The Black and Ethnic Minority Woman Manager

Cracking the Concrete Ceiling

arilyn J Davidson

THE BLACK AND ETHNIC MINORITY WOMAN MANAGER:

CRACKING THE CONCRETE CEILING

by

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Preface

My job as Chairwoman of the Equal Opportunities Commission has led me to develop a great understanding and insight into the lives of women, not just in the UK but also in a number of other countries. Equality issues are very important to me and I can trace my interest back to the discrimination I have experienced in my own life.

In 1978 when I came out of Law School looking for my first job I was well qualified, very confident, ambitious, ready to launch myself on the world. Anybody and everybody who knew me said I would have no problems. I applied for 250 jobs at a time when there was a great shortage of newly qualified graduates applying for articles. I didn't get one.

I remember going through a very analytical process based on my training as a lawyer. Was it my dress, my presentation, my interview skills? I couldn't understand it until I faced the stark realisation that it was either gender or race discrimination and I personally found this very shocking.

Discrimination is insidious. It saps your confidence and your self-esteem. It bars you from tried and tested career paths, irrespective of your ability and qualifications. Not unnaturally, I deplore it.

I was therefore very pleased when, in 1994, the Equal Opportunities Commission published two reports which revealed the extent of the double discrimination black and ethnic minority women face on the grounds of race and sex discrimination. It exploded the myth that women are a homogenous group with similar needs and experiences. The Commission used these reports to raise the profile of the issues and to persuade other organisations to develop strategies to deal with them.

Eradicating discrimination is not an easy task. Prejudice and tradition are not lightly swept aside. Dr Davidson's book provides an insight into just how deep-seated the problems are and makes positive and excellent suggestions for the future. The book lends further support for the need for organisational and policy changes to help remedy and eliminate discrimination so that opportunity is available to all. I welcome its publication.

Kamlesh Bahl
Chairwoman
Equal Opportunities Commission

Dedications and Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to my children, Fern and Lloyd, and to Bob Cooke.

Special thanks to Caroline Davey for her help with interviews and data analysis; fellow researcher, Linda Hite, for her invaluable comments and suggestions on the first book draft; and the Sundridge Park Research Fund for financing this study. Finally, I wish to thank all those women managers who participated in this project and gave their time and energy to share their experiences.

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The Black and Ethnic Minority Woman Manager – An Overview

On a macro-societal level, (gendered) racism operates through various mechanisms. Black women are (a) marginalised, (b) culturally problematised and (c) impeded in social mobility. They encounter paternalism, they are underestimated, their work is ethnicised, and they generally have fewer career opportunities than men and white women, respectively. These mechanism operate simultaneously and probably stimulate each other.

(Essed, 1991)

INTRODUCTION

Colette (not her real name) is 28 years of age, single, an Afro-Caribbean graduate junior manager. She works in a section of Social Services and was born in the UK. However, the problems and pressures Colette experienced as the first ethnic minority woman to hold her position in a predominantly white company, in the end, forced her to quit her job:

> My career is very important, perhaps too important. I feel terrible now that I have left the company but the job took over my life. I could never switch off. It initially felt strange being the boss because the people who worked for me tended to be older and had been in the company longer. They resented me. What made matters worse was that although I was supposedly in a position of power, my male (white) superiors had ensured in reality, I had no real power. This obviously made my situation impossible and undermined my authority. Nothing was done to enhance my career and I wasn't even given adequate training. Having to deal with racism was also a problem, it wasn't just directed towards me but often towards ethnic minority groups generally. For example, at one meeting someone suggested Asians with large families would be likely to steal things. Naturally, I challenged this, but no one supported me. That was one of the major problems, I felt totally alone and isolated with no one (especially another black woman) to turn to – particularly in regards to fighting continual racism – which became more and more directed towards me. As far as my performance went, I felt as a black woman I shouldn't ask

Portions of this chapter originally published by M. Davidson in *Psychology at Work* (1996) by P. Warr (ed), London: Penguin.

