undermined by the use of tokenism because it results in the widespread assumption in the minds of others that they are not in their roles because of their own merit and abilities.

- **Typcasting:** Ethnic minority women are being prevented from developing their full potential as they are being streamed into specialising in ethnic minority or gender issues.

Research participants felt tokenism and typecasting were most severe in the public sector and in politics, compared to the private or voluntary sectors.

Gendered roles: caring responsibilities continue to shape careers

“I took four years off to sort my family life out.”

Research participants discussed how the bulk of caring responsibilities continues to fall disproportionately on women’s shoulders. They also discussed how organisations have remained unresponsive to the demands of families. Together, these factors impact negatively on the recruitment, career progression and quality of working life of women. Mothers in the sample recounted how they had started their careers late, worked part-time, taken career breaks, postponed going for promotions, missed out on training, networking and decision-making opportunities, chosen jobs that are conveniently located and entailed little travel, and faced discrimination from colleagues. They also talked about the difficulties of pursuing high profile careers for themselves and their families. It is no coincidence that many of the research participants had no children.

Distinct approaches: ethnic minority women add value

“There’s not a lot of people who can straddle both the world of communities and the world of policy.”

The report shows that ethnic minority women can bring distinct and valuable experiences, skills and competencies to organisations that are otherwise dominated by white, middle class men. Women who have grown up in ethnic minority families and communities have cultural capital: direct knowledge about the norms, cultures and perspectives of these communities, as well as an understanding about some of their needs. As members of minority groups, they have often developed a deep awareness of social structures and of their positions within them. Such experiences mean that they possess bicultural and cross-cultural competences which enable them to bridge different working cultures and work successfully in very diverse environments. Their widespread commitment to values of equality and social justice also seems to affect how ethnic minority women

understand and use power. Research participants viewed power as the ability to make a difference and to empower others. This, in turn, impacts on their leadership style, which they describe as revolving around inclusion, collaboration and facilitation.

Recommendations

Lessons for organisations

There is no lack of talent or ambition amongst ethnic minority women in the UK. Instead, many of the barriers and challenges they face to achieving their full potential are structural. Organisations that aim to lead in their sectors should address institutional inequalities for four key reasons:

- Not making the most of the skills and abilities of ethnic minority women means missing out on a huge pool of specialist talent.
- Ethnic minority women have in-depth knowledge of and access to the increasingly diverse, global and niche clients and markets that organisations require. This is crucial if Britain is to maintain its competitive edge in a global market.
- Making businesses effective in competitive markets demands innovation, creativity, and a willingness to move away from 'group think' and the usual answers and perspectives – a clear call for diversity and difference.
- Greater diversity in decision-making positions will enable the delivery of services that meet the needs of a diverse population.

Within politics, parity of representation provides the added incentives of increasing legitimacy and deepening democracy.

Forward thinking organisations should seek to:

- **Become model workplaces:** Provide excellent parental and care leave entitlements and flexible work practices for all.
- **Champion meritocracy:** Recruit, retain, pay and promote transparently and based on skills and competence rather than seniority or stereotypes.
- **Embed equal opportunities:** Monitor for equal opportunities in all relevant parts of the business, including pay and promotions, and ensure that data collected is actually analysed and used to change practice.
- **Deliver on governance best practice:** Ensure that senior decision makers within the organisation, whether board, executive or

management, reflect the diversity of the various populations the organisation works within, serves or works with, and employs.

- **Challenge stereotyping:** Actively promote inclusive workplace cultures that reward talent and are tough on prejudice and discrimination.

Overall Recommendations

The specific mechanisms that will make a difference to ethnic minority women's access to decision making authority can vary between sectors. They include the following key roles:

Government

The Government is well positioned to lead by example, by complying with and championing the current legal, regulatory and statutory equalities frameworks including the positive duties, and by recruiting, retaining and promoting talent including through learning from and adapting to "difference". Government also needs to integrate its thinking so that the specific needs of ethnic minority women are not missed as a result of generalisations about all women or ethnic minority communities.

Political parties

As the gatekeepers to some of the most powerful positions in society, all political parties must increase their efforts to ensure fairness and transparency in their operations, as well as more actively recruiting, supporting and promoting ethnic minority women.

Employers

Across the public, private and voluntary sectors, as well as in public appointments, organisations need to seriously review how they understand "talent" and "work". Structures and processes that reward the actual skills and abilities of ethnic minority women and facilitate their career progression without prejudice or discrimination need to be institutionalised via leadership from the top. In particular, organisations will benefit from making more use of the distinct experiences, skills and competencies that ethnic minority women bring.

Families

Family members can enhance the critical roles they play in empowering their children to achieve their full potential by taking up community leadership positions in the public institutions that affect their children's lives, for example as school governors.

Ethnic minority women workers

In addition to possessing exceptional drive, talent and resilience, the women leaders in the study deliberately enacted strategies for success that other ambitious women could employ including challenging tokenism and typecasting, relying on support networks, and formally ensuring contributions are recognised and valued.

Further details on particular actions to take can be found in Chapter 9.

I. Introduction

I.1 Background

Ethnic minority women are under-represented in positions of power across politics and the public, private and voluntary sectors. Despite making up 5.2% of the population and 3.9% of the labour market¹:

- There are only two ethnic minority women MPs and there has never been an Asian woman MP. Ethnic minority women make up just over 1% of the House of Lords.
- There are only around 168 ethnic minority women local councillors in England.² This represents less than 1% of all councillors.
- There is only one ethnic minority woman in the senior judiciary.³
- Around 3% of the senior civil service are from ethnic minority backgrounds, about a third of these are women.⁴
- Ethnic minority women make up only 2.3% of public appointments.⁵
- Of the 961 Directors of FTSE 100 companies, only 8 are of non-European descent.⁶
- None of the top 50 highest earning charities have a chair or chief executive that is an ethnic minority woman.⁷

As part of the Fawcett Society's Seeing Double programme on the needs and experiences of ethnic minority women, ETHNOS was commissioned, with funding from the Government Equalities Office, to explore the reasons behind this under-representation.

I.2 Aims of the research

The aims of the Routes to Power research study are to explore why ethnic minority women are so under-represented in positions of power. The research seeks to examine the experiences of ethnic minority women who have succeeded in reaching positions of power to find out from them about the motivations behind their achievements, the professional trajectories they followed, the barriers and challenges they met along the way, the

1 *Sex and power: who runs Britain 2007*, Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) 2007.

2 *Census of Local Authority Councillors 2006*.

3 EOC 2007.

4 Cabinet Office SCS Database as at October 2007. Senior civil service is defined as Grade 5 and above.

5 EOC 2007.

6 *Female FTSE Report 2007*.

7 Internal research, Fawcett Society, 2008.

strategies they employed to overcome and handle these, and the steps they believe are needed to increase ethnic minority women's access to positions of power.

1.3 Structure of the report

After a brief discussion of methodology, the report begins by addressing the family circumstances of the ethnic minority women participants in their formative years, to identify both the obstacles they have had to overcome and the resources they were provided with to empower them for life. The fourth chapter reports on expectations and experiences in the educational system. The fifth chapter covers some of the key drivers behind the remarkable achievements of women in the study and their impact on the professional trajectories of ethnic minority women. The next two chapters each address the most powerful sets of constraints which have restricted the career options and progression for many women in the study: organisational discrimination and caring responsibilities. The eighth chapter explores the added value which ethnic minority women bring to organisations and it describes some of the outstanding impacts they have made. The final chapter summarises the many ideas generated throughout the study on how to enable more ethnic minority women to reach positions of power in politics, and the public, private and voluntary sectors.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research design

The research is entirely qualitative. It is based on three focus groups and twenty-three individual interviews with women from a range of ethnic minority backgrounds. Focus groups are an ideal method to explore such complex issues as people's professional trajectories, the barriers which they met along the way, and the support which they think is required to widen access to positions of power. Focus groups allow access to a range of opinions and experiences relatively quickly, but leave scope for participants to expand, in their own words, on themes of importance to them. Because each participant prompts other group members into discussing their own views, the dynamics of focus groups stimulate reflection and can produce more perceptive insights from each participant than they may have produced without the benefits of group interactions.

However, group dynamics can also obscure important individual differences in opinions and experiences. They are impractical when working with extremely busy professionals. The presence of others can also make it difficult for individuals to disclose and openly discuss certain experiences. Thus, we also conducted individual interviews with twenty-three of the most powerful ethnic minority women currently working in the UK. These women shared their experiences and views on how they made it to the top of their respective professions and what is required to support other ethnic minority women in fulfilling their full potential.

The findings of this report are illustrative rather than statistically representative, and draw overall conclusions from each focus group and interview.

2.2. Topics covered

Both the focus groups and the individual interviews explored similar issues. A copy of the full discussion guide can be found in Appendix A, but an overview of the topics covered with all research participants is given here. These are:

- Current roles and responsibilities
- Trajectory into current position
 - Family background
 - Educational and professional background
 - Motivations

- Barriers and challenges
 - Strategies to overcome barriers
- Contributions of ethnic minority women
 - Vision
 - Skills and competencies
 - Impacts made
 - Future ambitions
- Recommendations to widen the participation of ethnic minority women

2.3 Profile of research participants

2.3.1 Individual interviews

The profiles of the women who were individually interviewed to take part in the study were extremely varied in terms of ethnicity, age and sector of activity. In terms of their backgrounds, individual interviewees included women of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, Black African, African-American, Guyanese, mixed parentage (Black African and White British) and Chinese origins. Research participants were invited from across politics, and the public, private and voluntary sectors. Selection was based on a number of criteria, including:

- The participant's own or their organisation's public visibility;
- The participant's own or their organisation's level of influence in their field or sector;
- The need to balance representation from different ethnic minority groups;
- A desire to balance representation from each sector;
- A desire to ensure representation from a diverse group of organisations within each sector;
- The availability of participants; and
- The willingness of participants to contribute.

A total of twenty-three women were interviewed for the research. Many of these women had received a range of awards (including honorary doctorates and professorships, life peerages, MBE, OBE and CBE awards and professional achievement awards) in recognition of their outstanding and innovative contributions. For the purpose of reporting, people of Indian,

Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Chinese backgrounds are referred to as Asian, and people of all other backgrounds are referred to as Black.

The table below summarises the profile of the women who took part in individual interviews.

Table 1: Individual interviewees

| Name | Title | Organisation |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Nina Amin | Tax Partner | KPMG |
| Baroness Amos | Life Peer and Former Leader of the House | House of Lords |
| Dawn Butler MP | Member of Parliament | House of Commons |
| Shami Chakrabarti | Director | Liberty |
| Naaz Coker | Chair/Chair | St George's Healthcare NHS Trust/Shelter |
| Althea Efunshile | Executive Director, Arts Planning and Investment | The Arts Council |
| Baljeet Ghale | President | National Union of Teachers |
| Irene Zubaida Khan | Secretary General | Amnesty International |
| Brenda King | Member/Director | European Economic and Social Committee/A/C Diversity |
| Mei Sim Lai OBE DL | Partner | Lai Peters & Co |
| Carol Lake | Managing Director | JP Morgan |
| Pinky Lilani | Founder | Asian Women in Achievement Awards |
| Nahid Majid OBE | Deputy Director, Area Initiatives and Communities Division | Department for Work and Pensions |
| Zahida Mansoor CBE | Ombudsman | Legal Services Ombudsman for England and Wales |
| Gloria Mills CBE | Director and National Organiser Equalities | UNISON |

| Name | Title | Organisation |
|-------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| Danielle Walker Palmour | Director | Friends Provident Foundation |
| Ruby Parmar | Tax Partner | PricewaterhouseCoopers |
| Angela Sarkis | Former National Secretary | YMCA England |
| Maggie Semple | Chief Executive | The Experience Corps |
| Srabani Sen | Chief Executive/ Former Chief Executive | Contact a Family/Alcohol Concern |
| Sukhvinder Stubbs | Chief Executive | Barrow Cadbury Trust |
| Valerie Todd | Managing Director | Transport for London Group Services |
| Baroness Uddin | Labour Party Politician | House of Lords and Life Peer |

2.3.2 Focus groups

The women who took part in the focus groups held less senior positions, as the aim of the focus groups was to map trajectories as they were unfolding. One focus group included local councillors, another included women leading pioneering work at grassroots level, and the third comprised women active in public life in a range of capacities (e.g. school governors, local magistrates, non-executive directors of various public bodies such as NHS trusts). In terms of their ethnic backgrounds, the focus group participants included women of Indian, Pakistani/Kashmiri, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, Turkish, Greek, Chinese and Malaysian backgrounds. Two of the groups took place in London (those with local councillors and with women in public life) and one was held in Birmingham (the group with grassroots pioneers). Because each group comprised women of diverse ethnic backgrounds, reporting is not done on the basis of ethnicity for the focus groups, unless participants identified that they were reporting on experiences that are distinct to their communities.

2.4 Fieldwork

All the focus groups and individual interviews were conducted by the same female researcher. Most of the interviews took place face-to-face, usually in the respondents' workplace. However, due to time constraints, five interviews took place over the telephone. The focus groups all lasted around 90 minutes. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on the research participants' availability, with one lasting 30 minutes. All interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, except for one of the face-to-face interviews (on interviewee request).

The data collection took place between July and October 2007.

2.5 Analysis and reporting

All the interviews (except one) and the focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were coded and analysed with N'VIVO, a software package for the systematic analysis of large qualitative data sets. Top line findings were identified to devise the coding frame. Each transcript was read and units of meaning (for example as sentences and paragraphs) were allocated to relevant codes in the coding frame. This enabled researchers to search for any patterns in the data and to test out emerging hypotheses. To produce the report, responses were explored in relation to each code, in order to identify commonalities and differences in the key themes. Data sets were searched for any patterns linked to either ethnicity or sector, as these proved early on to be meaningful variables. The report stresses any differences linked to sector or ethnicity whenever these have emerged empirically. If no such differences are reported, it is because none were found.

Given the topic of the research, it is important to state that some of the women approached declined to take part in the study because they felt unable to discuss publicly any experience of discrimination they had encountered in the course of their professional trajectories, even under confidentiality agreement and the guarantee that they would be able to comment on the draft report before publication. In relation to the material which was gathered, the authors have also had to make careful decisions about the quotes that could be included or that needed to be excluded

from the report in order to protect the confidentiality of respondents. There have been many instances where important information and evidence had to be edited out because it would readily identify research participants in contexts which were deemed inappropriate. For many reasons, therefore, it is likely that the report underestimates the full extent of organisational discrimination experienced by research participants. In the spirit of doing justice to their experiences, the report draws very extensively on verbatim information from the ethnic minority women who participated in the study.

