



A Double Disadvantage? Minority Ethnic Women in Trade Unions

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and Nupur Mukherjee**

Universities of Bristol & Hertfordshire

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SUMMARY

This report investigates the experiences of minority ethnic women in four trade unions. It is set against a backcloth of vigorous initiatives on tackling racism in trade unions alongside a growing increase in racism and xenophobia in the UK and Europe. The four unions chosen were the Communications Workers' Union (CWU), the lecturers' union (NATFHE), the public services union (UNISON) and Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers' Union (USDAW), unions which represent a wide range of occupational groups. The research involved interviews with national union equality officers, interviews with minority ethnic women activists, analysis of documentary sources and attendance at various black workers' conferences and networks. It was clear that the Stephen Lawrence Task Group had raised the importance of tackling racism in trade unions and provided a range of resources to support union members.

The unions were at different stages of development in their equality initiatives, but all had introduced a combination of separate structures and positive action measures. These structures were important in recruiting and involving black members; the challenge lies in ensuring that their influence reaches the main decision-making structures of the unions. The women interviewed provided a rich picture of why they joined their union and how they became involved. Their commitment to the union and their belief in its importance in protecting people at work was a strong theme. Their experiences of racism and sexism pervaded their working lives. They faced segregation, low and unequal pay, isolation, racism, sexism and harassment. Many expressed the belief that they suffered a 'double disadvantage', with sexist and racist treatment often coming from different directions. Our analysis suggests that their disadvantage is more complex and that they are suffering 'multiple discriminations' resulting in degrees of exclusion from both union and employer structures.

The minority ethnic women in the study also demonstrated the personal benefit they have received as a result of their union involvement in terms of training, personal development and some saw the union as an alternative career. Their commitment to community and collectivism is illustrated, with many women active in a range of community based organisations. The women were actively working to shape their lives and resolutely challenging discriminatory practices. The report concludes with policy recommendations for both trade unions and employers to improve the position of minority ethnic women in their unions and workplaces. We are mindful that there is still a long way to go to ensure the visibility and voice of black women. The importance of maintaining the momentum of recent equality initiatives on ethnicity is vital in the light of enduring hostile factors within organisations and society.

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BACKGROUND

The situation of minority ethnic¹ workers within the labour market and the persistence of institutional racism have become major social and political issues in Britain and the EU. Despite the steady growth of a body of literature dealing with women in unions, there has been surprisingly little research into the position of minority ethnic women within trade unions. This research project aimed to address the dearth of research on minority ethnic women in industrial relations, and engaged with unions' own evolving interest in the more effective representation of their minority ethnic membership. The TUC Stephen Lawrence Task Force boosted union policymaking on ethnicity and racism and provided a rallying point for activists in the black workers' union movement. The research has been carried out at a time of great optimism in the wake of the 1999 MacPherson Report and new legal imperatives in the form of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Equally, it is set against a backdrop of increasing racism and xenophobia throughout Europe. Of further contextual significance is the decline in union density since 1995 among ethnic minority groups – a matter of concern for unions who can no longer take for granted their loyalty to trade unions. Against this background, an exploration of the neglected intersection of gender and race in trade unions is therefore timely.

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The research links together the different labour market experiences of minority ethnic women, their active involvement in trade unions and the development and implementation of equality

¹ In this report we use the neutral term 'minority ethnic' or refer to black and Asian women. We employ the term 'Black' in the political sense in which it is used within the anti-racist union movement, as a unifying signal. In doing so we are following the practice of many of our respondents.

initiatives and anti-racist policies. It therefore aims to:

1. gather information on the experiences of minority ethnic women within trade unions, thereby filling in a gap in the research literature on unions,
2. gain a better understanding of the special problems facing this group of women within workplaces and unions,
3. contribute to our understanding of the relationship between ethnicity, gender and class in relation to employment hierarchies,
4. contribute to academic and political debates surrounding the management of diversity within the workplace,
5. identify the policy implications of the research.

