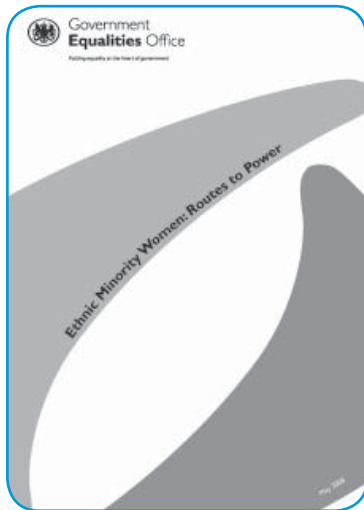


Routes to Power



In 2007, in response to Harriet Harman's new priorities for women, the Government Equalities Office commissioned the Fawcett Society to carry out research into ethnic minority women's routes into decision-making positions. 'Routes to Power', published in 2008, is the report based on the findings of this research and is the most frequently downloaded report from the Fawcett Society website. Based on in depth interviews with 23 women who have achieved

notable success, including Shami Chakrabarti (Director of Liberty) Baroness Valerie Amos, Gloria Mills CBE and Baroness Uddin, the research provides a fascinating and personal insight into the experiences of women from ethnic minority backgrounds. In each interview, the women were asked about their family and educational background, their motivations, career to date, the barriers and challenges they experience and the strategies they use to overcome these. Josephine Middleton looks at some of the key findings of this seminal report.

Family and Educational Background

A supportive and stable family background was identified as critical in terms of developing aspirations and overcoming early negative experiences in education or work. Although the majority of women surveyed came from middle class backgrounds, this was not the defining factor in each woman's success. The family support that proved most essential was less about money and status and much more about instilling strong moral values, a sense of community and a desire to succeed.

When looking at the educational background of the participants, there was a wide variation in experience and outcomes. A lot of the women interviewed had been schooled outside the UK, with many coming to this country to study at degree level. Education was not, for many interviewees, top on the list of priorities – other family commitments and economic restrictions meant education was often postponed or interrupted. There was also a notable difference between individual experiences - Black women for example reported having faced low expectations from educational authorities, while Asian women felt both supported and empowered in school.

Amongst all the survey participants however there was one strong common factor – a drive to excel. Often rooted in childhood, this came from an awareness of the sacrifices made by parents and a

desire to avoid financial and social exclusion.

The majority of women felt there were high expectations placed on them by family, teachers and themselves and this contributed to increased ambition and determination. This coupled with a strong sense of equality and social justice, was the driving force behind many of the women surveyed.

Challenges in the workplace

When it comes to turning aspirations into reality, most of the women felt strongly that gender and race inequality had both proved significant challenges. Despite improvements in legislation, many believed that discrimination was still present, albeit more covertly than before.

While the principles of equality and social inclusion may be embedded in policy, the reality is that inequality and prejudice are still thriving in many organisational cultures and in the hearts and minds of individuals. The ethnic minority women in the survey found this manifesting itself in two main ways – typecasting and tokenism. In the case of typecasting, some women felt that they had been restricted in their career choices or in their professional development by being pushed into roles with a purely gender or race focus.

Other women had experienced being used as tokens by organisations keen to prove themselves as equal opportunity employers. Even when it is not deliberate, tokenism has the effect of undermining the achievements of ethnic minority women, with colleagues often assuming them to be simply filling some kind of diversity quota, rather than being in a job on the basis of merit. The women surveyed for the study said they often felt they had to work even harder in these cases in order to establish credibility and prove themselves worthy of their job.

Conclusions

Although the study emphasised the progress and achievements made to date, it showed that there is still a long way to go. The research highlighted several key areas for improvement and recommendations for individuals, families, employers and Government. For employers, there should be an emphasis on meritocracy, valuing individual workers for their abilities and experience. Employers should also recognise the added value that ethnic minority women can bring to the workplace and ensure that these skills are being developed to their full potential.

The Government was felt to be well placed to lead by example – current equalities frameworks should be championed and complied with at all levels and individual talents should be developed and nurtured. It is also crucial that Government policy and practice recognises the specific needs of ethnic minority women and that this group does not fall between policies aimed at all women or all ethnic minority groups. The experiences and challenges faced by minority ethnic women in education and work are unique, and should be recognised and treated as such.