Finally, given the nature and size of the sample, this report does not attempt to generalise about the experiences of all ethnic minority women in the UK. Its intention is to capture some of the richness of these women's experiences and to shed light on some of the key factors that have shaped their careers. It complements the interim research report which profiled the focus group with local councillors called 'Routes to Power: ethnic minority women local councillors'.¹ Together these reports aim to be a first step towards generating a better understanding of the reasons behind the current under-representation of ethnic minority women in positions of power.

¹ *Routes to Power: ethnic minority women local councillors*, Fawcett Society, 2007.

3. Family background

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the family backgrounds of the women who took part in the study. The aim is to find out whether there are socio-economic and domestic patterns that can account, at least in part, for the success of ethnic minority women in reaching positions of power. The chapter explores such issues as:

- Social class;
- The quality of family life; and
- The level of politicisation (especially in relation to race and sex discrimination) which characterised families.

3.2 Social class

Among ethnic minorities in Britain, social class background is an important factor accounting for people's professional achievements, even when taking into account individual educational achievements.¹ This is certainly the case for the majority of women in the research. While they have all been highly upwardly mobile, roughly three-quarters of them started off in families which they describe as middle-class. They commented on the fact that such factors as home ownership, living in safe and relatively affluent areas, high parental educational achievements, secure parental employment (from at least one parent), cosmopolitan values and lifestyles, and so on, helped ensure that they would be able to fulfill their potential and that they would be shielded from some of the most detrimental impacts of racism.

“We lived in Islington in a house with a garden. We didn't live on an estate. My father had a car. He was a professional. My mother stayed at home as women of her time did. She grew up in a convent school in the Caribbean. My father played the saxophone and we had a piano at home. We were quite privileged. There is no doubt about it. So growing up, at home I was partly insulated from the things that every other black person was feeling.”

“There have been barriers linked to gender and race but so much power given to me through social class, through education and upbringing, through accent, through good area, or whatever, that it almost offset the difficulties I could have encountered because of colour.”

¹ Lucinda Platt, *Migration and Social Mobility: the life chances of Britain's minority ethnic communities*, The Policy Press, 2005.

“I was always told that I could do whatever I liked by my teachers, by my parents and by everybody really. In fact, I felt a responsibility to do good because I had all the advantages.”

“I come from a family of fairly high achievers. I’m an only child but my extended family, for generations and generations, has been [full of] high achievers. Various members of my family were the first Indian in Occupied India to take particularly high senior roles and so on. Both on my mother’s side and my father’s side, there were very high expectations in terms of career achievement. When you are brought up with that set of expectations, that’s what you expect of yourself.”

Many of these positive factors were also found in migrant families that had experienced downward economic mobility when they arrived to Britain, but had nevertheless retained middle-class values and lifestyles.

“I grew up in the suburbs of London in a semi-detached house in the outskirts of London and I went to local schools. My parents had been graduates in India before they came to London, so education wasn’t new or particularly difficult for the family. In England, my father was a book-keeper/accountant before he retired and my mother stayed at home for ten years with her children even though they both had degrees. It’s the classic migrant pattern. They were over qualified for the jobs that they eventually did, but they knew what it was like to be privileged, they knew that education was key and they believed in gender equality.”

“Dad worked at Victoria post office sorting letters. Back in Jamaica he was a bookkeeper and accountant, but when he came here, nobody would appoint him to that kind of work. Similarly, my mother was a teacher but when she came here she couldn’t get that kind of work, so she worked in a factory. She did sewing, seamstressing. But they had middle class values and aspirations, strong aspirations for me.”

However, a quarter of the women in the sample did overcome significant economic, social and cultural barriers to achieve the positions they occupy today. Some came from very large families, experienced severe economic hardship, had parents who could not communicate in English, had to be separated from their parents and other close relatives, experienced social isolation and disorientation after migration and did not receive proper schooling.

“I was brought up in the Punjab in a little village where we didn’t have electricity and toilets and running water, the sorts of things you take for

granted. My father left me, my mum and my grandparents to come and work in construction in the UK. I missed him desperately. It took him about two years to then save up enough for me and my mum to come and join him. I was four when I came over to Britain. I didn't speak English until I was nine."

"I was raised in a small town in Kenya. My dad wasn't particularly well off. It wasn't as if he had a lot of money and could afford to send his daughter to England for her education. So my mum and dad and everyone else had to make some big sacrifices. And because of exchange controls at the time, my father was only allowed to send a certain amount of money each year. I had to make do, pay for fees, transport, lodging, etc., which was quite a challenge... But the most difficult thing for me, which I hadn't appreciated at all, was the fact I was actually moving thousands of miles away from my family into a strange country. All of a sudden, I had to cope with a completely different culture, a huge anonymous city, bad weather, nobody to rely on."

"I was brought up in Malaysia. My mother doesn't speak any English and I come from a family of ten children."

"I come from a very working class family. My mum would work days and my dad would work nights. I had four brothers and one sister."

Thus, the values and aspirations (if not the economic advantages) associated with a middle-class family background have been important contributory factors in helping the majority of Black and Asian women in the study reach positions of power. However, a number of women bucked the odds and overcame economic, social and cultural barriers to make it to the top of their professions. We will explore in subsequent chapters some of the drivers behind these astonishing achievements.

3.3 Family life

As mentioned above, a number of women in the study came from very large families and one discussed having lived in extended households. The vast majority came from what they describe as "stable", "happy", "loving", "caring", "strong", "balanced" and "supportive" families. This is especially the case among Black women participants. Even when they faced adverse economic circumstances and many of the risk factors which affect families in similar positions of economic disadvantage, these women never ceased to believe that they were "special".

“Somehow my parents just instilled in me the feeling that I was special. They believed in me so much that I ended up believing in myself. I still do!”

“I had all the risk factors and could have gone right over the edge actually, but I suppose what I had was those strong protective factors as well: loving parents who wanted and expected me to do well.”

“I had a very good childhood in the sense that I had very good, caring parents. I was brought up in a very working-class area, therefore experiencing the challenges of most kids in that area, but our family life was good, loving and strong.”

Even in the case of the three Black women who were raised by their mothers on their own, with all the added economic and logistic pressures this often places on the family, the feeling of love, care and support was never put in question.

“I come from a single parent background, a very low-income background. It was not easy but there was a lot of love around.”

“My parents divorced when I was about five, so my mother raised eight kids on her own. She had two jobs but she always worked around the family. So she’d put us to bed at night and then she’d go out to do her nursing job in the night. She would come back in the morning and get us ready for school, make us breakfast. While we were out at school, she’d do her second job maybe at a nursing home, residential home, something like that. But when we got home, there was always a hot meal on the table and mum was there. She would cook, put us to bed, go to work, same routine, without a break.”

The only research participants who did not report such an empowering family life were Asian. Yet, even in those cases, Asian women did not doubt that they were loved and that their parents wanted the very best for their daughters. They only felt that their parents did not always understand the demands of the contemporary British context, and the entitlement to self-determination felt by second generation women.

“My father has always been one of those dads who was absolutely devoted to the family. Very, very supportive. He just did not know any different.”

3.4 Race and gender politics at home

One interesting and distinctive dimension of the upbringing of people from ethnic minority backgrounds is the extent to which their households can be said to have been “politicised” around race and gender. A third of the women in the study came from families where there was a strong awareness of race and sex discrimination. Their parents believed that it was important to challenge prejudice, harassment and institutional discrimination and to change the social structures that reproduce inequalities and disadvantage for women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds. This type of politicisation at home was much more common among Black women than among Asians in the study.

“My dad and his dad were always talking about politics and they were very aware of social justice. They did not tolerate injustice and that was part of my life growing up.”

“My dad came from a very poor but very political background. He was very clever, very political. All my political values come from him. I still have those political values.”

“My mother always said that the three ‘R’s’ that every girl should have is to be resourceful, resilient and resolute. If you are determined and focused, there is no reason why you can’t achieve it.”

“My father really instilled in me a passion that women were equal.”

Most of the remaining participants came from families in which there existed a strong humanistic, often religiously-influenced ethos around the responsibility of those who are more able to help people who are less fortunate than themselves. This philanthropic ethos was not about challenging existing social structures, only about offsetting the worse outcomes of economic, political and social inequalities through positive individual action.

“My family had a strong philanthropic ethos, but they were actually strangely not politicised. They were more humanitarian. Their approach was much more in terms of charity and service rather than politics or ideology.”

“There was always a sense of philanthropy in the family, there was a tradition of philanthropy or community service. My father was a doctor, he did a lot of charitable work. My grandmother was very well known for her philanthropic background, so there was an expectation that

whatever you did, you did in the public service, not as a commercial or private business.”

“I came from very much a Muslim family where the mantra was, you have to do charity work, you have to put something back into the community.”

“My mum has this very Christian philosophy which is about doing good to others and turning the other cheek. She was not at all politicised around race or anything. She was just concerned with doing the right thing.”

While the level of race and gender consciousness at home could have been expected to be a key factor driving many of the outstanding achievements of women in the sample, there was in fact no straight-forward relationship between them. Two thirds of the women came from families which they described as having no politicised identification with either gender or race.

3.5 Conclusions

The majority of the women in the study came from families that can be described as middle-class, at least in terms of their aspirations, values and lifestyles, if not always in terms of their economic position. But a significant minority came from working class backgrounds, with many additional risk factors linked to language difficulties, different cultural traditions, difficulties linked to migration and adaptation in a new and at times inhospitable country, single-parenthood and so on. One third of the women came from families with a strong awareness of race and sex discrimination while two thirds came from families that had relatively little awareness around the issues. Indeed, their families were generally more concerned with “doing good” and “giving back” through individual humanitarian and philanthropic action than with changing economic, social, political and legal structures in favour of greater equality. The one factor that unites nearly all the women in the study is that they came from stable and loving families. This is said to have been key both in protecting them against discrimination and in empowering them to achieve their full potential.

4. Education

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this section is to identify whether highly successful ethnic minority women have distinct educational aspirations, experiences and trajectories. It explores:

- Educational history;
- Cultural and parental aspirations;
- Teacher expectations; and
- Choice of university programmes.

4.2 Educational history

One may have expected that, like most other highly successful professionals in the UK, ethnic minority women who have made such outstanding professional contributions have been schooled privately and pursued higher education in prestigious universities. In fact, this was rarely the case. Almost half of the women in the study did their primary and secondary schooling abroad (in their country of birth) and only obtained their degree in the UK. In fact, many came to the UK specifically to pursue their higher education. Unlike their white male counterparts, very few of the women attended world-class universities. The norm was to attend polytechnics and local universities.

“I would not make it today with my educational background through our graduate recruitment programme!”

“I am definitely somebody who was largely educated in the school of hard knocks.”

“I went to a very ordinary Polytechnic. Nothing high-flying.”

Moreover, many of the women in the study staggered their education. Some could not afford to continue studying and needed to start earning a salary early on. Others chose to start their family. Others realised once in work that they would progress better if they broadened or deepened their skills set, and others still went back into education when their marriage broke down and they realised they would have to become the chief income earner for their family.

“I could not afford not to earn a salary. I had to start working quite young.”

“I gave up my university to have children. I went back afterwards. What I was told was: ‘You can do your Masters later, you can do your career later. You need to support your husband first.’”

“My manager spotted me and suggested I do a Diploma in Management Skills. So that helped the transition to a managerial role a lot. And then I started an MBA because I wanted to push myself further.”

“I went through basic education at school, but I was stopped because girls didn’t go to education in those days: they got married and lived happily ever after. It’s only when my marriage didn’t work that I went back into education.”

4.3 Cultural and parental aspirations

Black and Asian women reported very different cultural and parental expectations. None of the Black women discussed any community-specific cultural or parental barriers in relation to education. While they acknowledged that girls and boys generally tend to be streamed into very different career trajectories from a very early age, and that such societal gendering restricts career options, they did not believe that this applied any more to black children than to white ones. In the Black women’s experiences, the main hurdles in education came from the schools themselves rather than from home or the wider black community. In fact, many discussed how their parents had very high academic expectations of them.

“My parents were both teachers and they wanted the best education for their children. That was a key factor in coming to England.”

“My father used to say: ‘You are going to Cambridge and you are going to be a lawyer.’ So that was the aspiration for me. He knew that as a Black child I would need to be better than my white counterparts so he wanted me to do very well.”

“My mother said to me: ‘Will you go to university?’ I said: ‘I can’t go to university, not me. Nobody in my family had ever gone to university before.’ But she thought I could do it.”

“My mum always brought me up to challenge and to question and to probe and to fight stereotypes. Her approach to life was there’s nothing that girls cannot achieve that boys achieve and it’s a question of making sure that you do excel in everything you do.”

Many Asian women reported similarly high educational aspirations from their parents.

“My father really instilled in me a passion that women are equal and that I was no different from my younger brothers. He really believed that education was the key to empowerment because nobody could take that away from you. He wanted me to get educated, to unlock doors and to achieve my full potential.”

“My parents certainly had aspirations for their children and there wasn’t a sense that you couldn’t do anything that you wanted to do. I suspect in school I had probably higher aspirations than many of my white counterparts, male counterparts. So if high aspirations and parental enthusiasm are an advantage then, in a funny way, I had an advantage.”

“For me, it was not a question of whether I’d have a career, but what my career would be; not whether I went to university but which high class university would I go to.”

“My parents always pushed me to get a good education.”

“My husband’s family are incredibly supportive to their women, whether they are outside or inside. And I also came from a family where all the women were educated. My maternal grandfather educated all his daughters. He was such a feminist!”

However, these women acknowledged that such high expectations were not the norm. Two Asian women felt that they had probably benefited from the fact that they were the only girls in their family and, as a result, their parents had displaced onto them the high educational expectations they would normally reserve for boys.

“I fought really hard with my dad for him to send me to England for my education. I come from a traditional Indian family and I’m one of three daughters and no sons. As far as girls were concerned, the expectations were that you work for a while, then you get married and have a family. That’s the tradition. But I guess because there weren’t any sons, I think my father thought: ‘Why not?’ And I set the trend for my sisters, both of whom are very highly educated and with great careers!”

“The fact that we had no boys in the family probably helped. In a Muslim family with only girls, one of two things happen: either girls are very traditional or the parents get to think that they should give the same opportunity to their girls as they would have to their boys. Had we had a

brother I'm not sure whether my parents' expectation would have been so high for their girls. I don't know. But I have found that the willingness of my family to invest in my education to give me the freedom to choose what I wanted to do was very, very important."