METHODS

Given the lack of research on minority ethnic women, this project was designed as an exploratory, qualitative study, based on a case-study approach. In particular, we wanted to provide the means for some of minority ethnic women's experiences to be voiced. Four unions were selected for the research, CWU (the Communications Workers' Union), NATFHE (the Lecturers' Union), UNISON (public sector union) and USDAW (Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers). They were chosen because they a) covered a range of occupations and sectors, b) organized reasonable numbers of minority ethnic workers, c) were at different stages in the development of policies on race equality and d) reflected unions with both high and low proportions of women as members. UNISON is an acknowledged leader in the field of self-organization and union democratisation. As the UK's biggest union it organizes large numbers of minority ethnic workers in the public services. NATFHE has long had a black members' section and represents professional women. CWU

represents manual workers and office workers, many in high technology fields. It deals mainly with two large employers, BT and Royal Mail. BT employs many minority ethnic workers and has a reputation as a leader in the field of equality and CWU has recently developed a vigorous black workers' movement. Finally USDAW organises many minority women in retail, especially in the London area and is developing black networks and events. It has partnership agreements with Tesco. The research was carried out in two over-lapping phases with a third phase of publicising the findings.

Phase 1 of the study focused on the equality policies of the four unions. Interviews were held with national union officers dealing with equality issues, including paid officials, staff members and lay officers. A considerable amount of union material was collected for each union, e.g., publicity and educational materials, reports, audits and websites.

A number of race equality events organised by the case-study unions and the TUC were attended e.g. union and TUC Black Workers' Conferences, Black Workers' Networks, and get-togethers. These events identified key issues of concern to minority ethnic trade unionists.

Phase 2 involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with women, who were active in their unions. The interviews covered the women's employment and trade union careers, along with details about their family situations, migration histories, ethnic identifications and broader community involvement. The intention was to confine this phase of the research to the London and Bristol areas, although in practice we also interviewed women from the Midlands and the North of England. 55 women were interviewed. Their ethnic origin is set out in Table 1 and the location of the interviewees in Table 2.

Table 1 Ethnic origin of respondents

	CWU	NATFHE	USDAW	Unison	Pilot	Total
African	2	2	4	1	1	10
African-Caribbean	5	4	8	13	2	32
Asian	4	5	2	1	-	12
American	-	-	1	-	-	1
TOTAL	11	11	15	15	3	55

Table 2 Location of respondents

	CWU	NATFHE	USDAW	Unison	Pilot	Total
London	8	10	8	9	1	36
Elsewhere	3	1	7	6	2	19
TOTAL	11	11	15	15	3	55

Phase 3. An on-going part of the research is to disseminate the results widely. It has also involved a consultative process with people engaged in the research to check for accuracy and coverage of issues.

THE UNIONS AND EQUALITY STRUCTURES

Pressures for change

Unions have developed a range of structures, strategies and edicts to recruit and involve black members. These approaches have varied in their impact across the trade union movement and the importance given to them over time. The case study unions are affiliated to the TUC and send delegates

to the TUC Black Workers' Conference. This conference is a means of black workers seeking voice in the wider trade union movement. The importance of black workers to the TUC and its affiliated unions is not a new issue. In 1981, the TUC launched the *Black Workers' Charter*. In 1990, it commissioned a research report on the involvement of black workers in trade unions. In 1993 the TUC Black Workers' Conference asked the TUC to review the progress of unions in implementing the recommendations of this report and also sought information on action with respect to black women. It has been necessary for black workers to continually push to ensure that their concerns remain on the union agenda and this push is a recurrent theme today.

Stephen Lawrence

A more recent drive emerged from the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the extraordinarily tenacious fight of his parents for justice and change. Following the MacPherson Report, the TUC General Council set up the Stephen Lawrence Task Group², which set in train a new era for race initiatives. The Task Group has played an important part in contemporary union initiatives on race; its composition³ reflected the need to give a high profile to race and racism. The broad aim of the Task Group was to tackle institutional racism both in the workplace and the union. The range of reports, conferences and educational initiatives that has emerged from the work of the Task Group is impressive as are the initiatives to embed race equality issues into union agenda e.g. in partnership and organising. The TUC is committed to a 'serious shift of resources to tackling racism in the workplace'. At the same time, public and union awareness of key areas of disadvantage have been highlighted through, for example, the freephone 'root out racism' hotline, the Stephen Lawrence Task Group Web Site⁴, TUC and other union

² Trade unions played a significant role in the Lawrence campaign from the outset. It was initially the Black Workers' Conference, soon to be followed by the wider trade union movement that offered the Lawrence family logistical and financial support.