> for help and advice, as it was made clear to me that black women were seen as inferior and lowering the management standards and I didn't want to do anything to reinforce this fallacy. I even worked longer hours than most of the other people there. Towards the end though, I didn't care how black women were perceived – I'd run out of energy and given up. I was not accepted because I was black and female – it was a lose–lose situation. The more assertive I became, the more difficult they (management) made my life. The racism I encountered led to me losing self-esteem and confidence and eventually became depressed and mildly paranoid. I'm now looking for a job in a big city where there are other black people in the organisation.

Over the past 17 years, the author has interviewed and questionnaire surveyed hundreds of female managers as part of numerous different research projects, investigating the experiences of these women's existence in male dominated organisational cultures. Undoubtedly, the majority of these interviewees have been white. However, very occasionally one would, by chance, interview a woman manager from an ethnic minority background and, like the case of Colette above, she would have a very different kind of story to tell.

It is important to note that there are currently differing opinions and inconsistencies regarding descriptive terminology used when describing 'non-white' women and men. In the USA for example, while Asian, Indian, Hispanic, Native American, and African-American women would be referred to collectively as 'women of color', only the African-American group is referred to as 'black' (Hite, 1996). A number of prominent British researchers, such as Mirza (1992) and Bhavnani (1994) used the term 'black' to include women from African, Asian and Caribbean ethnic backgrounds, as well as mixed ethnicity backgrounds. Bhavnani explained her rationale for this choice of terminology when she wrote:

> The words black 'race' and ethnicity are often confused in the research literature. . . . The overall use of the word 'black' does not mean that the diversity of the black communities in Britain is being discounted; cultural and ethnic identities are critical for all peoples, black and white, but they can only be understood in the context of a racialised and gendered society. 'Race' is a social constriction, not a biological one, hence the ethnicity, gender and class is subject to constant change.

On the other hand, other British researchers such as Deakins *et al.* (1996) who have recently investigated success factors in 'non-white' entrepreneurs, exclusively use the term 'ethnic minority' to include business owners from various ethnic minority groups. Moreover, these authors totally omit the word 'black' from their publications. Therefore, in an attempt to address this dilemma, the term 'black and ethnic minority' is generally used throughout the book. However, the solo term 'black' is used when specifically adopted by an individual researcher or part of a quotation from either a publication or interviewee.

In 1988, the American academic Nkomo wrote a chapter entitled 'Race and Sex: The Forgotten Case of the Black Female Manager'. In it, she raised the issue of the invisibility of African-American women managers as far as American women in management research was concerned:

> Every time I came across a book or article on women in management I would hurriedly scan the book hoping to find some mention or discussion of the unique experience of black women managers. More often than not I found nothing. . . . The overwhelming implication is that the same sex-role constraints operating as boundaries for white female managers influence the experience of black female managers also. To understand the experience of black female managers, one merely extrapolates findings from the women in management research to black female managers.
>
> (Nkomo, 1988)

Later in 1990, while attending an International Women in Management Conference in Canada, the author met and listened to a lecture by the African-American researcher Ella Bell. Clearly, her research at Harvard substantiated previous American literature which concluded that African-American women managers faced a double jeopardy of sexual and racial discrimination, which secured their position at the very bottom of the managerial pyramid. However, despite research by our American colleagues, to date, there are very few British publications specifically investigating the experiences, problems and pressures of black and ethnic minority managers, male or female. Gilkes (1990) explored childhood, educational, occupational and cultural experiences of 25 UK women community workers from various ethnic minority backgrounds in a Northern city by in-depth, tape recorded interviews. She reported that these women frequently referred to their powerlessness, isolation and victimisation stemming from inequality and status degradation, fostered by negative images and stereotypes attached to black women's work (Gilkes, 1990). More recently, Mirza's (1992) five year longitudinal study of 62 young black and ethnic minority women in London, once again highlighted the wasted potential of both the men and the women. In the words of Mirza (1992): 'Despite the myth of the "black superwoman" busy outstripping her male counterparts, if you are young, female and black in Britain, chances are slim that you will find a job to reflect your academic ability or potential.' Therefore, the author felt that the experiences of British black and ethnic minority female managers should be systematically studied and highlighted, in the hope of starting a process of corporate awareness and change, as well as encouraging further research to be carried out by researchers from different ethnic groups. With financial support from the Sundridge Park Research Foundation, the author decided to spend six months going round the country and, with the help of a female colleague, Caroline Davey, interviewing a cross section of female managers from African, Asian, Afro-Caribbean and mixed ethnic back-