Moreover, nearly all the South Asian women in the research reported that in Asian cultures expectations of educational achievements are highly gendered and patterned by social class. There was widespread agreement that, especially among more traditional and poorer families, women were not expected to achieve much in their education. Many Asian women reported anxieties in their communities around educating girls and fears that this would lead them to become "Westernised" and therefore to fail to fulfill their caring duties to parents, husbands, children and parents-in-law, and to dishonour the family's reputation as a result.

"I was not sent to school at all before I was 9 years-old because my parents were very traditional and they did not think of educating a girl. It just did not cross their mind at all. I only went to school when my younger brothers reached school age and people discovered that there was an older child in the house who needed to go to school."

"The barriers and challenges for me came mainly from within the community. There was huge pressure on my parents not to let me study because it was bad for a girl to leave the family home and I was going to damage the family name."

"The one person who held me back the most was my mum because she worried that I would do things that are bad for my reputation if I got an education: I would become Westernised."

Among more affluent Asian families, South Asian research participants reported that parents often had high educational expectations for their daughters, but that this was mainly with a view to "marrying well" rather than to pursuing a fulfilling career.

"I had a privileged upbringing, but my parents didn't want their daughter to do too much because that would put me out of the marriage market, so they encouraged me with my studies but they didn't really encourage me to fly in my profession."

"There was a very high expectation of education that you had to go to university and do well in your education, but not that you would necessarily go into employment."

One Chinese woman in the study discussed parental and cultural expectations that she should do well both in her studies and in her career. This sets her apart from many other Asian women in the study.

“Coming from a Chinese culture, there’s a lot of emphasis in doing well in your studies and doing well in your profession. That’s very much part of the culture. My parents were typical of that culture and they encouraged me too.”

While some of these cultural aspirations for Asian girls have changed over the years, there was a general agreement among research participants that progress towards gender equality in Asian cultures had been slow and that limited cultural and parental expectations, especially in relation to securing a career, continued to restrict Asian women’s educational and professional achievements today.

4.4 Teacher expectations and discrimination in school

In addition to community and parental aspirations, the expectations of teachers and the experience of discrimination in school were also important factors shaping the professional trajectories of Black and Asian women in the study. Again, very different stories emerge for Black and Asian women. Black women described various forms of institutional discrimination in school. Most reported low teachers expectations and the railroading of black pupils into a narrow set of career options.

“My teachers certainly had no aspirations for me. I suppose I had the added problem that I was quite bright and I answered back. And of course in middle-class areas, kids who answer back or ask questions are seen as having enquiring minds, but in working class environments, those same skills are seen as something totally different. It’s called delinquency. It has a really negative connotation.”

“The teachers made an assumption that I should go into sewing and actually made an appointment for me to go to this sewing factory, because I was quite good at sewing.”

“Although I was very bright at school, when it came to thinking about careers, the only option put forward to me was that I needed to be a nurse. I wasn’t given a choice. The school’s view was, ‘Well, you need to become a nurse, that’s what your people do’ That was the subliminal message all the way through.”

“I wanted to become a lawyer. The teachers failed to see that this was an achievable goal for me.”

In nearly all cases, what made these women so resilient to discrimination in school is that their parents protected them against racism by reiterating their high expectations of them, by challenging teachers and head teachers and, if necessary, by removing their daughters from school.

“One of the teachers in the Junior School said to my parents: ‘She’s done very, very well in the Infant School but you realise she will now fall back, it won’t be the same,’ and my parents got so angry. They challenged these racist assumptions and expectations.”

“On our very first day in school my sister and I were put in the bottom stream for everything. My mother discovered this and she went to the school immediately the following morning. She was ready to go to the school long before the school was even open! And she said: ‘What’s the basis on which you’ve done this? Have you tested my children? Do you know what their ability is?’ And of course they didn’t, they had no idea. They had just looked at us and assumed that we were stupid or couldn’t cope in an English school. We were then tested and went into the top classes for everything.”

“I was taken out of school because my mother perceived the attitude to be racist.”

Some of the Black women in the study derived their resilience from the encouragement of individual teachers who saw their potential and gave them attention and support.

“I had this one teacher who really believed in me. He saved my life.”

By contrast, Asian women participants rarely reported experiences of discrimination in school. In fact, many discussed how they had been encouraged by teachers and had become “teacher’s pet”.

“From my personal point of view, I didn’t feel I was held back at all. If anything, I was given the fast track. I had a lot of support in school.”

“I was very lucky. I was always very well supported. I learnt English very quickly. I was put in the medium class for English and happened to be quite good at maths and they put me in an advanced class for maths. Being good at maths helped them not to treat me as a lot of children who have English as a second language, who are treated as educationally

subnormal. I was lucky that people treated me as an able child who needed to catch up with English so I always had a lot of extra attention. When I went to secondary school, I had a geography teacher who took a lot of interest in me academically and he pushed me to take my O-levels earlier and pushed me to take an extra O-level. He got me an interview at Oxford. I also got a lot of pastoral support from my P.E. teacher who is still a very good friend of mine. I wasn't any good at P.E. but she took a lot of interest in me so whenever things got a little bit difficult at home, she would just look out for me and make sure I was ok. Having a surrogate British mum and dad alongside my very traditional Indian mum and dad just helped me to bridge the cultures."

"I can't say that I experienced racism in school. Teachers were very helpful. They wanted me to do well. They saw I was bright and I worked hard and they encouraged me."

"I would say I got more encouragement than barriers. I am someone who has done very, very well out of state education in this country and I got an excellent education because there were still grants in those days."

Asian women in the study put forward various hypotheses to explain this state of affairs. Some argued that Asian girls probably did experience discrimination in school but were less aware of it because their parents were themselves not very sensitive to discrimination and did not develop their daughters' consciousness around racism and sexism. Some suggested that school teachers perhaps had more positive stereotypes of Asian girls – as "hard working", "honest", "intelligent" – than they did of Black girls. Some also hypothesised that teachers probably shared well-intended but paternalistic assumptions that Asian girls needed to be helped against their own culture and were therefore happy to help them.

"Within the education system, Asian girls always did better and always are going to do better because there is this desperate feeling of sadness for our lives, you know, 'Poor Asian women, poor little Asian girls having such a terrible time, tied to the kitchen sinks. We need to free them up!'"

Whatever the underlying reasons, the Asian women participants seem to have fared better than Black women participants in the English educational system.

4.5 University programmes

In terms of the university programmes from which the 23 women who were interviewed face-to-face graduated, the range is extremely wide and there are no discernable patterns. The programmes include law, accountancy, urban planning, sociology, geography, history, semiotics, nursing, education, statistics, computer science, pharmacy, business studies, public administration, public relations and communications and music.

This variety should not conceal the difficulties many of the women have faced in choosing unusual programmes of study and career paths. Most of the participants were pioneers in their respective fields and had to deal, to varying degrees, with guilt about resisting family or community wishes, the absence of role models in their chosen fields, lack of advice, lack of professional networks, social isolation, among other difficulties.

“So many young women continue to go down these very traditional routes, vocational routes because they feel they have to satisfy their parents’ expectations.”

“Nobody in my family had ever gone to university before, this was like groundbreaking. I had no reference points. No one could tell me what it was like.

I: So what did you choose to do?

Public Administration.

I: How did you settle on that?

It was accidental because I’d got my A-level results and I went through clearing to see what places were left and there was a number of places in business studies, sociology and public administration. So I looked at the prospectus for all of them and public administration sounded the best.”

“People who went to university in those days were predominantly white people from middle-class backgrounds, so you felt isolated and out of place. It was quite intimidating really. I was desperate to go back to the Caribbean.”

4.6 Conclusions

The educational experiences and trajectories of the Black and Asian women who took part in the study seem to differ from the educational experiences and trajectories of their white, male counterparts. Very few attended prestigious universities and business schools, and their university programmes were extremely varied – with a slight emphasis on the social sciences. Many did not go into higher education straight away: they either started a family or began their career, and only afterwards continued their education. Moreover, there are differences between educational experiences of Black and Asian women participants. While most Black women report having received very strong encouragement at home, most Asian women report having experienced barriers against education either at home or in the wider community. And while most Black women report having experienced a systemic failure of expectations in school, most Asian women report having felt empowered and supported in school. In all communities, high educational expectations from both parents and teachers are a key driver of achievement.

5. Motivation and professional trajectories

5.1 Introduction

This chapter turns to the professional trajectories of ethnic minority women. It looks at the motivations behind the great achievements made by women in the study and at the distinct career paths they have followed. This chapter needs to be read in tandem with the following chapters that explore barriers to career progression, as professional trajectories are also shaped by other personal and external factors.

5.2 The drive to excel

In different ways and for different reasons, the women in the sample had a drive to excel. In most cases, this drive emerged from a very early age. Some women came from families of high achievers who had clear expectations that their children would also do well. Others were driven by their awareness of the sacrifices made by their parents to ensure their future (either through migration, through economic sacrifices or through protection from community pressures) and a desire to honour this debt of gratitude. Others still had a strong awareness instilled by their parents that, as women from ethnic minority backgrounds, they would have to be twice as good as others to succeed. And finally, some women were driven by the desire to avoid the pain of economic hardship, social exclusion and discrimination which they had experienced growing up. Each type of driver is exemplified below.

“I was just raised with the idea that I should excel, that I should do well. This was part of the family ethos.”

“There was no way I could fail. Not after all the sacrifices that my family had made for me to have a good life.”

“My dad used to tell me, right from a very young age, how I would have to be better than everybody else because as a Black child, I would need to overcome barriers to make people believe in me.”

“One of the things that was made very explicit by my parents from a very young age was that I would experience many disadvantages being female and being Asian in a white environment. So there was very much an articulation of the view that to succeed you had to be not just good, you had to be the best.”

“At the age of seven, I was going with my father, who was the bookkeeper of a hotel chain in Tanzania, to bring the books on a

Saturday morning. I went in with him to work and we went to a side entrance of this hotel and it was locked, it was padlocked. So my father and I went to the front entrance and we were stopped. They said: 'This is for white people, you have to go back.' And we said: 'It's closed.' So we had to wait until they found somebody with keys rather than sneak us through. And I remember asking my father: 'Why are we going through this, and why so much noise was made in opening that door?' because it was a corrugated metal door. And my father said: 'That's the way things are. You have to accept that.' And afterwards we talked about it and he said: 'The only way out of it is to get a good education.' So I did. I turned from being just average to being top in class. I was determined to get through front doors."

5.3 Values: equality, social justice, empowerment, human rights

Where the drive to excel was the motivation behind the high achievements accomplished by ethnic minority women in the study, the fight for equality, social justice, empowerment and human rights was the motivation behind the specific career choices and the distinct contributions these women make. This was the case both amongst the focus group participants and the individual interviewees.

"I'm quite value driven in my career choices. I have to work for organisations or on issues that I feel passionately about. Sometimes that passion doesn't grow until you're in a job, but certainly, values and ethics are quite important to me."

"I bring a commitment to getting it as right as possible for people who don't have an opportunity to be at those tables where decisions are made about them, and I'm always acutely aware of who is not there. I'm trying to clear the way for them to be there or to create mechanisms whereby their voices can be heard, rather than always having other people speaking on their behalf."

"I've always had a passion for social justice and I think what motivated me is seeing the conditions in which people live, people being denied access to justice, access to equal opportunities. I've always wanted to ensure that people were able to achieve their full potential, to actually realise their ambitions and aspirations."

"One of the things that drive me is people being disempowered, from citizenship, the economy, the political system. And the more I succeed,

the more I realise how fortunate I am, and how others can't participate who have got the potential but maybe haven't got the break."

Although the differences between these two perspectives are sometimes blurred, it is important to distinguish between women who understood gender and sex discrimination as matters of social justice and empowerment for those who are excluded, and women who understood all forms of discrimination as breaches of fundamental human rights that are a concern for all citizens.

"Somehow, issues of individual justice as opposed to social justice, due process, fair trials and the wider issues about how human rights fit into a cohesive, multicultural society, those are the issues that have dominated my life. If I'm honest, I've probably become more aware of the politics of race and gender much later on in my life. And I came to this debate with the eyes of a lawyer through concerns about debates around the death penalty, debates about free speech and fair trials and those sorts of issues. Yes, equality sat in that framework but it was only one part of that framework. I've become more aware of the politics of race and gender as I grow older. There are people you will interview who decided the struggle was for race equality. I share their struggle or views about all sorts of things but the entry point for me was more individual justice and human rights in more general terms."

"I've had a very strong human rights perspective in the sense that I thought that issues around race discrimination, sex discrimination, disability discrimination and so on have to be owned by all of us. And the way to do that is through a rights based approach so that if you are part of the majority, these are rights that are important for you as well."

Because it is more encompassing and because it frames discrimination as breaches and threats to the fundamental beliefs, principles and institutions of democratic society, this latter approach can be a more powerful way to influence. Whereas the exclusive focus on specific manifestations of inequalities around either race or gender can more readily be seen as oppositional, relevant only to minorities and in turn marginalised.

Finally, concerns about equality, social justice and empowerment also exist, albeit to a lesser degree, among ethnic minority women working in the private sector. Importantly, they take on slightly different meanings and are manifested somewhat differently in companies than in parliament, government departments, local authorities, trade unions or charities

for instance. In the private sector, such values are likely to manifest as having a professional remit for workplace diversity, for corporate social responsibility or for growing ethnic minority business. It becomes embedded in a business strategy which seeks to attract staff from the widest possible talent pool, to demonstrate that the employer is inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of its staff, and to avoid the loss of lucrative government contracts. Thus, the promotion of equality and diversity is driven as much by corporate needs as by the women's own desire to achieve these aims.

5.4 Power: making a difference

The strong values orientation displayed by ethnic minority women, especially outside the private sector, is associated with a view of power which seems unusual and distinctive. Power for them is not particularly about personal success, superiority to peers, control or authority. It is about influence, access to resources and the ability to make a difference in the lives of others. Power is not actually sought as an end in itself. It is an instrument to enable greater and faster social change to improve life conditions.

“Women want to use their power to have impact. It's not about wanting personal achievement or personal power, it's about wanting to have access to resources, to make a difference to other people's lives. It's about what you do that will make a huge and large impact. It's about wanting to be part of the decision-making to influence the policies, to make sure you influence the outcomes and you influence what decisions are being made in terms of how they're impacting on people's lives and improving their quality of life. It's not about power for the sake of power.”