³ It was chaired by John Monks (the TUC General Secretary) and its membership reflected senior trade unionists including, from our case study unions, the General Secretaries of NATFHE, USDAW and UNISON and a Deputy General Secretary of CWU.

⁴ This includes hotline data, hotline stories and advice on tackling racism at work and best practice examples.

publications. The interest in racism among trade union members is high and illustrated by what was described to us as the 'phenomenally successful' TUC on line course on tackling racism.

Black and Women's Structures

Each union has separate conferences for black workers and women and motions are put to the union annual conference. The four unions have a range of equality initiatives, many of which involve separate structures such as informal networks, training for black members, self organising groups and others which involve explicit inclusion, such as additional seats and reserved seats. Importantly, and not always recognised, separate structures aim to ensure that black workers and their interests are included and represented.

To try to understand the similarities and differences in approach between the four unions we summarise the characteristics and structures of each union in the following section.

Representation

Table 3 shows the proportion of women and black members and the proportion of women in conference and the executive. In no union are women proportionately represented.

Table 3: Representation in the unions

	Total Membership	Women Membership %	Black Membership %	Women in Conference %	Women in Executive %
CWU	300,000	21	7	□	6
NATFHE	65,000	47	4	□	25*
UNISON	1.3 Million	72	10	58	62
USDAW	310,000	60	5	44	53

* At least 25 per cent
SERTUC, March 2000

With regard to racist and sexist behaviour, unions need to challenge discrimination in the

organisations where they have members, but also in their own organisations to ensure that they effectively represent members. The dual duty to examine both their own structures and challenge employers is a task which few organisations have to confront. As will be seen this has been tackled in a serious manner that challenges existing structures in unions.

The CWU

The CWU is a male dominated union. It aims to recruit members from Royal Mail, BT and other telephone companies, cable TV, the Alliance and Leicester and Girobank, although in practice BT and Royal Mail are the dominant employers. Occupational groups represented include: engineering, computing, clerical, mechanical, driving, retail, financial and manual skills.

CWU operates in two contrasting cultures. Sexism in Royal Mail is well documented. The Black Workers' Conference exposed unacceptable levels of racist harassment and bullying. This kind of behaviour is manifested in a variety of ways for example, indecent postcards, and racist comments on frames and walls. There were cases reported where management and union colluded in doing nothing about such practices. BT was a very different scenario. In 2001, BT was cited as the number one-rated company for promoting racial equality in the business environment by Business in the Community's Race for Opportunity (RfO) campaign. Nevertheless, our research suggests that the difference between policy statements and what happens in practice remains a challenge for human resource management in BT and for their recognised unions. During the course of the research restructuring and redundancies have been announced in Royal Mail and further change is heralded in BT. Given some of the later findings in this report, the danger of unfair selection for redundancy is ever rife. Following the Stephen Lawrence Report, the CWU commissioned an independent audit to investigate the state of race equality in the union. Inevitably, the audit led to questioning and accusations in the union, as was

evident at the CWU Black Workers' Conference, but it provides a good platform from which to tackle problems of racism in the union and in workplaces.

Separate Structures. Equal Opportunities Department was formed at the inception of the CWU. There are four Advisory Committees established, dealing with areas of potential discrimination, which feed into a sub-committee of the National Executive Council. These are: the Women's Advisory Committee (WAC); the Ethnic Minorities Advisory Committee (EMAC); the Lesbian & Gay Advisory Committee (LGAC) and the Disability & Special Needs Advisory Committee (DSNAC). The Equal Opportunities Department, as well as dealing with the work of these Committees and being involved in campaigning issues, gives advice to branches on equal opportunities issues and through a hotline number provides assistance to members in respect of harassment and discrimination.

NATFHE

NATFHE recruits academic and academic related staff in a range of educational institutions. Black members in NATFHE face subtle forms of discrimination in colleges and universities, where they are often in a tiny minority, because at about four per cent of the teaching force, black staff are under-represented in both further and higher education. The pay gap identified by the Bett Report (1999) and the increasing use of agency staff and part-time staff create negative conditions for women in the education sector. These disadvantages are compounded by race discrimination for black and Asian women. A high percentage of black women employed by agencies, is part-time or casualised.

