

## Black women face a double discrimination at work say unions

03 April 2006 Deborah Gabriel

### Black women face barriers regardless of qualifications

This weekend, (Friday 7- Sunday 9 April), the Trade Union Congress (TUC) will hold its annual Black Worker's Conference in Eastbourne and taking centre stage will be a joint informal session to discuss the pressing issue of black women and employment.

Discussions and workshops will centre around the double discrimination that black and Asian women experience on a daily basis throughout their working lives. A survey conducted by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) last September in Bradford, Birmingham and London stopped employed women in the street under 35 and asked them a range of questions about their aspirations and employment experiences.

The survey forms part of a research project which is looking at what factors affect black and Asian women's employment, what is holding them back and what can be done about it. Helen Woollaston, Campaigns Manager at EOC told Black Britain:

**"What [black] women have been telling us is that they're finding it harder to get jobs which match their qualifications than white women do and harder to get promotion as well."**

She said that women feel that the reason for this is down to: **"stereotypical assumptions being made which relate to them as women, as well as to do with their ethnic background."** Giving an example, Woollaston explained how one of the questions in the survey asked women whether they were asked questions during job interviews about plans for marriage or children:

**"It was quite shocking really that the black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in the survey were three times more likely to say that they had been asked these type of questions than white women were."**

According to Woollaston, this appears to confirm the belief that employers are making assumptions about black and Asian women concerning their family circumstances and that there are particular ways that race discrimination manifests itself for women.

Woollaston told Black Britain that DFES statistics show high rates of black women entering Higher Education, but due to 'double discrimination' there is **"a big worry"** that they will not find jobs to match their skills upon graduating. This was the experience for Adunola Ajuwon, a 24-year old woman of African heritage from Birmingham.

Ajuwon has been trying for two and a half years to secure a job in PR but despite having an honours degree in media and cultural studies and a master's degree in media production she has been unable to get a foot in the door. She has applied for jobs in her home town of Birmingham as well as in London and other cities across the UK.

During one interview in London Ajuwon felt as if her interviewer was just **"going through the motions"** and also mentioned that **"half-way through my answers she would cut me short."**

During university when she was undertaking work experience, Ajuwon found herself working for a major public broadcasting company. One of its executives told her: **"You might want to consider changing your name, it's too ethnic."**

During another interview conducted by two male interviewers, Ajuwon was subjected to inappropriate sexually implicit remarks which she found un-nerving. She has applied for positions

both in the public and private sector and feels that barriers to her getting into the PR industry have been experienced in both areas.

But it has not only been her experience, former black students from her university course have suffered similar levels of discrimination: **“Every black person that I went to university with who was on my course is either working in a bank or similar establishment...it’s very disappointing.”**

Her lack of success has forced her to take an unwanted job in the banking sector and she is now considering going to work abroad in Nigeria:

**“I will probably end up going to Nigeria as I am now 24 and realistically I can no longer be applying for trainee positions beyond the age of 25. I just keep thinking I cannot have acquired all this education just to work in a bank.”**

### **Black women get stereotyped into certain types of jobs**

The TUC has recognised that black women face a double discrimination and has looked at its collective bargaining processes as a means of tackling the problem. Colette Corkhurst, speaking on behalf of the TUC told Black Britain that sometimes when looking at race equality, unions do not focus on black women and similarly when dealing with gender equality, black women are again often overlooked.

She said that the TUC aims to ensure that black women are visible in the workplace and that all the issues are properly considered: **“As far as we are concerned, black women are still concentrated in low-paid jobs, mainly in public services, manufacturing and retail.”**

The reason for this is largely to do with stereotyping. But Corkhurst admitted that when it is already hard to identify and deal with race cases and sex discrimination cases it is even more difficult to pinpoint where one discrimination ends and another begins in the case of black women.

Corkhurst said that stereotyping is still a major problem in the workplace: **“We do have managers who for example, faced with a black woman will stereotype them into the type of work that they think they should be doing or that they think them capable of doing.”**

In trying to tackle the problem through the unions, Corkhurst said that by having women’s structures and race equality structures the TUC is committed to ensure that black women and the issues that affect them are taken on board.

Corkhurst agreed that the problems black women face in gaining employment and progressing in their careers is not due to inadequate skills: **“Black women are one of the groups most likely to enter higher education, so they have got the qualifications, so it’s obviously at the recruitment stage that something is going wrong.”**

She added that there are definitely issues relating to black women accessing work, the type of work they are able to secure and being able to progress in the workplace.

Christine Tucker has worked in the training department of a large bank for five years and has studied for external qualifications relating to her area of work, which she has passed successfully. There are no other black employees working in her department.

Despite running the team jointly with another colleague for eight months, when this position became available she submitted an application but wasn’t even selected for interview. After querying this she was presented with a checklist of criteria she supposedly did not meet, none of

which were included in the original profile for the job. She told Black Britain:

**“What surprised me is that someone with fewer qualifications and less experience got called for an interview.”** Tucker is a member of her union and chairperson for the national advisory committee which she says enables the union to go to the company and request the introduction of diversity training.

The union has established through surveys that around 7 per cent of the bank’s employees are black or minority ethnic, but only two out of 64 team managers are black. Tucker said that recruiters were reluctant to interview candidates from ethnic minorities but were happy to call those with English-sounding names for interview:

**“I used to be involved in conducting interviews on site and I have witnessed an individual looking at application forms and discarding any with obviously black or Asian names.”**

Woollasten told Black Britain that the TUC have been stressing that when looking at race equality it is essential to look specifically at the position of black women as in the past: **“Policies to tackle race equality have not looked at issues facing women in general.”**

In addition to surveys questioning women, the EOC are also undertaking a survey of 1000 employers across England in areas where there is at least a 5 per cent ethnic minority population. The survey will ask whether the companies employ black and Asian women in their workforce and whether they see them progressing at the same rate as other women. If not, they will be asked why they think this not happening. Woollasten said:

**“We feel that a lot of employers do want to see diversity in their workforce but perhaps are not quite sure what they need to be doing or what they are doing wrong. We want to talk to them about the best way of making positive changes.”**

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