“You're not doing it for your own benefits. It's not about routes to power. You don't really want to access power for yourself but you want to make things happen for other people. Maybe that's kind of a feminine thing. I suppose a lot of men would want to be in a position because of power, so maybe there is a difference there.”

“For me, politics has never been about routes to power. It's always been about serving.”

“People come to politics for different reasons. My goal is to make a change and to have politics more accessible, more reachable and more real.”

“My approach is to focus on outcomes because I know that there has to be a real improvement in achievement for the programme to be successful and to make a difference to people’s lives.”

“I’ve never been a career gradist. The only reason I want to go up is because there’s so much power there to be able to make a difference, to affect how power is distributed, to change structures, to change how money is spent. That’s the real driver for me.”

In many cases, the experience of having power sharpened the ethnic minority women’s understanding of the possibilities opened up by their positions, skills, networks, etc. The realisation of the scale of the difference they can make further contributed to their drive to achieve more.

Some research participants discussed how the ability to make a difference varied a great deal by sector, with the voluntary sector being seen as the most flexible and as having the greatest scope for change, followed by the private sector and then by the public sector. Differences between sectors are discussed in greater detail later in the report.

“The voluntary sector in this country is the key sector in my view, where you can demonstrably make a difference. Working in the public sector, you’ve got far too many restrictions on you, either because of the bureaucracies that you’re dealing with or because of politics. So in terms of the ability to make a difference, I think it is really with the voluntary sector.”

“I have found my experience of the public sector so constraining. It was not for me. Everything was a battle to achieve the smallest of outcomes.”

“I have found the transition from the private sector to the public sector very difficult. I was not expecting that at all.”

5.5 Cross-sectoral moves and multiple commitments

The career trajectories of the majority of women in the sample were characterised by many cross-sectoral moves. Most women in the study had careers that straddled education, social services, health services, housing services, regeneration, legal services, and so on. The only common denominator and thread between these professional experiences was their

commitment to key values. Indeed, many women explicitly discussed how they were always looking for opportunities to tackle inequalities, injustices, exclusion and disempowerment regardless of the specific sphere of economic, political, social and cultural life in which these may be found.

“If I look back on my career, there are certain themes I’ve always cared about. It’s much more about the values that underpin who I am and what I care about than it is about particular jobs. The main thing has been a passion to change the world. I have always cared about inequalities hugely. I care about social justice, not just in the sense of race equality or women’s equality, or human rights generally, but also in the sense of inequalities between countries and between parts of the world, and having a global perspective. I’ve had a very strong human rights perspective because I think these are issues that have to be owned by all of us, and the way to do that is through a rights based approach. So these are the values that have underpinned my career. I did not deviate from that.”

“From a very young age, I really wanted to make a difference through empowering people who are less fortunate. I felt that I had a duty to help others, whether it is to do with the health service, with access to services, with education, with equalities.”

This commitment to values also partly explains why most of the women in the study are or have been very active in public life as school governors, magistrates, non-executive directors of public bodies and as members of government task forces and commissions. In all these capacities, they generally act as powerful spokespeople on equality and diversity issues. This experience in turn deepens and broadens their skills sets, serving as useful stepping stones from which to make solid contributions elsewhere.

The only people who did not follow such cross-sectoral career trajectories or get involved in non-executive directorships were accountants and lawyers, all of whom experienced a traditional career progression, often rising through the hierarchy of only a handful of organisations until they reached the top.

5.6 Conclusions

The study found that the outstanding achievements made by ethnic minority women participants were motivated by a desire to excel, often rooted in childhood experiences. In addition, the specific career trajectories

of ethnic minority women were driven by key values around equality, social justice, empowerment and human rights. Most women moved across a range of fields of activities, using whatever power they had to try to make a real difference to people's lives. The only exceptions were accountants and lawyers, all of whom experienced a more traditional career progression.

The focus of this chapter has been firmly on the motivation behind the career trajectories of ethnic minority women. However, it is clear that careers are not only shaped by values. A wider range of personal and external factors interact to create or restrict opportunities for women to progress. These are discussed in the next chapter.

6. Organisational discrimination

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapters discussed the family background, educational experiences and motivations that shaped some of the career progression and choices of ethnic minority women in the study. The current chapter turns to organisational discrimination, one of the main constraints impacting on the career choices and progression of ethnic minority women. It discusses:

- Perceived changes in the extent of discrimination over time;
- The emergence of new forms of organisational discrimination;
- Multiple discrimination based on race, gender and class;
- Differences in the nature and extent of discrimination in politics, the public sector, the private sector and the voluntary sector;
- The impact of discrimination on the career choices and career progression of ethnic minority women; and
- Strategies to help overcome organisational discrimination.

6.2 Changes in discrimination over time

Most women in the study discussed the growing political, legal and moral awareness in British society that it is unacceptable to discriminate overtly against people on the basis of their gender or race. Some also acknowledged a decrease in the extent of discrimination over time. However, they mainly felt that the nature of discrimination had changed from being overt to covert, from blatant to subtle, without losing much of its potency. They argued that fairness, equality and inclusion were embedded in legal frameworks, institutional discourses and policies but not implemented in practices, that the pace and depth of change needed to be increased, that hearts and minds had yet to be won.

“There is a political awareness, a recognition that it is important to have equality and diversity, but it’s quite something else to implement that and to make it a reality. The discourse has changed but not so much the reality. We need a step change.”

“There’s a lot of lip service paid about diversity, a lot of talk, but sadly many organisations see this as a way of getting funding but they don’t implement it. We don’t see real progress for many ethnic minority women.”

“We may have the legislation but we have not won hearts and minds.”

6.3 New forms of organisational discrimination: “tokenism” and “typecasting”

The fact that the legislation is in place but that people’s prejudices and stereotypes have not fundamentally changed, as the previous quote indicates, has serious consequences which need to be understood. Based on the experiences reported by ethnic minority women in the study, it appears to create two main new forms of organisational discrimination, tokenism and typecasting, both of which are described in turn.

6.3.1 Tokenism

Tokenism refers to the limited inclusion of members of a minority group for the purpose of creating a false appearance of inclusive practices. The experiences of the women in the study indicate that the use of ethnic minority women as tokens to demonstrate that organisations are inclusive or that individuals are seen to “value diversity” continues to exist in all sectors.

“My employer [in public life], she sort of champions domestic violence, children, ethnic minorities. She’s always proud of the fact that she’s got an Asian girl and a black girl working in the office, so it’s like: ‘I have an Asian girl’ and I have to smile and go: ‘Yes, it’s me.’ She does that a lot. She’ll have us go to meetings to make her look like she cares about ethnic minorities. It does get to you after a while and now I avoid meetings. I pretend to be sick.”

“Because I am the only one at that level in the organisation, they always use me for events and recruitment fairs and for attracting ethnic minority business.”

“I have position but no influence.”

Participants also identified how the use of tokenism produces a related, widespread and deeply problematic result: the assumption, *in the minds of others*, that ethnic minority women more generally are in their roles in the workplace because they are tokens and not because of their own merit and abilities. Thus, whenever there is an initiative to support ethnic minority women – whether it is a drive to recruit more women from ethnic minority backgrounds to make up for the current under-representation, support for ethnic minority women in accessing training, help with various aspects of career progression or providing greater visibility and prominence to those ethnic minority women who have progressed in their careers so

that they can act as role models for others – this gets interpreted by those who do not endorse the change agenda and who continue to believe that women and ethnic minority people are less capable as forms of “tokenism”. In all these cases, the real merits and abilities of the person are undermined because they are assumed to be there only to satisfy legal, political or institutional agendas rather than because of the value of the contribution they make.

“Initially, I had a very hard time because people assumed that I was there because of some sort of privilege. They were there on merit, of course, but I was there because of political correctness! It is very difficult for anyone to establish themselves in a new job, but when you have to deal with this kind of distrust of your competence among colleagues who actually know nothing about you, it is very, very difficult.”

“You have to evolve a range of strategies to overcome perceptions that you are not there on merit, to get permission to get into a conversation at the right level without being seen as a token or being marginalised.”

“There is constantly this argument branded about that you have to appoint on the basis of merit and ability. So I say to my colleagues: ‘Yes, I accept that merit and ability are important but, no disrespect, were those not the criteria for appointing you too? Why do you decide to raise it now? You only raise this issue when you talk about BME and women and it’s really important that we’re not going to raise this question every time because of course that’s the only basis on which we appoint and if that’s the only basis on which companies and organisations are appointing, then it does not have to come up.’”

“People are opposing all-women shortlists because they say they want “high-calibre” candidates. What is that about? They are essentially saying that women would not be as “high-calibre” as men. I have never heard anyone invoke calibre in relation to all-men shortlists, which is what we have in practice in a lot of places.”

The assumption that ethnic minority women are tokens can also be manifested in expectations that they are there only to “represent” other minorities, rather than to contribute as every other professional.

“It was my first day and I came across this man who said to me: ‘Are you part of the UK delegation?’ When I responded yes, his reply was: ‘I heard the appointments for this mandate were politically correct!’ ‘Really’, I responded, ‘Are you representing white men over fifty?’ He paused and

actually looked puzzled, and then replied: 'I am not referring to me but to you!' I thought, of course white men never represent anybody because they are always there on merit!"

The depth of disempowerment that such charges of tokenism had on the participants was demonstrated by the number of the women who spontaneously felt the need to establish, in the course of the interview, that they had got their job because of their "merit", had been "selected through a due process", had not benefited from "any advantage" because of their sex or ethnicity or had not "cut corners". Given the outstanding achievements of these women and the institutional recognition they have received (in the form of honorary doctorates and professorships, MBEs, OBEs and CBEs, professional awards, public recognition through the electoral process, political recognition through appointments to the Lords and various task forces and commissions, etc.), it is astonishing that so many still felt the need to address the possibility that they might be perceived as unmeritorious tokens.

Other respondents were aware that they may at times either be used as tokens or be perceived as such, but they clearly saw tokenism as a problem in the minds of others. They were determined not to let themselves be undermined or derailed from their organisational aims because of possible tokenism.

"The media and other organisations ought to be jolly concerned about their diversity. Maybe they think about me originally because of these concerns but, as the head of my organisation, I am not going to turn down advocacy opportunities and the chance to further our aims because I happen to help them with their diversity. I happen to think that I don't do a bad job. They would not reinvoke me if I did not deliver."

"Of course I have been seen as a token! Oh God, yes! But then I think: 'What am I here to do? What am I getting out of this and what is my organisation getting out of this? Fine, I'll play their game to get what I need for my organisation.' You need to learn not to let them get you down, erode your confidence, upset you. You need to focus on your ultimate aims, not on your feelings at that point."

"I don't particularly have a problem with being given a platform in part because I am a Black woman. I guess I grew up in a nice comfortable home because my dad was allowed to work in corporations because of positive discrimination, which happens in America. So I gratefully take the

platform and then I drive my own issues, my own agenda. I don't pay too much attention to the motivations of other people because that's their issue. Mine is to achieve what I need to achieve and to take whatever help I can get to do that."

The assumption, in the minds of colleagues and superiors, that ethnic minority women may be mere tokens means that the women have to work much harder to establish their credibility. Participants discussed having to demonstrate their competence over and over again.

"You've got to earn their respect. It's not like they withhold judgement. No. They assume you're rubbish."

"You have to keep on demonstrating how brilliant you are. Ethnic minority women at every level have got to work harder and to be better qualified to really demonstrate many times over that they can do the job."

"Men go for jobs aspirationally whereas many women go for jobs when they are already qualified for them. Unlike men, they have to have already demonstrated their skills to convince potential employers."

"In some cases, it's a real plus being a Black person and people love it. But sometimes, usually when I am dealing with older, traditional, wealthy people, I've got to work harder. And the way I work harder is by doing the most basic things, establishing that I can speak English properly, that I like cultural things, I can be engaging, that I am integrated in British society. Because they make assumptions that black people can't do this."

6.3.2 Typecasting

Typecasting refers to the automatic placing of people in a narrow set of roles either based on their previous experience and preferences or because assumptions are made that the person lacks the talent and versatility to fulfill other roles successfully. When typecasting is desired by someone, this poses no problem. Indeed, it offers opportunities for them to deepen their skills in a particular field and to make a strong contribution. However, when typecasting is imposed by others based on their own restricted assumptions about the kinds of contributions that can be expected from ethnic minority women, this is problematic. Typecasting and stereotypes are closely associated.

Because organisations are expected to promote diversity and equality, there have been many opportunities for ethnic minority women to act as advocates, champions and role models in those fields. Indeed many ethnic minority women such as those in the study have a deep commitment to equality, social justice and empowerment and feel that they have a better understanding of discrimination. They have been happy to take up positions linked to equality and diversity. However, many of the women also feel that they are prevented from developing their full range of skills because of the constant demands by others that they should primarily or exclusively focus on ethnic minority and gender issues.

“I think the biggest obstacle professionally is people wanting to put you in boxes, not the box you want to be in but the box that they think you should be in. So you need to be quite clear about where you want to be.”

“There is no accident that I’m doing what I’m doing because if you like, it’s allowed. Does that make sense? I think it would be a wholly different matter if I was trying to do engineering. I don’t think I have cracked the issue of being typecast.”

“It’s interesting that most of the roles I’ve held have had nothing to do with equality. And yet, at regular points I’ve been asked to chair or talk about diversity issues. I don’t mind doing it but I am better qualified to talk about regulation. That’s what I am doing and that is where my skills are. But this is seen as a white man’s world.”

“Invariably, I get asked to chair this or that equality or diversity group. You get pigeonholed and stereotyped that somehow you know a lot about the subject matter when this is not necessarily your area of expertise.”

The dilemma of whether to get involved in equality and diversity issues in a professional capacity is one that most of the women interviewed have had to address at some point in their career.

“When I was working at the [charity], I found myself leading directors on issues of diversity and equality and that felt a little bit creaky. I thought, I don’t know if I should be doing this. Should I be doing this because I am a Black woman? What other opportunities will I have to give up? I know that I can make a big contribution there but where can I make the biggest difference? You grapple with all these questions.”

“A lot of people resent being asked to deal with [issues affecting black people], but I don’t mind because I’m Black and we’re not equal. There’s still racism and those issues affect me, they affect my family, they affect my friends, and they affect society as a whole. So I don’t mind if I’m going to be typecast and put into that role. Until we have an equal society, a level playing field, I will fly the flag for black people and for women and for young people and all the minorities I come under.”

Only a very small minority of women in the study decided that they would not be involved in issues of diversity and equality.

