

## Well qualified, ambitious black women kept in low jobs by employers, new study reveals

11 September 2006 Deborah Gabriel

### Black Caribbean women have most difficulty finding work

A new report by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has found that black Caribbean women are highly ambitious, but both their access to the job market and career opportunities are thwarted by discrimination.

The Study, called: **Moving on Up? Ethnic Minority Women and Work** which examined the aspirations, experiences and choices of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and black Caribbean women, completes the first phase of a two year formal investigation into employment prospects for these groups of women under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975.

The study surveyed 202 Black Caribbean, 201 Bangladeshi, 205 Pakistani and 204 white British women in London, Birmingham, Bradford and Leeds in face to face interviews between August and September last year.

Black Caribbean women were the group with the highest number seeking promotion in the near future (51 per cent, compared with 46 per cent white, 42 per cent Bangladeshi and 48 per cent of Pakistani women). In terms of women aspiring to senior management positions, almost a third of black women (30 per cent) expressed this desire.

But the study revealed that 54 per cent of Black Caribbean women often had difficulty finding work (compared with 34 per cent of white women). It also revealed that increasingly black women are forced to take jobs below their skills and experience levels.

Sixteen per cent of black Caribbean women admitted taking a job they were over-qualified for because of their inability to secure a job that matched their skill level. Almost one third (31 per cent) of black Caribbean women had seen less experienced or less qualified people promoted above them and a third had experienced racist comments at work. Commenting on the report's findings, Jenny Watson, Chair of the EOC told Black Britain:

**“If you look at young women under 35 who are actually in the workplace...they want to get into senior positions or they're very aspirational in terms of running their own business but the reality of that, particularly for black Caribbean women is that there is a very heavy concentration, particularly around health and social work.”**

Using the words of one of the women in the study, Watson said that for black women, this amounts to: **“A concrete ceiling, never mind a glass ceiling. There are much lower levels of representation in senior management roles.”**

Watson said that this represented **“a real loss”**, not just for the women and their families, but for Britain as well. The study also looked at employers in areas where there is a sizeable black population with a pool of women to choose from but many employers are not aware of what the population they are recruiting from looks like.

Watson told Black Britain: **“They don't realise that they are missing out because 30 per cent of them in travel to work areas where there are significant numbers of black Caribbean women don't employ any. That's a concern for all of us...but clearly a concern for employers because they're not fishing for talent in the pool that they should be.”**

Forty-two year old Diane Martin is a living example of the EOC study in terms of the experience of black Caribbean women. Born in the UK, Martin went to live in Jamaica at the age of nine, when her parents, who were Jamaican, decided to return home to live. Martin said that her mother feared that Martin would be held back in her education in the UK and would fare better in Jamaica.

### **Despite a bachelors degree and an MBA permanent jobs evaded Diane Martin**

After completing her education in Jamaica Martin embarked on higher education study in the US, and by the age of 27 had gained both a bachelor's degree and MBA from Columbia University. In 1981 Martin returned to Jamaica and taught for a couple of years and returned to the US briefly, before coming to live in the UK in 1994.

But despite being well-qualified, Martin who was then 30 did not find the streets of London paved with gold, or career opportunities. She told Black Britain: **"I thought the world was my oyster,"** but it didn't take her long to come back down to earth.

Initially Martin just focused on getting a foot in the door in the job market but found that she was being overlooked and told that her degrees were gained in the US and not the UK. Martin then decided to focus on temporary work and signed up with a temp agency where she found work within three weeks.

As well as carrying out administrative assignments for her agency's clients she also did in-house work for the agency. But duties were fairly basic tasks such as data entry. Commenting on the way in which Black women often have to grit their teeth and take a job that they are over-qualified for, Martin told Black Britain: **"You are cheap at half the price."**

Speaking of her experience in the job market Martin said: **"I have found that in the last twelve years I have only had one permanent job offered to me. I have been a temp all this time."**

Martin also told Black Britain about the experience of her sister-in-law who gained her MBA in the UK, yet was forced to work for a high street chemist as a cleaner for five years to stay off benefits. Asked whether she had any regrets about moving to the UK from the USA, given her experience in the job market, she said: **"I don't regret coming to the UK because it seems here you don't get everything you want. But I have a wonderful husband and two wonderful children."**

But Martin admitted: **"Career-wise it's been dreadful and financially it's been dreadful,** largely because the jobs for which Martin has been over-qualified do not pay well. But Martin told Black Britain that there is also little job satisfaction. She pointed out that often employers would over-burden her with extra responsibilities: **"They are willing to use your skills but not for more pay,"** she said.

Commenting on the experience of black women in the workplace, Martin told Black Britain: **"There is a sense here of knowing your place. Whatever you've got is an irrelevance."** Martin explained that often other work colleagues perceive the over-qualified employee as a threat: **"And so you walk on eggshells trying to fulfil the role you've been hired for."**

Just before going press Martin contacted Black Britain with the news that her temporary contract, which was about to expire and which she was assured would be renewed was being terminated. The day before the termination the EOC had arranged for journalists from the mainstream media to interview Martin in relation to the study and as a result, Martin received several phone calls at her place of work, which did not go down well with her employer.

But Martin assured Black Britain she was unaware the journalists would call her place of work without her first agreeing the times she would be available: **"I am still speechless. I realise that I**

**have no job security, but I was deliberately misled and summarily sacked without recourse.”**

Perhaps the reason for the agitation of Martin’s male employer over the interviews regarding the plight of black women at work was because on hiring Martin, he: **“Openly declared, in front of the entire office, that he hired me because he liked the size of my breasts! The agency advised me to confront him quietly, which I did, but he has been gunning for me ever since,”** Martin said.

EOC are keen to hear from more women and employers about their experiences in the workplace or related to the job market. The helpline number is listed below.

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