grounds. However, neither of the interviewers came from an ethnic minority background. Both were white, middle class and female. Certainly, for some of the interviewees, the ethnic origin of the interviewees was an issue of concern to them:

> I think I should tell you that I've spoken to some of our black women managers concerning your study. While most are in favour of the concept and willing to be interviewed, a number did raise the issue as to why a black woman was not carrying out this research. A few would not agree to be interviewed because of that.

As a consequence, as white interviewers, this issue was always raised during initial contact and at the beginning of each interview session. This enabled interviewees to discuss their feelings about this issue openly and indeed, some women spoken to highlighted some advantages – as illustrated by the following quotation:

> I feel as a black woman talking to a white woman, I actually am much more detailed and graphic when describing my experiences. If you were black, I would tend to assume that some of the problems I have living in a white world were too obvious to even mention to a woman sharing the same ethnic background.

There is a host of literature pertaining to race and ethnicity in research methods (e.g., Stanfield and Dennis, 1993), with heavy emphasis on the ethics relating to the different gender, socio-economic group and ethnic background of the researchers/interviewers and the research subjects/groups.

In her recent book *Black American Women's Writing – A Quilt of Many Colours* (1994), the British academic Lennox Birch suggests how a white women such as herself can identify with African-American women's experiences through the analysis of their voices expressed in their writings:

> The personal struggle of Afro-American women against marginalisation in America, channelled into establishing for themselves a self-definition in which their beauty, strength and individuality is recognised, is not just one of race, but of gender too. In examining racial prejudice black women writers expose the cultural constraints of class, gender and religion with which white women can also identify. White women cannot, as Barbara Smith points out, share the experiential reality of white racism suffered by black women, but by being exposed to a literature expressing that reality, they can move towards an understanding of their own culturally shaped prejudice, confront their own fear of difference, and realise that there is more that joins black and white women than should ever keep them apart.
>
> (Lennox Birch, 1994)

The American white sociologist, Margaret Anderson has carried out numerous qualitative studies on the lives of African-American women. In her review of the unique methodological problems for members of both

minority and majority groups doing research in minority communities, she makes the following conclusions:

> we should develop research practices that acknowledge and take as central the class, race and gender relations in which researchers and research subjects are situated. At the same time, we should question assumptions that the knower is the ultimate authority on the lives of those whom she or he studies. We should not assume that white scholars are unable to generate research with people of colour as research subjects, but we must be aware that to do so, white scholars must work in ways that acknowledge and challenge white privilege and question how such privilege may shape research experiences.
>
> (Anderson, 1993)

Prior to describing the demographic profile of the women managers who took part in this study, this chapter will review the overall position of women in the workforce and women as managers. Each of these sections will then be followed by specific reviews focusing on what is currently known about black and ethnic minority female workers and managers.

What is evident from the Labour Force Surveys and research literature, is that until relatively recently, the position and experiences of black and ethnic minority, women and men, were largely ignored. References to 'female', in fact, assumed 'white' female. If black and ethnic minority women were included in the samples, they became 'invisible' and were absorbed into the predominantly white populations.

WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

Today, in most Western countries, organisations recognise that women represent a significant proportion of the labour force. Since the mid 1970s, British employers have responsibilities towards their employees under both common law and statute, including the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts, Race Relations Act, Employee Protection Acts and Health and Safety Acts (Wilson, 1995). In 1996 women accounted for 44% of the UK workforce (Labour Market Trends, 1996) and this figure will continue to rise until the year 2006 according to recent UK government projections. Similar trends are evident in Australasia, the USA, Canada and throughout Europe (Davidson, 1996). In the European labour market, women now make up 41% of all adults who are in work or looking for work (Plantenga, 1995). Similar patterns emerge in Australia where women account for 42% of the workforce (Still, 1993). Furthermore, these rates are predicted to continue increasing, particularly among younger women. In the UK, for example, about three-quarters of women are expected to be working by the year 2001.

This significant continued rise in employment among women has its roots in a number of developments. These include the expansion of service

industries, the increase in part-time employment, changes in life expectancy, in economic circumstances (especially in relation to employment and housing) and in social expectations. In addition, the changing nature of the family means smaller families and households, later marriage, more cohabitation, more extramarital births, more divorce and more and more people living in one-parent families, predominantly headed by women, with dependent children and dependent elderly relatives (7% of UK households, HMSO, 1995).

Over the past twenty years there has been a swing from employment in traditional industries such as manufacturing towards the service sector, an area of employment which is traditionally female and one which offers plenty of flexible employment patterns. Indeed, for several years, the UK government has promoted greater labour market flexibility in relation to flexible hours, job sharing, part-time working, home working and self-employment (Watson, 1994). In 1996, women represented a third of all those working full-time and 82% of those working part-time (Department for Education and Employment, 1997).

Life stages – particularly parenthood, clearly have a much greater influence on women's working lives than on men's. In 1995, 65% of UK mothers with dependent children were economically active compared with 55% in 1984 (Labour Force Survey, 1995). Among people of working age, 63% of mothers worked part time and the greatest increase in labour market participation has been among women with children aged under four, an increase from 37% in 1984 to 54% in 1996. In contrast, employment grew more slowly or even declined among mothers with no educational background, lone mothers, mothers with a youngest child of secondary school age, mothers with three or more children and black mothers (Sly, 1994). Indeed, it should be noted that despite having higher levels of education and qualifications than white women, in 1996, 16% of ethnic minority women were unemployed. This compares with an official 1996 unemployment rate for white women of 6% and 9% for white men compared to 20% of ethnic minority men.

Recent evidence in the UK suggests that at school, girls are attaining better academic examination results compared to boys. The 1995 National Consortium for Examination Results showed that girls were almost ten points ahead of boys for the third year running at GCSE level. In 1995, girls and boys were level in subjects such as maths and science with girls excelling in language based subjects – this, despite the set-back of continuous assessment of course work which was suggested by some to favour girls over boys.

Not surprisingly, there have also been significant increases in the number of females going into higher education. From 1995/96, while at the post-graduate level, men's enrolments still outnumber women's, at the under-graduate level there are now more women students. There are also increasing trends for women graduates to move into areas of managerial and professional employment which were previously dominated by men. In 1973, only 10% of students studying for social administration and business

degrees were women, whereas today in the UK more than 45% of these students are female (Davidson and Cooper, 1992). A recent survey of ten UK companies who kept detailed records of their graduate intake over the last ten years found that Shell had tripled the number of women graduates it recruits, while Unilever had more than doubled its intake. Other companies such as National Westminster Bank, Barclays, ICL, Coopers and Lybrand and Abbey National, had also seen big increases in the number of graduate women they recruit (Webber, 1994).

Nevertheless, occupational segregation by gender still persists in all European labour markets. More than 50% of employed women are found in service or clerical jobs, compared with 20% of men (Plantenga, 1995). According to Rubery and Fagan (1993), the majority of the new jobs women moved into in the 1980s were in two occupational areas: professional jobs and clerical jobs. Therefore, while an increasing number of women are entering the lower level service and clerical jobs which are already female dominated; some women are gaining access to highly skilled professional jobs, including management.