“I don’t agree that just because I’m from an ethnic minority, that’s what I should be involved in. I want to make it on equal terms with everybody else. Not because I have concentrated on diversity or because I’m a statistic in diversity. I want to be recognised as a mainstream partner who is valued for what I bring to the partnership as a whole, not just to the diversity element. That’s one of the reasons I have not actively got involved in the diversity agenda. What I do best, my people skills are strong, my technical skills are strong, my communications skills are strong, my ability to go out and meet people, talk to them and influence them, are strong. I don’t want to close that off. I don’t want to be pigeonholed as somebody just concentrating on the minorities.”

“I refused to be the token ethnic minority leader in ethnic minority work. But it’s been difficult to resist being pigeonholed in a tiny little corner and not to be able to use your real professional skills and expertise.”

6.4 Multiple discrimination: race, gender and class

Most of the ethnic minority women in the sample come from middle-class or working-class backgrounds, unlike many of their counterparts. This means that any discrimination or exclusion they experience could stem from any combination of three different and interrelated sources: race, gender or class. In addition, discrimination from each source could be experienced in isolation or they could interact or have a cumulative detrimental impact on careers. Most of the time, research participants found it hard to identify the precise factor that hindered their career progression.

“I don’t know if it’s to do with my style, my background, my gender, my ethnicity. I can’t think what part of that makes it more difficult for me than others but, in my experience, it takes a long time to get to something.”

“How would you know what it is that people find the most objectionable in you? If your accent and voice tell them that you are Asian, female and working class, how would you know which one bothers them most?”

Nevertheless, there were some occasions when the women felt that discrimination they experienced was clearly related to either their race or their gender. Social class also came through from the discussions as a significant additional factor that could be readily felt in terms of feelings of exclusion and disadvantage.

“I was on the board of [a public body] with a lot of colleagues who were all incredibly upper class, many of them men who’d never seen “real people” at all in their lives. And at some point, they started speaking in Latin across the table, with the clear purpose of excluding me.”

“The public sector was the first place I’d worked where class was so extraordinarily marked. Many senior colleagues have a long Oxbridge lineage. These are people who are of a different social class: proper upper-middle-class people. I remember one woman told me she thought I was so wonderful and so inspirational because I really believed in my principles and values and sent my children to state schools. It was so noble to sacrifice my children in that way for my views and values! So that was the hardest environment that I’ve ever worked in but I learned a lot.”

“Many middle-class white men might not be as educated as some of the black people out there, but they feel as though they deserve to be in a higher position. They don’t see that black people or working class people have an equal right to be there.”

“It’s all about the informal codes and rules. We don’t have the same basic assumptions, styles, ways of thinking and behaving.”

6.5 Differences in the nature and extent of discrimination between sectors

The nature and extent of discrimination seem to be different in politics, the public sector, the private sector and the voluntary sector.

6.5.1 Politics

Research participants felt that the greatest amount of discrimination was found in politics and in the public sector. The women described the world of politics in the following way:

“We are so far behind. Something like 2% in the House of Commons are from ethnic minority backgrounds. There is no real political will because it would mean that some older white men have got to lose some of their power. There are only so many seats which can be shared.”

“A huge amount of prejudices and discrimination are coming in and preventing women, very strong women in some cases, from taking over second-rate male candidates. Anybody who tells me that we are running a democratic process to select candidates either has no understanding of the political process at all or lacks good faith.”

“I’ve suffered racism here in Parliament. I have been asked what I was doing in the Members’ lift because somebody assumed I was a cleaner.”

“I was actually told that I would make the Party unelectable. That’s how difficult it was.”

“What about special advisors and government advisors? How many are ethnic minority women? It’s not surprising that we are not being innovative in coming up with new ideas and solutions.”

“Government still has a long way to go to make sure it’s truly fair and diverse on all sorts of levels. There are some pockets of good practice and many well-intentioned people but as an institution it has a long way to go.”

“If you try to push the agenda forward, this is seen as not being loyal, so you are effectively being gagged.”

6.5.2 Public sector

In relation to the public sector, participants recognised that considerable efforts were made to recruit, retain and promote ethnic minorities, but they pointed to evidence that showed that these were plainly not sufficient.

“When you look at the evidence, how many ethnic minority women do you see that are chief executives of a large public body? If you look at the whole of the NHS, of all the trusts, how many ethnic minority women are there at chief executive level? If you look at the local authorities, how many chief executives are ethnic minority women?”

Moreover, many ethnic minority women in the public sector continued to experience tokenism, typecasting and exclusion from colleagues and superiors, leading to serious emotional difficulties.

“I almost have panic attacks when I go to senior management meetings because I feel that they all look down on me: ‘Oh, you stupid little girl, don’t you understand that?’ You are made to feel stupid.”

To be honest, I’m seeing a counsellor now because I couldn’t cope, not because of the work but because of particular members of the team and senior management. It is the isolation. It is the way they undermine my performance, because I do not act or fit into a particular culture, although this is exactly what my partners outside love about my approach. I had great appraisals before and I love my team but particular line managers, for some reason...”

Some felt that skills which outsiders to the public sector brought in to contribute, were in fact devalued once they arrived in post.

“I was invited to do a specific job because of the specific skills I had. And I remember one conversation where one of my male colleagues was quite rude really about outside people and outside skills and what they can’t do and it was ridiculous.”

6.5.3 Private sector

By contrast, assessments of the extent of discrimination in the private sector were relatively more positive. Nevertheless, research participants recognised that women had a slower career progression than men and were less likely to make it to the top. One felt personally frustrated in her career progression.

“Why is it we take on 50% of women and only 11% are partners? What happens to these women through the ranks?”

“I am a very strong leader, highly commercial, very creative. I know how to take risks, very politically astute. If you have someone like that, why don't you get them running the business? Why are you not seeing those skills? Are you being distracted by something else to do with who the person is? I want more and I've got potential to do more. I know I can do it but it feels like a very zigzag way to get to the top.”

However, the daily experience of work for the women working in the private sector seemed generally much more positive and rewarding than for those in either politics or the public sector. There were fewer instances of tokenism and typecasting reported. Some argued that the private sector genuinely did welcome a broader range of talents because it made business sense to do so. Some felt that their organisation had invested in them to develop their skills as senior managers, directors and partners. Others expressed great support from colleagues and satisfaction with their work-life balance.

“I've never experienced any discrimination, not at all. And that's really my experience of this firm.”

“At least in the corporate world, there is now a much greater recognition that it's good to have a diverse workforce, a broad talent range and a broader skill set.”

“The top organisations have realised that talent doesn't have colour, creed or gender, talent is talent and it doesn't matter which brain it sits in. There's a genuine shortage of talented people, so big organisations make a special effort to attract the best. If you have a customer or client base which is made up of 25% ethnic minorities and you have a culture in your organisation which is mainly white, how are you going to sell to it? You need to have in your organisation diverse people who will understand the different cultures of the marketplace, who will then go out and sell to or service these clients, because that's what it's all about.”

“Now that I am in a major organisation, I realise how important skills are, I mean besides the technical skills, and how organisations train their people into the various skills.”

“When I first joined, I went to see my boss, and I said: 'Look I'm going to have to work part time for a while for personal reasons,' and he said:

‘No, you don’t need to do that. Why don’t you just work shorter days a couple of days a week and you make up the time?’ And to this day, after all these years, I still pick up my children on Thursdays and Fridays and just work longer hours early in the week.”

One person who came to the public sector from the private sector confirmed the strong impression from the data that the private sector fares much better than the public sector when it comes to discrimination.

“In the private sector, when I first joined, they wrote an article about me, talking about my background and all the skills I was bringing to the organisation, and welcoming me to the team. It was fantastic. It sent a clear message that she’s good, she’s not tokenistic, she’s setting the agenda, she’s going to lead the team. They wanted me and appreciated me. Here, it’s almost like they don’t want to listen. They want me to come in, shut up and just stick at it. They don’t really believe in or value my skills, I just need to fit in and act and behave as they do.”

6.5.4 Community and voluntary sector

It is more difficult to assess the extent of discrimination in the community and voluntary sector. The women individually interviewed were all at the very top of their respective organisation and, at least in their current role, did not report discrimination from colleagues inside the organisation. As in the private sector, there were relatively few instances of tokenism and typecasting reported, and women were generally positive about their working lives. Some discussed how their organisation invested in them and developed their skills. Others talked about feeling well supported by helpful boards and having teams that respect and value their leadership and managerial skills.

“I have a lot of support from my board and from my staff.”

“Maybe because the voluntary sector is seen as soft, it is less of a problem for others to accept that women can be involved? I don’t think that people think that I am out of place here. They are behind me. I feel very well supported by my team.”

The focus group participants who worked in the community and voluntary sector at grassroots level and were less senior were more likely to report discrimination. A few had been frustrated at various points in their career trajectories, largely by sexist assumptions being made about them by male colleagues. They spoke of double standards in the ways in which women’s

performance is perceived, and of the difficulties they face in adopting self-presentation strategies that are acceptable to colleagues because they successfully combine strength of argument and “feminine” attributes.

“I remember once in a meeting, I challenged my colleagues and I was bloody good! So a couple of women came and said: ‘Well done. You showed them.’ And then some men colleagues were all saying things like: ‘My God! You were really intimidating, really aggressive.’ Now I will never forget that because the exact same behaviour was seen totally differently by men and women. So there are double standards still.”

“People still expect you to have all these feminine qualities, to be nice and gentle, but they also want you to be like them because if you are not, they won’t respect you, so it’s a fine line.”

However, none of the women reported serial undermining of their contributions, or blatant discriminatory language or behaviour from peers, as other participants have reported in politics or in the public sector for instance.

6.6 Impacts of discrimination on career progression

It is clear from the discussion so far that the careers of the ethnic minority women participants are still shaped and restricted by institutional and individualised discrimination. Some women described crushing experiences of discrimination at work which must inevitably have dented their confidence and self-esteem. Some felt that colleagues and superiors used or perceived them as tokens. Some have made significant contributions to equality and diversity out of passion and personal commitment, but also because they were typecast into these roles by others. And some have explicitly reported that discrimination was a key driver for them leaving a position.

“I had a Director who would systematically not look at me in meetings and expect answers and suggestions from everybody else. There was just no respect for me or my skills at all so I decided to go somewhere else.”

“I found it so difficult to have the feeling that I was not doing well and to be perceived and made to feel like I was not doing well that I decided I should leave. I could not get through to them.”

“I realised that I wasn’t being encouraged, helped or supported in the way that I saw my colleagues being helped and supported. Assumptions

were made that you are very happy working at grass roots level doing basic untrained or unskilled, non-supervisory type roles, and they loved to keep certain people in those roles. So I left. That was a big decision.”

“I was appointed once in an organisation where there has been a big push because there weren’t any black managers and they had been told they needed to do something about it. So I applied for the job and happened to get appointed but then there was this kind of reaction: ‘We don’t really want her here, so we’ll make her life difficult and then she’ll go and we can say that we recruited but that the person left.’ That’s how I saw it anyway. I don’t think it was about me but I did leave. I did not want to get stuck in a groove and get miserable.”

Even the women within the study who are demonstrably exceptionally talented, competent, hard-working and resilient have not been immune to organisational discrimination, in many different guises. They reached their positions and made their outstanding contributions in spite of multiple barriers, among which discrimination features highly. They have had the resilience to overcome many of the barriers that have been erected by others on their way. One cannot assume similar tenacity and resourcefulness from all ethnic minority women.

6.7 Strategies to help overcome organisational discrimination

Many of the women took for granted the existence of organisational discrimination and most had evolved very deliberate strategies to overcome the hurdles they knew would be erected before them over the course of their career. One way in which they ensured that they would not be blown off course by discrimination was by keeping a strong focus on the aims and objectives – equality, social justice, empowerment – they were there to achieve.

Another strategy was about joining, or creating if necessary, support networks both inside and outside their organisations.

“I am part of a CEO support group. None of us bat an eyelid about being completely open about our vulnerabilities. We give each other a lot of support. One of the regular things that we put on the agenda is ‘Boasting’ so that we can learn from each other’s successes and overcome the fact that we lack assertiveness.”

“We have a little group of heads of large NGOs and five or six of us meet twice a year. They’re all men by the way incidentally, I’m the only

woman, but it's been hugely useful for me to have that group of real equals, peers, where we sit and compare experiences. No assistants, no aides, no replacements. We talk about our problems at work and there's a kind of friendship there that you can really be honest. If one of us has a very tough thing and we failed, we just sit there and talk and mentor each other."

"I was chairman of what was probably the most effective networking organisation for senior business professional and executive women. And it was extremely useful for me in terms of making contacts with other women from lots of different professions, backgrounds, industries and so on. I made a lot of very good friends with people at senior level."

"You need to have allies, upwards, sideways and downwards."

"There are always plenty of other people out there. Find them. You are not isolated. Never feel isolated."

To address anticipated implicit or explicit charges of tokenism and stereotypes, research participants stressed the importance of being prepared, of establishing their competence, of making clear contributions to meetings and of making sure others acknowledged their contributions.

"We have to go to meetings totally prepared, and having read all the papers."

"I say very clearly from the outset: 'In this committee, I bring that particular perspective.' So people know why I am there and what I will contribute. I would not just sit there and say and do nothing."

"You have to be conscious of how you are going to be perceived and to take steps to minimise that. So whenever I'm in a meeting for the first time, I always make sure that I make three points. I say something like: 'I have listened carefully to what has been said around the table and I would like to make three points: one, two, three,' and then you stop. That gets you permission to get into a conversation at the right level without being seen as a token or marginalised."

"After I say something, I ask for a response: 'Do you agree? What do you think?' That way you can't be ignored or dismissed."

Since many of the women knew that they were less likely to be offered access to professional development, they argued that they needed to be proactive in seeking opportunities to enhance their skills set.

“You have to make sure that you access all the information and the training that you need along the way. If I don’t know something, [I] find out about it, push yourself [sic] to learn.”

“Whether it’s mentoring, shadowing, training on managerial skills, boardroom skills, networking skills, communication and public speaking, all of that is going to be very useful and you need to find out what is available internally and what the organisation is happy to pay for so that you can deliver better for them.”

“Make a conscious effort to identify what is the skill set that is missing. What is the skill set that these people can bring me and that I need to acquire? Write it up and put it on your fridge”.

Many of the women who worked at grassroots level, volunteered in public life roles or worked in smaller organisations did not seem to have ready access to ongoing formal professional development. Some did not discuss the issue of training at all and may not have been aware of the need to take up professional development opportunities. Others talked about the fact that it took them a long time before they felt comfortable in their position and able to make a contribution, which suggests that they could have benefited from a good induction programme and other training. Others still discussed the fact that it is very difficult for them to develop skills because there are no formal mechanisms to do so in their organisation.