Separate Structures. As part of its inclusionary strategies, the NEC has two black representatives, one lesbian and gay representative, and one disabled representative. At least 25 per cent of the NEC must be women. NATFHE is the only union to have had a black president. NATFHE has a range of member networks and aims to use its web-site to

enhance links within and between networks. Of interest to this project was the view that

black women tend to go into black members' groups rather than the women's group. . . they identify a felt oppression based on race not gender.

Indeed it was felt that

white women collude with structures which are disadvantageous to black women.

In NATFHE, members have to choose only one group to join. The collective sense of oppression identified is translated into a more closed approach to black networks in NATFHE. For example, unlike the CWU, only black members are allowed to attend the Black Members' Conference.

UNISON

UNISON is the largest trade union in the UK with a recorded membership of 1.3 million, 72 per cent of whom are women, with an estimated 10 per cent being black. UNISON members work in the public services, utilities and for private contractors providing public services.

UNISON reported that black and women's issues are high on the agenda. Indeed it was said that 'it's a women's union'. Issues that specifically concern black members are redundancies, fixed term contracts and disciplinaries. The context within which UNISON members work provides the backdrop to this picture. The public sector has gone through dramatic and seemingly perpetual change with increasing managerialism, devolution and increasing measurement of services and workers. This is coupled with greater insecurity and in parts labour shortages and high turnover. Such a context provides a fertile environment for discrimination, harassment and bullying.

UNISON has introduced UNISONDirect which may be a spur for membership recruitment but should not be at the expense of the encouragement of local representation.

Separate Structures. UNISON'S approach to equality is enshrined in its constitution. The mechanism for achieving gender equality was threefold: proportionality, fair representation and self-organisation, a combination of inclusion and separateness. The NEC (National Executive Council) has 70 seats plus four additional seats for each self-organising group (SOGs). SOGs for women, lesbians and gay men, black members and members with disabilities exist at national, regional and branch levels and are supported by officers at national and regional level. Election mechanisms ensure that at least 60 per cent of the executive are women, including 14 reserved seats for low paid women. The complexity of UNISON is all the more evident with the recognition that there are 2,000 branches, but of particular importance is that each of these branches is encouraged to have a lay equalities officer. Issues relating to women and black members feed through to the Black Members National Conference or the Women's National Conference or via the regional structure which feed into the NEC and the AC. There is a Black Women's Caucus at UNISON, which is not policy making but offers support, advice and an open network for black women within the union. In mid 2001, there were two black women on the NEC. An equality officer focuses on NEC race policy and the membership of black members, advises and services the SOGs and was on the TUC's Stephen Lawrence Task Group and its Race Committee. There are 15 people with equalities responsibilities in UNISON although it was made clear that all organisers should also deal with equalities. UNISON has developed an action plan that covers bargaining, organising, training and learning and the role of UNISON as an employer.

USDAW

USDAW has about 310,000 members. 60 per cent are women and an estimated five per cent are black members. USDAW members work in a variety of occupations and industries, which include; retail, distributive, manufacturing and service sectors. USDAW, a union with high turnover, has also

increased its membership by nearly seven per cent since 1997. Its major remit is recruitment and selection and the Organising Academy is important to a union that has to recruit a significant proportion of its membership each year in order to stand still.

USDAW has had an equality officer since 1985. Their National Race Relations Committee came into being in 1991 and race equality work was the responsibility of a Race Equality/ Education Officer. We were given the impression that race had been of secondary importance, that the work got done whenever there was the time to do it. It was suggested to us that whilst women's structures were well established, issues on ethnicity had been of secondary importance in the past.

USDAW representatives work in a highly competitive environment. Bullying has increased as a problem for USDAW members directly resulting from competitive pressures on managers having to deliver targets. The push for customer loyalty compounds the problem with bullying around working time arrangements. Both black and white women suffer from the unfriendly working practices. In theory, because of the availability of part-time work, the problem should be less for part-time workers. In practice, part-timers' needs are not prioritised. Part-timers are often employed on low hours contracts with a 16 hours' base that requires them to be flexible on the employers' terms, 'to flex up'.

Separate Structures. USDAW members are now looking inward and 'are pushing on reserved seats'. This would clearly be a departure for the Union and its culture in that we were told that the idea of reserved seats

is quite new and it's very difficult to use that language here.

