

EMRAW Bulletin

Ethnic minority representation at work



October 2007

Introducing a new 3-year research project from the Working Lives Research Institute



In February 2007 a research team at the Working Lives Research Institute were granted £317k to undertake an in-depth research project focusing on how black and ethnic minority (BME) workers access support for problems at work.

This project, titled 'Influences of identity, community and social networks on ethnic minority representation at work' will be undertaken by Dr Jane Holgate, Dr Meeta Jha, Janroj Keles (Working Lives Research Institute, London Metropolitan University) and Professor Anna Pollert (University of West of England).

Working lives Research Institute

The Working Lives Research Institute (WLRI) is a centre for research and teaching, based at the London Metropolitan University. We undertake socially committed academic and applied research into all aspects of working lives, emphasising equality and social justice, and working for and in partnership with trade unions.

We emphasize the way changes in work are experienced and shaped by workers and workers' organisations, recognising the centrality of race, gender, sexuality and disability to their experiences.

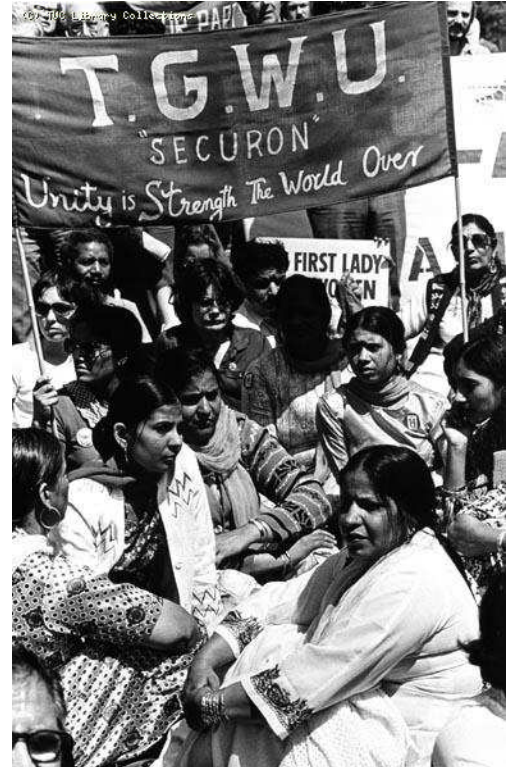
In acknowledging that work is contested and the subject of political choices, the Institute aims both to further academic understanding and to inform and support the policies of trade unions, social movements and public and private sector organisations.

The Institute's links with trade unions, community and voluntary organisations, campaigns and progressive institutions are key to the development of its research programme.

The relationship between ethnic minorities and trade unions

The British trade union movement is increasingly aware of and committed to addressing its failure to recruit and organise among minority ethnic communities. Through a study of workers from minority ethnic groups, this research aims to review and evaluate existing strategies and initiatives towards representing black and minority ethnic (BME) workers. It will assess how trade unions could develop more effective strategies for greater inclusion of diverse groups of workers within their organisations and at the same time widen the scope for representation at work.

The trade union movement has, for some time, acknowledged the need to increase their reach into BME and migrant communities, which are under-represented in trade unions, and this intention is reflected in recent publications. In recent years, the migrant labour force has increased, accompanied by hostile media reports that have fuelled racism and xenophobia. Challenging racism and social exclusion is a key concern of both government and trade unions. Consequently, there is an urgent need for increased knowledge generated through research into the needs of the diverse communities in the labour market.



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What is the aim of the EMRAW research?

The research will theorise the lack of connection between different social actors (e.g BME workers, community organisations and trade unions). We also will attempt to understand the linkages between, and relative significance of, different forms of social divisions as mediated by ethnicity, class, faith, secularism, gender, age, migration, etc.

In addition, we aim to explore whether barriers exist for some groups of BME

workers in joining or taking part in trade unions and the reason why some workers choose alternative means of accessing support at work.

The research will provide a detailed analysis of the needs and aspirations of different groups of BME workers, whose social networks, length of time since migration, and other factors, may affect the way support for work-based problems, are accessed.

An important facet of the research will concern whether

greater consideration should be given to how collective identities develop and how social networks are used to provide support at work, and if new trade union strategies for organisation and inclusion are needed for BME groups according to their different histories, geographies and social and cultural experiences.

Where is the research taking place?

In an attempt to understand social networks in some detail, and the context in which people live their lives, the research will focus on three London boroughs (although it is accepted that these communities are not geographically bounded- either in terms of work or home life). London was chosen due to the fact that almost half of the UK's BME communities live in the capital and many social networks are long established. The boroughs provide a geographical research framework as useful contextual, quantitative data is collated at this scale (e.g. Census data) and community activity and support networks are often found organised at the scale of local boroughs. We have chosen to conduct in-depth qualitative case studies of locally based ethnic groups, Kurdish in Hackney, Indian in Ealing and Caribbean in Lambeth.

While we could have chosen other ethnic groups in other London boroughs, we have specifically chosen these as in Ealing and Lambeth the ethnic groups represent the largest minority ethnic group in the boroughs with well-established social networks.

The Kurdish communities, although not the largest, represent a significant under-researched ethnic group located in a particular geographical area within the borough of Hackney. In addition, the research team has established contacts in these areas, which will facilitate access to hard to reach respondents. The rationale for the choice of ethnic group by borough allows for an exploration of a range of issues that may influence the way these workers access support for work related issues.

Previous work conducted by the research team has established contact with a number of BME groups. Further groups will be identified with the guidance of the regional TUC, Citizens Advice Bureaux, community law centres and faith groups.

The research will be undertaken with 180 BME workers (identified as having problems at work), community and other organisations providing support for employment-related issues, to explore the reasons given for lack of engagement with trade unions, including reason for joining and participating (or not participating) in union activity. Moreover, the researchers will interview BME workers (union members and non-members) from across a range of unions and employment sectors to understand if there are specific factors that encourage or discourage union membership.

The resulting data will be used to develop proposals as to how trade unions can be more inclusive to BME workers, whose needs may differ from much of the current union membership, and how they might engage in partnerships with community organisations to challenge social exclusion.

It will assess whether barriers to engagement, which have been identified from other research conducted by the applicants, are widespread or have geographical specificity, and whether new ways of organising around BME workers can provide greater representation for employment-related issues.

Working *with* communities and organisations

As this is a collaborative project involving community organisations, BME workers, trade unions, faith communities it is hoped that it will be of direct benefit to these particular groups, but in addition it will also benefit:

- Local voluntary community groups who will be able to find information and access support from a website and photographic exhibitions.
- Trade unions (including race relations and equalities committees).
- Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Law Centres and local community and voluntary groups providing employment related advice.
- Migrant worker support groups.
- Government departments dealing with social exclusion.

All research findings will be fed back to those taking part in the research, and a conference will be held at the end to which all participants will be invited.

Contact details...

If you would like to contact any of the research team to ask questions about the research or to get involved, please contact any of us at the addresses below:

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