“I have to say it has been a learning curve because I know nothing about the medical world. And walking into a [NHS Trust] boardroom that was, as far as I was concerned, full of brain surgeons and oncologists, I think for six months I couldn’t say a word. I really felt completely intimidated by the environment and everything that was going on. It’s much longer for you to learn because there is no real support and you are not in there everyday, so it takes a long time to get to know the organisation.”

“There is a steep learning curve initially and it does take a good three to four years to get used to the jargon and all the different policies that are coming out every ten seconds and to keep up to date with those things.”

“It’s a small organisation so we don’t really have training. If you need to develop skills, you need to be proactive and to find out how you can do

that best. No one will actually come and tell you: ‘Hey, you should go on to that course.’”

Above and beyond these discrete strategies, the one key message that emerged clearly from the interviews was the need to challenge discrimination, to stand up for one’s rights, to challenge assumptions and stereotypes, and to be resilient in the face of adversity.

“You need to have that confidence to say: ‘Excuse me, is there a problem here? Are there issues we should be talking about?’ You have your limits and you will stand up for your rights.”

“You have to ensure that you retain your respect and dignity at work. If you fail to challenge then you are colluding with your own disrespect. The bottom line is that you have to be treated in a professional manner at all times to keep your dignity, integrity, self-respect. If you fail to keep that, you will lose the respect of your own colleagues. It will limit your ability to become an agent of change and to succeed.”

“Pick yourself up. There will be another job. Maintaining that persistence and that belief that another door will open is vital.”

“Be persistent. Keep on going. Don’t loose heart because if you do, no one else is going to come knocking on your door.”

“Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent. Eleanor Roosevelt who said that, and that’s so true.”

6.8 Conclusions

The impact of sex and race equality legislation has been to eradicate the most blatant forms of racist or sexist discrimination and abuse, to put equality, diversity and inclusion on the agenda, and to create more opportunities for ethnic minority women. However, the legislation has not entirely succeeded in changing “hearts and minds” and, in fact, has contributed to creating new forms of organisational discrimination. Indeed, ethnic minority women continue to experience multiple discrimination based on race, sex and social class. They are sometimes used as tokens to help organisations be seen to be diverse and inclusive. Much more frequently, they are perceived to be tokens even where this was not the original intent, which undermines their credibility in the eyes of colleagues and superiors and forces them to work twice as hard to demonstrate their

merit and abilities. This has a detrimental impact on their self-esteem and career progression.

The careers of the ethnic minority women in the study were partly shaped by typecasting based on stereotypical views about the skills and competences assumed of ethnic minority women. They were allowed and encouraged to take on roles in relation to equality and diversity but often deterred from developing and demonstrating their expertise in professional areas traditionally associated with male skills. This has restricted their career choices and progression.

Evidence from this research shows that experiences of discrimination vary by sector, with politics and the public sector being perceived as the sectors in which there is the most severe discrimination, compared to both the private and the voluntary or community sectors. Regardless of their sector or ethnic background, women had evolved very similar strategies to overcome organisational discrimination. These included: keeping a clear focus on their overall aims and objectives, accessing internal and external support networks, making sure that they had the right skills and competencies and that those were recognised by colleagues, and, more generally, making sure that they were keeping their dignity at work by challenging discrimination, standing up for their rights and maintaining their resilience in the face of adversity.

7. Caring responsibilities

7.1 Introduction

In addition to organisational discrimination, the women in the study highlighted gendered expectations around motherhood and caring responsibilities as having a significant impact on their routes to power. These expectations in turn made logistical and emotional demands on them that influenced their working lives and life choices. This chapter explores:

- Societal expectations in relation to women;
- The professional and personal consequences of trying to maintain work-life balance;
- Variations in cultural expectations of women by ethnic minority community; and
- Institutional barriers encountered around caring responsibilities.

7.2 Expectations of women: the problem with work-life balance

Women, the study shows, continue to be expected to be responsible for the bulk of the emotional and practical work that comes with being married, having children and/or having parents in need of help. Save relatively limited exceptions, the increasing opportunities and expectations for women in the workplace have not been accompanied by a new sexual division of labour in the home for the women participants. Looking after partners, children and parents, with all their complex needs, is still overwhelmingly women's responsibility, regardless of their ethnic or social class background or the scale of their professional achievements. Against this reality, an emphasis on work-life balance for some of the women feels like more of a burden than a help because it is perceived as reinforcing the notion that women's lives are about multiple and competing roles.

“The thing with work/life balance is that it actually protects the *status quo*. It does not change the fact that women will continue to be responsible for everything – work, social life, cooking, shopping, organising birthday parties, looking after everyone's emotional well-being. It's just about making it a bit easier for them to keep on doing everything. It looks progressive but there is something quite reactionary about it.”

“We do get burnt out because we have all these other roles, not just work but family life and social responsibilities.”

“We do take on multiple responsibilities even in the most progressive of households; we do take on the largest share of caring responsibilities and look after our careers as well.”

7.2.1 Professional consequences

According to the women in the study, the uneven share of responsibilities imposes a wide range of constraints on women. In relation to their performance and career progression, this can have a number of important repercussions. It can mean that women start their career later, that they work part-time for certain periods of their career, that they postpone going for promotions, that they cannot always develop professionally through formal education, that they are unable to stay long hours and have got to accomplish more in a shorter period of time and therefore endure greater stress as a result, that they miss out on many opportunities to informally network with colleagues and can therefore be excluded from important decision-making processes, that they cannot take up jobs which involve much travel or are located in new geographical areas that would be inconvenient for the rest of the family, that they may have to take a step back on return from maternity or adoption leave and that they suffer physical and mental exhaustion.

“Coping with a demanding career and having kids is difficult anyway. It was OK with one child but when my son came along, it got to a stage when I just wasn’t coping. Some of his development was delayed and that absolutely threw my life into chaos because your children are the most important part of your life. So I took four years off to sort my family life out.”

“I started to try to do an MBA at one point because I thought that would be a good thing for my career but then I got pregnant and I did try to have a small baby and study and that was just really difficult, so I gave that up.”

“I don’t have children and so that makes socialising easier, which helps to overcome one of the big barriers that many women experience. If you have children, you often don’t have time to socialise, to network. Because a lot of the real power, the real decisions take place outside formal talks and meetings.”

“Part of my decision to move into this job is that there is less travelling. Even though the hours are quite brutal, travel is not a big component so I don’t get to be away from home for long periods of time.”

“Even if I wanted to work in Darfur, that wouldn’t be easy. I have a five year-old son and my husband works in the city.”

“Even though the legal barriers have gone and you can take maternity leave and come back, there is still a disadvantage because you are out of the system and when you come back, you have to make up for it. Having children is quite a tough decision if you have ambitions in your career.”

“A lot of people say: ‘Stick with it. Push the whole agenda through. Believe in yourself. Challenge everything.’ But there’s a huge personal cost. The energy it takes at work cannot be put elsewhere. There is no rest, no respite. I am absolutely exhausted.”

7.2.2 Personal consequences

The uneven share of responsibilities also has consequences for the private lives of working women. Because the demands of work seem so immediate and incontrovertible, they are often privileged over the demands of private life. The women in the study were well aware of this and felt an enormous burden of guilt, especially in relation to their children.

“There have been times when I’ve felt my children have suffered. You have to make sharp decisions and I’ve not always made them in my favour or my children’s favour, and I really regret that. I’m trying to make up for it now.”

“My daughter now is the least patient with me. She thinks that I neglected her, that I deprived her of too much. I was in awe of my mother’s struggle but she just experienced it as an absence, a loss.”

“Our organisation provides a crèche so the children practically grew up in the crèche at times. You end up compromising the quality of life that you have with your family. And that is something that breaks your heart.”

“It’s not easy on the parent or on the child. The parent feels guilty and the child feels resentment.”

“Women feel a sense of guilt because women have a different approach to responsibility, they get more personally engaged in all their relationships at work or at home and that’s why we probably feel more

responsible as a mother, as a wife, as a boss, as a colleague than men do. And because of that if you don't live up to your commitment, you feel bad about it or you make an extra effort to live up to your commitment. But of course you can't live up to every commitment."

"I'm a carer for my very elderly and disabled father, so it is enormously stressful juggling my care commitments. The practical difficulties around time management, but also the emotional management. Work is very stressful and home is very pressured as well. There is a kind of emotional drain linked to that as well. I really cling on by my fingernails sometimes to make sure that I'm covering all bases. And I don't even have children."

It is perhaps not surprising that many of the participants feel that as long as women continue to be expected to take on most of the caring responsibilities in families and there continues to be a lack of institutional support for working parents, it will be almost impossible for them to achieve a sustainable work-life balance.

"It never was going to be possible to have it all. There are repercussions. Something's got to give because you can't do everything. It does not sound like a feminist, a very sisterly thing to say, but we can't."

"We do get burnt out because we have all these other roles, not just work but family life and social responsibilities. Something's got to give, because we can't be superwomen."

"This is the thing about women, it's all about timing. You can't juggle everything. You need to take time for the kids and you need to take time for yourself. That may not be possible at the same time."

"We have tried a great social experiment, but it has not worked. We can't have it all after all."

7.3 Cultural variations in expectations of women

The study reveals that expectations of women vary a great deal by ethnic minority community. The interviews and focus groups indicate that there continues to be a more traditional sexual division of labour in Asian communities than in Black communities, which impacts on most dimensions of women's professional and private lives. For instance, compared to Black women, Asian women in the study were more likely to have a greater number of children and to have caring responsibilities for a wider circle of family members (parents or in-laws). Asian women were also more likely to

have worked part-time, and to have tailored their careers, or interrupted them altogether, to fit around the changing needs of their family. They were more likely to experience intense guilt if they felt they had not successfully combined family and professional life.

“I had an arranged marriage but I haven’t had an easy time. So I’ve had to be home and look after the kids. And every Sunday, I will cook two or three meals, put the foil over, leave that in the fridge, and then I ring up my kids when they come back from school and tell them what to take out. Their food is cooked, they just have to warm it up. I do all that. I wake up in the morning, I make sure their breakfast is there then I go to work. I have my duties as a mother, which I do completely, and I think nobody sees that. Nobody at work sees what I do at home, and nobody at home understands what I do at work.”

“I didn’t feel that I wanted to go into full time employment because it didn’t fit around the children. So I started college and I met this lady who encouraged me to do part-time voluntary work which meant I still got home in time for the children. When I became a full-time worker and you had evening meetings, I used to take my in lieu time in the afternoon, go home and cook and then go back to the evening meeting. But the priority was making sure that the family was fed and watered and everything was in place. And women take that seriously. They want to safeguard the family. That’s the prism through which we make our decisions, which is different to men because men don’t do that. They are not expected to do that.”

“First and foremost, the family has got to be accommodated. I run a very successful company but it only opens from ten to four and only five days a week, which is very unusual in our sector. So it was always based on what I thought could be fitted in with what I want for my family.”

“One of the prices that I’ve paid very heavily for my professional life has been my son’s education. I have to say that’s one of my biggest regrets, for which I would undo every day.”

Although three Asian women reported feeling well supported by their Asian husbands, some felt that they did not enjoy understanding, support and respect for their professional achievements.

“When I got my OBE, a lot of people were quite shocked because they don’t know what I do. They all know what my husband does but with me it’s: ‘Oh, she works in an office somewhere.’ In fact, when I got my OBE,

one of my aunties came up to me and said: 'That's really good, but remember: 50% of the credit goes to your husband for supporting you.' I was so angry."

"You always have people asking you about the children but never about your work."

"Your career matters less to your [extended] family than your kids and how you carry out your obligations to them. They are happy that you are doing well but they are not interested in what you are doing."

Asian women also seemed more likely to have married someone from outside their own ethnic community.¹ Some decided not to marry at all, chose not to have children, or not to remain married, despite the many practical, financial and emotional difficulties which such choices involve.

"I'm not married even though in my culture I should have been married a very long time ago. But it is a personal choice that I've made. That comes back to haunt my family because in the Muslim community, it's not right for a woman not to be married and have children."

"I actually got divorced from my first husband, because after five years and the children, he suddenly decided he really wanted somebody who was more Indian, and that wasn't me."

7.4 Institutional discrimination linked to caring responsibilities

The research revealed that institutional discrimination around childcare can start even before women enter the workplace. Participants felt that many employers are wary of hiring young women because they expect that they will either leave their job or choose to work part-time once they have children. The women also discussed how many employers are reluctant to invest in the professional development of young women or appoint women to senior roles for the same reasons.

"Yes your priorities change once you have children. Yes there are things that you won't be able to do. But that should not be a reason for not employing women, as continues to be the case, because women and mothers bring something invaluable to the mix."

¹ Although personal matters were not systematically explored with all interviewees, at least four Asian women had married non-Asian men and one Black woman had married a non-Black man.

“I was not offered training when I announced I was pregnant. I would have had plenty of time to do this training for senior managers!”

“You still have women who are not being promoted, because they have families and assumptions are being made about them which restrict their progress. A male chief executive who has children would never have his family commitments brought into the equation at all. It’s still a man’s world.”

The fact that women are still expected to shoulder the bulk of childcare responsibilities means that they are disproportionately affected by all the financial, practical, emotional issues associated with childcare. At least seven women in the study chose not to have children. The others all struggled with childcare.

“Childcare has been a real bone of contention throughout my life.”

“Childcare is so, so, so expensive, so difficult to find in a place that is conveniently located reasonably near your house so that you can actually do the drop-off and pick up, the hours can be so restrictive, the quality of care so uneven... You really feel terrible about leaving your children behind.”

Participants were clear that having partners who are actively involved in caring for their children is critical to their success at work.

“I was very lucky to meet someone who had no qualms about doing fatherhood.”

“I’ve got two young kids but my husband is at home full time. He takes care of the kids as a full-time parent.”

“My children live with my ex-husband Monday to Wednesday and then I pick them up on Thursday morning from his place, do the school run and they’re with me Thursday night and Friday and we share weekends. It works really well. He’s very happy to look after the children.”

“There are very much barriers for women, in terms of being carers, being the main person looking after families. When I first became a councillor, I used to have a full-time job, I had small children and I used to say: ‘I really need a wife!’ [...] If you have not got a partner that’s supportive, you can’t do it because you’re going to have to rely on your partner to sort out the kids, do some shopping, you know?”