There has been a positive change in gender composition with the Executive Council (EC) now having nine women but at the time of the interview there were no black members and in memory only

one black person had been on the EC. In recognition of the need to provide structures to encourage black members' activism, there are black members' get-togethers and 'tackling racism' training courses to challenge racism in the workplace.

Separate structures

The range and complexity of structures and initiatives is impressive and as we shall see serves an important need among black members. Nevertheless it is the case the women's structures are dominated by white women and black structures by minority ethnic men. More openness to the involvement of black women is essential if these structures are to represent the diversity of union membership. However, what should not be forgotten, is that these structures alone are not sufficient, they should also link to mainstream decision-making bodies so that they firmly and deeply impact on union policies and practices at national and local level. We were told:

There is a need to move beyond structures and policy to actually changing things in the workplace.

UNION INVOLVEMENT

Why join a union?

We now turn to why the women in our study became involved in the union in the first place.

I've always been in a union. Because I think you need to have something to stand up for you outside the workplace. I think . . . apart from that it's the way I was brought up. My grandfather . . . he was very involved in the union. You have somebody to stand up for you. There's somewhere you can go if you need representation the concept of the union I agree with.

Table 4 shows the range of reasons the women in this study gave for joining a union. What emerges is

the importance of protection, belief in collectivism and the traditions of union joining. But also important is the spur of a particular problem, including race, for black women joining unions.

Table 4. Reasons for Joining a Union

	CWU	NATFHE	UNISON	USDAW	Total
Protection /support	1	4	4	6	15
Trade Union principles	3	6	2	1	12
Automatic/closed shop, manager asked	2	-	5	5	12
Having a specific problem/crisis at work	2	3	3	1	9
Advice of family	3	-	2	1	6
Need to as black	-	-	4	1	5
Advice of friends	-	1	2	-	3
Having a voice	-	-	-	2	2
For knowledge	1	1	-	-	2
To represent women	1	-	-	-	1

Becoming Active

We explored the routes that the women took to becoming active. These reflected the different sectors and the time when they first became more involved in the union.

Equality and Learning Representatives

Many women started out as Health and Safety representatives and then became shop stewards. More recently, the route to activism may lie in new developments around Learning Representatives or Equality Representatives. These new roles may appear more focused and may be easier to attract women to fill them. These developments may be important new means of encouraging women to become active.

Lay Official Encouragement

A number of the women was approached by lay officials, underlying the importance of strong local organisation.

Membership Encouragement

More traditional forms of encouragement were also evident. A number of women were pressed by friends and colleagues to become stewards, particularly because they were outspoken, known as 'strong women' or 'loud-mouths'. They were chosen as they were seen as people who would stand up for themselves and for other people.

I am a very vocal person basically, getting constantly into trouble.

Separate Organisation & Networks.

Women were inspired by self-organising groups, black networks and attendance at black conferences. The value of black networks should not be overstated in that for some women, union involvement came because there were black networks – the union was the means to this involvement. This is important for unions to note in the context of an increasing number of employer led black networks. It is possible that there may be the potential for partnerships between such networks.

I'm really into black issues, trying to promote equality in the university, so that's where my heart lies, I'm not into all this other stuff they are continually doing.

Social Justice

There was a strong sense of social justice both for themselves and for others in the women we interviewed. Some became active because of a personal case, usually harassment or discrimination, and a desire to help others as they had been helped.

I love fighting for people's rights any way, I fight for everyone's . . .

Gendered and Racialised Representation

The inadequate nature of the representation that they observed and experience caused many women to become active. Many existing shop stewards did not take sexism and racism seriously and may not pursue a grievance.

They don't like to take up cases of sex and race discrimination.

The existence of racial banter and its legitimacy by management and local unions caused some women to put themselves forward for election to challenge the existing culture. Challenging racial banter was an important message from the Black Workers' Conference. Black women may face racial banter from one direction and sexist comments from another.

Time on their Hands?

Women with young children are often reluctant to become actively involved in the union because of the demands of home and job. We noted that children leaving home became a catalyst for greater involvement. However, this should not stop unions encouraging younger women to become activists. Amongst the women we interviewed, there were women in their twenties and thirties, some with no children, but some with two or three children who sustained an incredible degree of activism.

ISSUES IN THE WORKPLACE: 'on the till for ever'

When we asked what were the biggest issues confronting black women in the workplace the problem mentioned most frequently was lack of promotion, with other commonly mentioned issues being segregation, low pay, isolation and racism and harassment.