Similar trends are recurring in Australasia and the USA. In Australia, 55% of female employees in 1992 were concentrated in two major occupational groups: clerks and sales persons. While 20% of Australian female employees were in professional and para-professional occupations, 22% were registered nurses (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1992). Even in the USA, with the strongest legislation affecting the employment of women, women are most frequently found in the helping professions, and sales and retail jobs. In 1992, US women held 98% of secretarial, typist and stenographer positions, 79% of administrative jobs, and 94% of registered nurse positions (US Department of Labor, 1992).

There have, however, been some advances in women entering traditionally male dominated jobs and in all the European Union countries, women are increasing their share of professional jobs. In the UK, for example, women now account for 54% of newly qualified solicitors, which is an increase of nearly 9% over the last 7 years. There has also been an increase by 10% of women becoming chartered accountants over the past 10 years and they now account for 37% of newly qualified accountants (Wilkinson, 1994). Even so, the majority of women in professional jobs are still concentrated in the caring professions and the public sector and are occupying the lower managerial positions (Davidson and Burke, 1994). Even in those industries in which women predominate, they tend to have the less prestigious jobs. For example, only 3 in 10 secondary school head and deputy head teachers are women, even though half of secondary school teachers are female (HMSO, 1995).

While the evidence suggests that it is relatively easy for women to gain employment at the lower levels of organisations, it is still proving very difficult for them to reach upper middle and senior management positions and the percentage of senior female executives is very small. In Britain, there are

approximately three million managers with about a fifth being women; of the million or so middle and senior managers, at most 4% are women (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Davidson and Burke, 1994).

BLACK AND ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

To date, the most comprehensive analysis of the position of black and ethnic minority women in the UK Labour Force has been carried out by Bhavnani (1994). Due to the increasing incidences of racial discrimination, several Race Relations Acts have been passed, the most recent being the 1976 Race Relations Act. In addition, The Commission for Racial Equality was set up.

Bhavnani (1994) adopts the word 'black' in her reference to women from African, Asian and Caribbean ethnic backgrounds. She recounts how the presence of 'black' people in Britain can be traced back to Roman times. In order to service the needs of the aristocracy, the introduction of slavery was a highly profitable trading economy. Hence, these women have had links with Britain for thousands of years. However, it was not until the beginning of the 1950s, 1960s, to the 1970s, that most black and ethnic minority women arrived in Britain. Bhavnani (1994) asserts that this affected their position in the labour market. Hindu, Afro-Caribbean and Sikh women arrived early in the migration phase at a time of stability and economic growth. Bangladeshi and Pakistani women on the other hand, tended to arrive in the 1970s in order to join their male relatives, already in Britain.

Bhavnani (1994) points out that it is only since 1984 that the collection of large scale survey data on 'black' women in the labour market commenced. In Britain, around 5% of the population of working age are of African, Afro-Caribbean or Asian origin. Indications are that this proportion is likely to grow in the coming years and more black and ethnic minority employees are entering managerial positions (Iles and Auluck, 1991). In 1995 around 71% of British women aged 16–59 were economically active. For black and ethnic minority women, the average economic activity rate was 57.6%. More specifically, 76% of Afro-Caribbean women were economically active compared to 61% of Indian women, 29% of Pakistani women and 22% of Bangladeshi women (Bhavnani, 1994). This compares to a rate of 71.4% for white women. However, while 56.3% of white women worked full-time, 69.8% of black and ethnic minority women were full-time workers. Bhavnani (1994) suggests reasons for this are material as well as due to demands from certain industries. They are more and more likely to work on a casual/temporary basis in jobs previously done by white women, and are also likely to be working as home workers in certain industrial sections, often hidden from official statistics.

Of the 3 million black and ethnic minority people in Britain, most are concentrated in the metropolitan areas and work in the urban markets. The