Some women reported clear cases of discrimination in relation to either maternity or adoption leave.

“I felt under real pressure when I went on maternity leave. My boss would ring me regularly and say: ‘I think this job is going to be too much for you, I don’t think you’ll be able to come back and I’m worried about you being able to cope with a baby. If you want to talk about a package, we’d be happy for you to come in and talk about a package.’ But I didn’t want a package! I just wanted to be able to have my baby in peace. I had to tell him to stop ringing me.”

“I was explicitly told that I would have to take a step back after my leave because they deemed I would be “out of touch”.”

“I adopted a little girl a few years ago and I have suddenly become aware of the barriers that mothers face, not fathers, the barriers that working mums face. By way of example, I was on one cabinet committee, purely on a voluntary basis and was leading a report for them. I was chairing a major report for them and I agreed to complete that report even though I was on adoption leave at the time. Much to my surprise, I found I was marked down for not attending the board meeting. They had decided they weren’t going to reappoint me. That was a big shock! It gave me a bit of an insight into the sort of challenges and barriers working mums face.”

Others reported instances of structural discrimination, commenting on how the working practices of many organisations functioned to exclude women, despite the fact that no individual prejudice was involved.

“Some people try and marginalise you by the fact that you’ve got other commitments. But most of the time, it’s just that organisational cultures militate against working mums.”

“I was talking to a friend who wants to apply to be a judge but has youngish children. What you have to do if you apply to be a judge is go on a circuit for six weeks at a time and sit in court and that’s a natural obstacle. There are some systemic obstacles that lead to indirect discrimination. That’s to do with how work places and work are organised, whether it’s a city law firm, the high court bench, whether it’s the Houses of Parliament.”

7.5 Conclusions

The bulk of caring responsibilities continues to fall disproportionately on the shoulders of the women in the study. This imposes a wide range of professional and personal constraints on them. It restricts their career progression, as many of the women have to start their careers later, work part-time, postpone going for promotions, miss out on training, networking and decision-making opportunities, choose jobs that are conveniently located and entail little travel, and face discrimination from colleagues. It also impacts on the private lives of the women, generating an acute sense of guilt among many. Asian women were particularly likely to express cultural and family pressure to privilege their roles as mothers and carers over their professional commitments. Discrimination around childcare has affected recruitment, career progression and the quality of working life. Some of the discrimination is rooted in personal prejudice, some in organisational cultures and practices. Being single, not having children or having a supportive partner who plays an active role in relation to children have all facilitated the professional success of some of the ethnic minority women.

8. Distinct approaches and impacts

8.1 Introduction

This last chapter explores the distinct approaches that the ethnic minority women in the study feel they bring to the workplace and the impacts they make as a result. It highlights the diverse values, experiences, skills and competencies that the ethnic minority women have and how they make these women valuable assets for organisations. The discussion focuses on the “added value” which ethnic minority women contribute, in addition to their other professional competencies. The chapter concludes by highlighting some of the many impacts already made by the ethnic minority women who took part in the study.

8.2 Different approach to power: making a difference

The chapter on motivation and professional trajectories already discussed in some detail the fact that the ethnic minority women in the study seem to have a distinctive approach to power. They see power as the ability to “make a difference”. Power is about influence, access to resources, and skills to enable greater and faster social change. This approach to power also shapes their approach to work and accounts for the specific impacts they make. Thus, the ethnic minority women see themselves as change agents, activists and agitators. By and large, this is true regardless of their level of seniority and of the field in which they operate.

“I’ve worked in various places and done various things, but the one thing that I think has been a common factor through all my jobs is that I am a very good agitator. I rock comfort zones, in a responsible way. The idea is not to make people all deflated and tell them how miserable and silly they are. It’s about rocking comfort zones and creating something new and something better out of it. I think of myself as a change agent.”

“My role is to get a point of view across, to try and convince others to come in, to chase the resources, to highlight deficiencies and opportunities whenever I can. I’m an activist.”

“I have been a trustee on practically every organisation known to man. I am always looking for opportunities to make a difference. How can I change the whole landscape?”

8.3 Values orientation: equality, social justice and empowerment

This report has also discussed the fact that the women in the study are motivated by a desire to bring about greater equality, social justice and empowerment. This strong values orientation is a key factor in the added value ethnic minority women bring to the workplace. Regardless of the specific fields in which they happen to be working, their concerns for equality, social justice and empowerment are central to their contributions and to their approaches.

“What makes me different? The experience of struggle, of inequality, of having to prove ourselves against the odds.”

“I bring a commitment to getting it as right as possible for people who don’t have an opportunity to be at those tables where decisions are made about them, and I’m always acutely aware of who is not there. I’m trying to clear the way for them to be there or to create mechanisms whereby their voices can be heard, rather than always having other people speaking on their behalf.”

“I want to ensure that we provide as many opportunities to as many members of the public as possible for them to be empowered, enriched, excited and engaged [by our programme of work].”

8.4 Cultural capital: in-depth knowledge of communities

The drive to make a difference and the specific values orientation displayed by ethnic minority women in the study both stem from an in-depth knowledge of their communities and an awareness of the experience of exclusion and deprivation which remain typical in many sections of the ethnic minority population.

“I have an awareness that communities need help to access services, and a greater understanding of the differences between cultures and of their aspirations too. It gives you that greater edge because you understand the drivers of inequalities and you can think of what needs to be done to overcome them. You don’t forget about ordinary people because you can identify with them.”

“As a Black person, I happen to have understanding of certain issues within the community that only an insider to that community can really understand. So I make a contribution because I understand that within the black community, within the family, education is very important, so

the underachievement that's happening cannot have only to do with the aspirations within the family. Something else is happening. I work very hard to address those other factors.”

“I suppose I bring a sense of realism to the job. I'm far more credible with young people, black people and women than a lot of [others in the organisation] because I am still one of them in a way and I understand their struggles.”

8.5 Reflexivity

Another striking aspect of these ethnic minority women, especially found among those in very senior positions, is the depth of their reflexivity. As a group, they tended to display a remarkable awareness of themselves, their skills and limitations, how others perceive them, how social structures shape individual experiences, and how power is distributed to privilege some groups and to exclude others. This reflexivity, they claimed, is intrinsically linked to the experience of minority status. It is also an invaluable skill which helps make them more enlightened, inclusive, consultative leaders.

“I had always denied that there was significant inequality, but then I went to the Caribbean for work purposes and I saw all the opportunities that were opened to me just because my skin is black, when in fact there were white people around who probably knew much more than I did about local issues. You know, within weeks I was meeting the Prime Minister and my white colleagues weren't. And when I got back to the UK, I got far more involved because I'd experienced the difference it makes when you do have role models, you do have strong networks, you do have connections that go beyond the professional, when you are in the majority. That changed my life.”

“I think there is something unique and that's an awareness of power structures and an ability not to take for granted these structures but to see clearly how they represent very specific interests which exclude very significant sections of the British population, whether they are women, poor people, ethnic minorities, disabled people or whatever.”

“Recognising where you are and where you come from is a unique strength I think. Because if you don't recognise where you are, that can be incredibly dangerous because you apply your assumptions, your specific experiences to everyone else.”

“You are aware of the limitations in your ability to understand the worlds of others and therefore of the need to listen to them. That comes from minority status. It also comes from a feminist analysis which puts you in the analysis.”

“If you’re a white man who’s always worked with white men and who has always been in a position of power, you’ve got no reference points and you’ve never had the need to take the perspective of other people into account. But that’s a really important people skill to have which people in minority groups are more likely to have.”

8.6 Leadership style: inclusion, collaboration, facilitation

Driven by their values around inclusion and by their recognition of the need to make a difference for others, the ethnic minority women in the study described their own leadership style as more inclusive and collaborative than that of most of their male colleagues.

“I like collaborative working: that’s the way you unlock the skills of other people. They want to join you because they want to feel part of the success story.”

“I like to operate more from persuasion than through power.”

“I have a very good team and very good managers that help and support me. It’s very important that you take your visioning into bringing about change, that your leadership style is inclusive so that others enjoy working with you and deliver with you.”

“I am really proud of the great team I’ve managed to build around me. It’s wonderful to see people working together in a very collaborative way.”

The women also see their leadership role as one of opening doors for others, of acting as facilitators for other ethnic minority women to fulfill their potential. Many are therefore active as mentors, provide opportunities for younger talented ethnic minority women to shadow them, set up awards to ensure that the achievements of ethnic minority women are formally recognised, create networking opportunities, and use whatever platforms they have to act as role models for others.

“That’s one of my life’s missions now. I feel as though I can’t pull the ladder up now. I’ve got here and it’s about making sure that other women make it through as well. It’s about passing that CV and it’s about arranging a mentor. It’s about opening the door and making it accessible.”

“I want to make it possible for all these other younger women to achieve their potential. This year, for instance, the Queen had a lunch for 200 women at Buckingham Palace and 14 of the winners of our Awards were invited. This 19-year-old girl who was holding my hand said to me: ‘You’ve made this possible for all of them!’ and that’s what I like to do.”

“It’s important to have a senior black woman in a top position who has profile and credibility and can act as a good role model for people. So I try to create opportunities to do that.”

“The contribution I make is about making sure that I can lift others as I rise, but also ensuring that we open up the institutions in our society wherever there might be systemic discrimination for whatever reason. So it’s really about opening up organisations and institutions to make sure that they’re more inclusive and that people have equal access to participate, but also to be engaged in the decision-making that always end [sic] up affecting them.”

8.7 People skills: emotional intelligence and focus on human relationships

Research participants felt that as women, and sometimes as ethnic minority women in particular, they tended to have better “people skills”. They felt able to use their emotional intelligence to achieve more and differently in the workplace. They claimed to make greater use than most male colleagues of their ability to understand human relationships. They declared themselves explicitly concerned with understanding the emotional drivers of behaviours. And they felt equally at ease engaging with clients and colleagues at a human level as they did at a strictly “business” level. They argued that these skills gave them both a distinct approach and a distinct advantage.

“Black women really bring a humanising dimension to all behaviours, to policy-making, to decision-making. I feel really strongly about that.”

“I believe in understanding what prevents people from moving on and addressing these emotional barriers. What are their fears? Why are they resisting? You need to listen very carefully, to read between the lines.”

“As a woman you have an advantage. I think women tend to be more sensitive to people’s emotions. They like building relationships. They’re curious. They ask questions. They notice what you’re wearing and all those things that personalise people. I think those skills are becoming

more important than ever now that there is such a tendency to think about communities in stereotypical terms. It's important to bring that personalisation in."

"I probably have got skills that some of my male colleagues don't have in terms of networking, of moving seamlessly from the business to the personal agenda. Everything hinges on good relationships and women have fantastic relationship skills."

8.8 Resilience and resourcefulness

The widespread experience of economic, social and political exclusion, and the many hurdles based on prejudices and structural discrimination which most ethnic minority women have experienced at some point in their lives appears to have forced the women in the study to be more resilient and resourceful than many of those colleagues for whom access to power has been seen as an entitlement all along. The women in the study appear to demonstrate that their successes at reaching top leadership positions are a result of converting such challenging experiences into advantages, using them to fuel their determination and drive.

"I am more resilient because of the experiences I've had that white men won't have had. There's an inner resilience, an inner strength that I often draw on in order to get things done. My job involves a lot of negotiations with staff, with trade unions, with contractors and I have to tackle some big issues. I use the inner resilience I've built up over the years to hold my ground."

"I won't let go. I have been incredibly tenacious in pushing and pushing and pushing that agenda in the face of enormous resistance from civil servants. They are good at putting aside their own values. We are good at using our values to drive us and make sure we don't give up."

8.9 Cross-cultural competences

Finally, based on their experiences of community life and through their experience of having reached positions of power, research participants argued that they had a unique set of skills which enabled them to straddle the world of ethnic minority communities and of mainstream white British society, of service delivery and of strategic thinking and policy making.

"There's not a lot of people who can straddle both the world of communities and the world of policy."

“We have that additional skill that we are equally at ease in the corridors of power as we are working with deprived youth in run-down community centres. We understand the ways of thinking in all these contexts. We know where people come from.”

“A lot of these people in Whitehall who create policies probably have the best of intention, but the fact that they have no understanding of these communities means that they may not make the best policies for people. So stop doing things onto people and communities, and enable them to help themselves. That’s why I am keen on a constant flow between community and decision-makers and that’s what I bring too.”

8.10 Impacts made

It is difficult to capture the full extent of the impact the women in this study have made over the years and across sectors. Some of their impacts have focused on excluded groups, making sure that those who are marginalised are being given a voice, that they can access services, that they can obtain redress if their rights are violated; others have been concerned with generic issues and services. Some impacts have been internal to organisations, contributing to changing the profile of the workforce, to obtaining resources, to setting new agendas and to changing organisational cultures; others have changed the wider social, economic and political environment, helping to change social policy and service delivery in numerous and far-reaching ways. Some have had a local, regional or national focus; others have made international contributions. Their impacts have covered such diverse fields as education, housing, legal services, health, the economy, community cohesion, regeneration, human rights, and others.

Here are a few of the remarkable achievements made by these extraordinary ethnic minority women leaders – in their own words:

“I have got two major policy areas under my control: the City Strategy and the Ethnic Minority Employment Task Force, with a budget of £50 million.”

“I devised something called the Outcome Framework for Children, which has changed the way local services work, so that they are focussed on the needs of the child or the young person.”

“I have played a part in getting new hospitals built, in ensuring that the workforce is diverse, that health services are delivered better at local level. This approach resulted in what we now call Primary Care Trusts.”

“We managed to get PSA targets for alcohol: one under the Young People’s PSA, one under the Community Safety PSA and we are about to secure one under the overall NHS Performance Framework. So out of the 45 PSA targets, one will be around alcohol.”

“Our charity now has 90% of deprived black children who meet the Government benchmark in terms of good GCSEs. They are prepared to continue their education and maybe go to university. It’s fantastic because we are working with children where normally less than 30% get good GCSEs.”

“I pioneered the campaigns that led to the EC Article Thirteen Directive. Apart from men and women in employment, there were no rights for millions of Europeans in terms of equality because the European Union did not have competence to deal with equality issues. I helped make sure that, for the first time, black people, women, lesbian and gay people, disabled people got the right to be treated equally: 480 million Europeans can actually access their legal rights and have legal redress in the courts if they are discriminated against.”