Segregation

Women uniformly described their workplaces as marked by vertical segregation, with few black or Asian people in top posts. Their descriptions reflect a long history of gender and ethnic segregation and its associated link with low pay, such as this account of a hospital:

The cleaners here are all black, black or Filipino, the people in the canteen, black, Filipino, err, clinic clerks, black, Asian you know. African or black nurses get talked down to a lot. Um in the hospital the sisters are all white, we haven't got one black sister in the department.

It is the same story in retail:

As in most retail stores the race composition is mainly black, it's predominantly black, on the lower levels, but like in terms of management It's pure white . . . The store manager is white and the deputy manager is white, the assistant manager is white, the whole of the personnel team which comprises 12 people is white.

Being Passed Over

Even in organisations with strong policies and procedures, managers operated with a wide level of latitude, a latitude that may be open to discriminatory practice. So that for issues of promotion:

It depends on your manager . . .

African-Caribbean women have a very strong work commitment and are more likely to work full-time than white women. The women we spoke to had lots of experience, energy, ambition and many had qualifications that did not correspond with their current work. Particularly in retail, we found many women from Africa with undergraduate and even postgraduate degrees working as store assistants:

As a black woman it's difficult to get anywhere... They want you to remain on the till forever.

There was a widespread experience of being passed over, often linked to a perceived belief in management that black people did not have the abilities for higher positions.

It's always been deemed that if you are black you cannot manage, it's just the assumption that we are not able to do it. I have heard many reasons, people say it is because of our temperament, it's that, you know, you people are all very highly strung

As a result of these blocked opportunities to 'move up the ladder', black and Asian men and women tend to be concentrated in low paid jobs. This applies as much in the college environment as it does in the shop or the office. They compare themselves adversely to white colleagues. This is a special problem for the many women who are bringing up children on their own or who are the main breadwinner. 38 per cent of the respondents were bringing up children without a current partner. Women feel especially bitter about being confined to low paid, low-grade jobs given that so many of them have bothered to acquire 'human capital' in the shape of qualifications and training, without getting the recognition they feel they merit.

Isolation

Isolation is a particular problem for women outside of London with its multicultural population. The women we spoke to in Bristol and the Midlands reported being the only black person in their department or one of a handful. In such conditions it is easy to feel vulnerable and in danger of being excluded. Women felt that it was necessary to keep their heads down and not be perceived as troublemakers. This may account for the very low number of black active members that we were able to identify in these areas. Moreover, while racism was reported by almost everyone, some of the worst stories came from outside London.

Even the 'Customers'

A recurrent theme reported to us was the issue of 'customer racism'. Because of the segregated nature of work and the preponderance of women in the service sector, this is more likely to affect women than men. We use the term 'customer' to cover the recipients of services, for example this would apply whether the customer is a retail shopper, a student, a patient or a recipient of letters. Unions stated to us that awareness of the racist implications of the now dominant 'customer culture' needs to be raised. We were alerted to examples of where there is racist collusion between the 'customer' and management in condoning racism. This collusion is part of the struggle that trade unions need to address. NATFHE has taken an important case to Employment Tribunal holding a college responsible for the racist behaviour of its students because the college did not take steps to prevent that behaviour.

RACISM, SEXISM AND 'MULTIPLE FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION'

The women get the double jeopardy, being a woman and being black

Double disadvantage?

One of key aims of this project was to see if minority ethnic women did indeed suffer a 'double disadvantage' of race and class. Although this concept was advocated by black women activists at a seminar held at the TUC attended by the research team, it has been subjected to criticism, on a number of grounds. First, the term disadvantage tends to imply that women are victims and it may tend to obscure their tremendous achievements and contributions. Second, it may seem to imply that men do not suffer disadvantage, although evidence suggests that young black men are some of the major sufferers of exclusionary

processes. Finally, it does not allow for other forms of disadvantage such as class.

While we acknowledge these problems, we found that many of the women we interviewed did indeed suffer from a compound of racism and sexism in the workplace. Indeed many spoke themselves of double disadvantage, discrimination, or jeopardy. Some even declared themselves to suffer a 'triple jeopardy' of race, gender and some other factor (levels of education, single parenthood, for example). What was clear was that processes of gender, ethnicity and class came together in complex ways and affected women differently in different workplaces and occupational contexts.

Racism

Racism was seen as the major form of discrimination by a majority of the respondents. We were shocked to hear their stories of racism, which appeared much more widespread and overt even than we had expected. Women were subjected to verbal abuse, false accusations, exclusion from social activities and on some occasions physical assault. Most common was what we term 'everyday racism' the persistent use of thoughtless language, stereotypical assumptions and denigration of black people. 'You're all right even though you're black'; 'you behave like one of us'; 'do you sunbathe?'; 'you people are very emotional' are the kind of comments which undermine those who have to hear them continually from their work-mates. African-Caribbean women described how they were seen as 'loudmouths' or 'aggressive' simply because Caribbean speech habits and conversational styles are different from those of white English people. Such racism was an encompassing experience for many women: it came from work-mates, managers and supervisors, and from customers and clients. Sadly, women who worked in retail also reported racism among minority groups, especially the three groups we have interviewed (Africans, African-Caribbeans and South Asians).

Sexism

Sexism was also experienced by a number of the women, though this tended to come to the fore more when women were in a male-dominated environment. It was particularly extreme for women in CWU who worked in 'men's work' such as engineering. Women reported high levels of sexual abuse and harassment: they were subjected to pornographic materials, lockers were broken into and tools stolen. One woman described having to hide in the toilets at breaks to escape harassment.

Sexism, along with racism, was also noted within the unions, where some older white male long-term activists find it hard to adapt to a more egalitarian climate. They were described as patronizing and insulting to women. As one woman said:

And sometimes, when a member has gone, I says 'why did you have that attitude towards her?' 'Oh she don't understand', 'Then why didn't you try to make her understand?' Because I don't think he should be doing a lot of the cases he's dealing with because he has this thing, 'I am the man . . . and you are the woman. Know your place'.

Withholding Opportunities

Often women's demands were ignored and they were denied access to courses and conferences, because branch officers deliberately withheld information.

Like the Chair said today, he didn't want to give funding for this workshop, did he? This black workers' workshop, he didn't think it was necessary. I just think it's just for show, to say that we have done this, we have done that for black people. We have done this, you should keep quiet, we'll give you a bag of crisps and now just shut up . . . Everybody thinks the union is only there for white people.

Some women described being the only woman at a meeting;

So, it's still a struggle, do you know what I mean . . . (the men) they don't want to change. They're there, they get nominated, elected time after time after time.

Still Meeting in the Pub?

Branch officers continued to hold meetings in pubs and public venues where women, especially those of Islamic faith, felt uncomfortable to go. This seems to us a wider issue than union meetings. Alcohol is central to socialising in Britain but the inevitability and necessity of this needs to be questioned. We were told of successful lunch-time and afternoon meetings and gatherings socialising around food that were seen as more enjoyable and considered better alternatives to the 'pub culture'.

'Multiple Discriminations'

Perhaps rather than speaking of 'double disadvantage' we should speak of 'multiple discriminations'. The women we interviewed were extremely aware of the prevalence of sexism, of racism and of occupational hierarchies in their workplaces and were determined to fight against them.

I think there is a difference in the way black women are treated and black men are treated, in terms of the discrimination that people suffer from.. and we all understand that double discrimination.. There's a lot of sexism in existence within the black community, you know, that it's almost seen as an excuse because the women are part of the black community... If you just deal with the racism, it's not going to stop black women being harassed because of their gender. Sometimes obviously it's difficult to tell, if a white person is harassing a black woman, is it because she's black or is it because she is a woman?

COLLECTIVISM, COMMUNITY AND ACTIVISM

Community Involvement

I like the community and I just like being part of everything

The experience of 'double discrimination' had led to many women becoming passionate about social justice. Many of them were very active within their own communities working for various agencies and voluntary groups. They reported being school governors, magistrates, labour councillors, AIDS workers, sports organizers and fulfilled a number of other advocacy roles.

Community and Union

While the minority ethnic women in this study joined unions for a range of reasons (need for protection, closed shop, trade union beliefs, family heritage, advice of friends or because of a particular workplace problem) many of the women went on to become active primarily because of their commitment to racial equality. A typical way into activism was joining a black self-organising group (SOG) or attending a black-only event. Women spoke of being empowered and inspired by these events. Through these events they became enthusiastic attenders at courses and conferences.