8.11 Conclusions

This final chapter shows that, compared with many of their white male middle-class counterparts, the ethnic minority women leaders in this study feel they have a number of additional skills, or skills that are more acutely developed. These are: an approach to power which focuses on making a difference; a strong values orientation focused on equality, social justice and empowerment; an in-depth knowledge of communities; a reflexivity about their own position and about power structures; a different leadership style based on inclusion, collaboration and facilitation; a range of people skills and an appreciation of the importance of emotions and relationships in professional contexts; a greater resilience and resourcefulness that results from the experience of adversity; and a range of cross-cultural competences which enable them to straddle different communities and to bridge different working cultures.

Combined with their other technical skills, these additional skills have been key to driving through the change agendas they pursued. This has resulted in powerful impacts across a range of sectors, both inside and outside organisations, on a local, regional, national and international scale. It is hard to imagine how much poorer the world would be had these women been prevented from making their mark.

9. Recommendations

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter collects the various ideas generated throughout the research study on what can be done to open the way for more ethnic minority women to reach positions of power, governance and decision making across politics and the public, private and voluntary sectors.

The specific mechanisms that will ultimately make a difference to ethnic minority women's representation can vary between sectors. This section is therefore organised in terms of the key players that can influence change, in whichever sector they may be operating at any time:

- Government;
- Political parties;
- Employers;
- Families and communities; and
- Ethnic minority women workers.

9.2 What Government can do

Compliance

One of the most effective levers at Government's disposal is the current legal, regulatory and statutory equalities frameworks it has developed. In particular, it should seek to:

- Enforce the existing race, gender and disability equalities duties;
- Use procurement as a tool to encourage partners who are not already bound by the duties to deliver on an equality agenda; and
- Demonstrate best practice by developing, publishing and promoting its own compliance with the law including using gender and race equality schemes that incorporate useful ways to respond to monitoring data that is collected.

Policy delivery

Government policy currently operates in "strand silos", either focusing on race and ethnicity or on gender. As a result, the particular experiences and priorities of ethnic minority women fall between two stalls and are missed from policy interventions. Policies aimed to promote gender equality and race equality need to consider race and gender respectively. A first step

should include a thorough review of the position of different groups of ethnic minority women. Significant emphasis also needs to be placed on managing schools so that they encourage all ethnic minority girls to excel. Specifically steps should include:

- Developing an authoritative evidence base on the positions of different groups of ethnic minority women, their particular challenges, and options for change across different sectors;
- Providing high quality, culturally appropriate and affordable childcare in all local areas;
- Developing concrete strategies, backed with sufficient resources, to tackle gender and race discrimination in schools;
- Providing additional educational support for children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Providing support to schools that operate in disadvantaged areas so that they can deliver high quality education to all of their students; and
- Training teachers and guidance counsellors to provide fair and aspirational careers advice to all students.

Operational

As an organisation, the civil service attracts some of the most competent and ambitious talent in the country. The lack of representation at senior levels despite there being a high proportion of ethnic minority women within the service overall suggests that this potential is being lost. While government must continue to work to recruit a diverse work force, it should not lose sight of the need to retain and promote ethnic minority women as well, including by learning from and adapting to the differences some of these women bring with them by:

- Changing the organisational culture of the civil service especially in terms of valuing skills gained from other sectors and experiences; and
- Continuing to promote partnership working and involvement of different communities in decision making at local levels.

9.3 What political parties can do

Ethnic minority women are under-represented in Parliament, in both the House of Commons (0.3%) and the House of Lords (1%), as well as in local politics as councillors (0.9%). This research study found that one of the

main bottle necks to increasing ethnic minority women's representation in politics is political parties' selection processes. As the gatekeepers to some of the most powerful positions in society, all political parties must increase their efforts to ensure fairness and transparency in their operations, as well as more actively recruiting, supporting and promoting the missing ethnic minority women within their ranks by:

- Using all-women shortlists, placing particular emphasis on selecting ethnic minority women;
- Making greater use of the full range of positive measures permitted under current legislation to enable more women to be selected as candidates including training and mentoring, "twinning"¹, "clustering"² and "zipping"³; and
- Reforming the culture of local political parties to reflect results rather than perceptions: evidence supports this study's conclusions that women are electable but that local political parties remain risk-averse at selection stage and continue to privilege candidates that are similar – in sex and ethnicity – to the candidates that have proved successful in the past.⁴

9.4 What employers can do

Overcoming the current under-representation of ethnic minority women in senior positions across the private, public and voluntary sectors requires a whole-sale review of how "talent" and "work" are conceptualised. Those involved in public appointments also need to consider how they assess skills for the work required including for school governor and magistrate roles. Structures and processes that reward the skills and abilities of ethnic minority women and facilitate their career progression without prejudice or discrimination need to be institutionalised via leadership from the top. Concrete mechanisms include:

- 1 In this system, two local parties select their candidates jointly, with a requirement that one man and woman be selected. For more information, see *The need for positive action*, Fawcett Society, 2001.
- 2 In this system, several constituencies cluster together with a requirement to select a set amount of women between them. For more information, see *The need for positive action*, Fawcett Society, 2001.
- 3 In this system, members selecting candidates on a list are required to alternate between men and women. For more information, see *The need for positive action*, Fawcett Society, 2001
- 4 *Submission to the Commission for Local Councillors*, Centre for Women and Democracy 2007

- Ensuring visible strategic ownership of an equality agenda at board and senior management levels through, for example, reporting mechanisms that are minuted;
- Integrating equality and diversity into core business processes through, for example, strategic and operational business plans, performance indicators and best value reviews;
- Monitoring work satisfaction, career progression, complaints, staff pay, retention and promotion and access to professional development and training in order to promote a fair and transparent organisational culture;
- Taking action on monitoring data where issues are raised;
- Managing for success so that ethnic minority women are offered the support and professional development opportunities they need to enable them to develop their skills as they are promoted;
- Shifting organisational culture to promote equality, recognise the diversity of skills, approaches and values that women from ethnic minority backgrounds bring, and value this diversity in the context of organisational aims;
- Recruiting ethnic minority women through targeted outreach programmes especially to raise awareness of public roles where ethnic minority women may be particularly needed, for example as local councillors, school governors, magistrates and in public appointments. Some work on shifting organisational images to appeal to ethnic minority women may also be needed;
- Establishing and resourcing internal support networks and facilitating access to external ones;
- Adopting a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination at work;
- Promoting working cultures that support work-life balance for both men and women including: flexible working hours, equal pay, compressed work, remote work and parental and adoption leave; and
- Showcasing and championing successful women who can then act as role models.

9.5 What families and communities can do

The study highlighted the critical role of families in empowering their children to achieve their full potential in terms of educational achievements, career choices and career progression. It also highlighted very significant differences between ethnic minority communities in terms of the support

women receive to achieve their full potential. While gender stereotypes are present and powerful in all communities, they may be especially restrictive in some sections of South Asian communities. Families and communities can adopt some of the following strategies to maximise ethnic minority women's chances of success:

- Become involved in their children's education – both informally, such as by reviewing homework, and formally, by becoming school governors for example – to help schools become more responsive to diverse needs and to ensure that teachers have high expectations of all pupils;
- Become involved in public life, acting as advocates for their communities in public institutions (such as local area strategic partnerships) to ensure needs are recognised and met;
- Become involved at grassroots level to reach out to women and encourage them to access training, to take up paid or unpaid work opportunities or to start micro-businesses;
- Instil in their children the belief that they can succeed if they are resolute, resilient and resourceful;
- Expose their children and young people to a broad range of experiences so that they can make enlightened career choices; and
- Teach their children and young people effective strategies to challenge bullying and discrimination.

9.6 What ethnic minority women can do

The women in the study were exceptionally driven, resilient and talented, but they also enacted a number of strategies to facilitate their progress, which other ambitious women could similarly employ. As with any recommendations focussed on the individual, success is not guaranteed because much of the context will be out of any one woman's control. It is not sufficient to rely exclusively on the talent, skills and determination of individuals. Nevertheless, the women in the study's experiences show the importance of:

Challenging tokenism, typecasting and other forms of discrimination

The importance of knowing when and how to respond to unfairness and injustice in a working environment cannot be under-estimated. Options include:

- Developing effective strategies to point out discriminatory assumptions made about oneself and others, both in social interactions and in institutional procedures;
- Coaching and mentoring other ethnic minority women to enable them to develop their full range of skills, not only those germane to the equality and diversity agenda; and
- Seeking legal or formal redress in serious cases of discrimination.

Establishing or joining support networks

A key factor in the professional success of the high achievers that participated in the research is their ability to draw on help and support from others. This helps to overcome feelings of isolation and develop a sense of belonging as well as facilitating the sharing of knowledge and strategies on how best to succeed. Support networks can take many forms including:

- Informal “allies” that women can rely on for feedback, support and advice;
- Informal “champions” that recommend women to others as well as encouraging and mentoring women themselves to pursue opportunities;
- Staff support networks internal to organisations including those formally resourced corporately and less formalised groups;
- “Buddy systems” for senior managers, directors and leaders to share their expertise and exchange strategies for success; and
- External social and professional networks that increase access to people who are either more senior or from other professional fields.

Making sure their contributions are recognised and valued

To overcome the negative assumptions, marginalisation and sidelining of their contributions which they sometimes encountered at work, the women in the study developed and advocated the following strategies:

- Developing effective self-presentation strategies at meetings and in public, such as being extremely well prepared for meetings, making sure that they have “presence” and make precise and strong points at meetings, encouraging colleagues to acknowledge and engage with the points they make, ensuring that their contributions are minuted properly, and addressing their audiences’ implicit concerns and fears;

- Being clear, confident and explicit about the skills that they bring to organisations and how they contribute to the overall pool of talents and skills, especially when they are new to a working environment; and
- Seeking external, incontestable validation through formal recognition of skills through certificates, diplomas, awards.

Actively seeking opportunities for professional development

Employers vary a great deal in their ability and willingness to develop their staff, as well as in the ways in which they distribute opportunities for professional development among their staff. At the same time, many employees fail to fully avail themselves of the opportunities that are readily available. Those who work in smaller or poorly resourced organisations face even greater challenges in terms of professional development. Thus, where possible, it is important for ethnic minority women to make the most of any opportunities that do present themselves including:

- Accessing induction programmes and mentoring, coaching, shadowing or secondment schemes;
- Seeking out opportunities to deputise;
- Accessing on-the-job professional training to develop specific skills such as communications, strategy, management, policy development, networking, chairing or leadership skills;
- Accessing further or higher education programmes outside the workplace; and
- Taking up positions in public life which foster skills development, such as school governors, local councillors, magistrates, non-executive directors of public bodies such as NHS trusts, trade union activists and others.

Making sure they help other ethnic minority women in their career progression

Nearly all the women in the study were motivated by a desire to help others. Very many owed some of their success to help received from others in the course of their professional lives. It is important that ethnic minority women (and others) play an active role in opening doors for others by:

- Mentoring, coaching and supporting others;
- Acting as role models and champions for their community to help address barriers; and
- Challenging individualised and structural discrimination.

Appendix A: interview schedule

Aims:

- To find out more about the routes to power of ethnic minority women
- To better understand how ethnic minority women can be supported to access positions of power, across politics and public life, and the public, private and not-for-profit sectors

PART I: Introduction

- ETHNOS/Fawcett Society/Funded by DCLG
- Duration 90 minutes
- Confidentiality/List of participants
- Permission for case study/Loss of confidentiality/Content to be agreed
- Recording

PART II: Current roles and responsibilities

- What are your current roles and responsibilities?

PART III: Trajectory into current position

- Background: what kind of family and social environment do you come from?
- What motivated you to achieve as much as you did? Was there a specific trigger?
 - Strong views on health, justice, education?
 - Wish to contribute to local community?
 - Want to increase voice for ethnic minorities? For women?
 - Personal challenge, development?
 - Encouragement from family, parents, friends, colleagues, role models?
 - Highly politicised family background?
 - Other?
- How did you go from there to here? What prepared you for playing your current roles?
 - Education
 - Work
 - Volunteering
 - Other

PART IV: Barriers and challenges

- As you progressed in your career, what obstacles did you encounter?
 - Logistical barriers
 - Knowledge barriers
 - Community or cultural barriers
 - Skills barriers
 - Financial barriers
 - Discrimination:
 - From general public
 - From colleagues
 - From institutions
 - Other barriers and challenges
- Did the barriers change as you progressed up the ladder?
- Does it become progressively easier or more difficult?
- How did you/do you surmount the difficulties?
- What strategies do you have to deal with barriers and obstacles along your way?

PART V: Contribution of ethnic minority women

- What are the key skills and competencies you feel you bring to your work?
- What impact do you think you've already made?
- What further impacts would you like to make?
- Do you think you make distinct contributions as a woman from an ethnic minority background? If so, which ones?
- Do you think it is important to have more ethnic minority women active in public life? Why?
- Probe:
 - Distinct contributions to make
 - Role models to others
 - Representation and visibility in public life
 - Closer to disadvantaged people

PART VI: Widening the participation of ethnic minority women

- Given the range of barriers and challenges discussed, can you say more about what has made it possible for you to reach the positions you have?
 - Greater recognition of the importance of diversity in wider society? In what way?
 - Institutions wanting to be seen to be inclusive? Why?
 - Race and gender equality legislation beginning to have an impact? In what way?
 - Unusual degree of support from family, friends, employers? What kind?
 - Good, extensive, powerful networks? What kind? In own community?
 - Good mentoring or coaching? From whom? Who made that possible?
 - Sheer grit and determination!?
- Do you expect that significantly more ethnic minority women are now likely to reach positions of power and influence? Why? Why not?
- What more do you think could or should be done to encourage more ethnic minority women to climb up the corporate ladder?
 - Remuneration?
 - Targeting, outreach and promotion amongst ethnic minority women?
 - Public education in wider communities?
 - Coaching, mentoring, personal development plans, shadowing schemes?
 - Incentivising employers to enable more flexible working hours?
 - Different working arrangements?
 - Free childcare provisions when performing public duties?
 - Anything else?
- Thinking now about support needs once *in post*, what support did you or do you find most helpful?
- Is there any other form of support that you would have liked or would like to get?

How do you juggle with your multiple commitments?

PART VI:Your future

- What ambitions do you have for the future? Where do you see yourself in ten years time?
- Are there any specific new roles? Which ones? Why/Why not?
- Do you feel that your current role prepares you well to play a more active role in public life?
- What hurdles do you think could prevent you from achieving your goals, if any?
- If you had one message, one advice to give to other ethnic minority women who are struggling to reach to top, what would that be?

Thanks and close

- Ask for additional comments/questions
- Reaffirm confidentiality

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