I enjoy every minute of it. I enjoy going to meetings, I enjoy going to my courses and finding out from my members what their problems are. So I take all the learning I can get.. It's my way of getting further education . . . I feel much better I feel like I've grown, I've really grown. It's amazing.

Need for Training

The women displayed a thirst for knowledge, which was partly related to their earlier bad experiences of the education system. As one woman stated, the

union can become a vehicle of further education for those who have been excluded from it.

I think there are lots of black people who can really, really contribute a great deal to the unions . . . But they need nurturing, they need information, they need training, they need mentoring, they need to be networked.

A Union Career?

Union activism also offers an alternative career to women who have been blocked and frustrated at work. Many would like to progress and become lay or paid officers, although sadly they had found it difficult to get the training, experience and support they needed to achieve such a goal. This is another example where the link between national policy aspirations and local practice may be weak.

'Star' Recruiters

It is crucial that such women get the support they need because they have so much to offer to unions. On a personal level they offer enthusiasm and apparently boundless energy. Many women had put major efforts into recruiting. Two had set up branches in non-unionised firms. One reported winning a prize as the best recruiter, another had joined up 60 people in the past year. Many told of how they had also encouraged family members and friends out in their communities to join the relevant union in their job. They were becoming advocates for the union. Most importantly such women embody a type of collectivism, which has been lost by many of their white colleagues.

The idea of a union is, I think, very important and the fact that as workers we come together, because that's where your strength will lie as a group as opposed to working as individuals. The union has its strength there.

Their rootedness in community has helped them stand against the general current of individualism which has been seen as such a threat to union organization. Thus black men and women could be an important force for union renewal:

Ours was a true workplace democracy. 'Cause to me you've got to be part of the union. They're our workplace democracies and we can't make those democracies into lived experiences unless we all participate.

BRINGING ON BLACK WOMEN: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Trade Unions

We asked the minority ethnic women we interviewed what the union could do to help them and to develop its provision for minority ethnic members. The following list of policy recommendations is informed by their views and experiences and our own observations:

- 1.** Mentoring of black activists by more experienced activists and officers – a very important and effective way to learn about the union and to develop skills.
- 2.** Support for networking which is a crucial route into participation and activism for black women. More support and information is needed for those who want to set up black and other minority networks.
- 3.** More targeted resources to help women attend conferences, courses and to support SOG activities.
- 4.** Identification of black female activists who are potential lay and paid officers and 'bringing them on' and making them visible.
- 5.** Bringing in black women by appealing to their desire for knowledge and encouraging them to become learning representatives or equality representatives.

6. A centrally based task force to deal with race issues, grievances etc – because branch secretaries are often ineffective in this area.
7. Recruitment campaigns targeted especially at black and other minority members, using black recruiters.
8. Induction pack for anybody taking on a union role explaining procedures and structures in a clear and simple way.
9. Encouraging different meeting places as an alternative to the reliance on pubs.

Employers

Many of the problems identified by the minority ethnic women in this study have important implications for employers and the way that staff is managed. We would therefore make the following recommendations for employers to take to ensure the dignity at work of all their staff and to ensure their full potential is developed:

1. Ensure that EO policies are closely monitored and their effectiveness discussed with the relevant groups of employees.
2. In particular, monitor proportions of minority ethnic employees in promoted positions, and ensure the monitoring results inform future action. Monitoring for its own sake is not sufficient.
3. Offer activities designed to promote self esteem.
4. Provide minority ethnic women (and men) with access to training opportunities and actively encourage them to utilise training.
5. Keep a careful watch out for 'everyday racism' and attempt to eradicate it. Use information, training and supervision to ensure that it is effectively challenged.

6. Ensure that perpetrators of major racist (and sexist) incidents and abuse are appropriately disciplined.
7. Be aware that black men and women in senior positions can be effective role models.
8. Consider alternative venues to pubs for networking activities.
9. Consult with your recognised trade union on equality issues.

AND – treat all your employees – women and men, black and white alike – with dignity and respect.

We need to be heard more, we need to be seen more, to be treated with respect more. We need to be given responsibilities more. Give us a chance, give us a chance. Most of us are mothers, to be a mother it holds a lot of responsibilities attached to it. So if you can be a mother then you can do anything.