

## **Empowering ethnic minorities in the UK construction industry**

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### **Abstract**

One of the major calls for improvement in the construction industry is that of increasing diversity at all tiers of the professional roles. Gender balance and increase in numbers of ethnic minorities in senior roles are among the categories for these calls. The UK construction industry is known to have an underrepresentation of some of these categories of minorities although there are continuous strides to improve the situation. In this paper, challenges that face ethnic minorities as they try to gain promotion to senior management and other decision-making roles is the focus. This research explored current practices and policies adopted by some UK construction firms with particular emphasis on empowerment of ethnic minorities into leadership roles. Using an interpretivist philosophy, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively sampled construction industry professionals. All interviewees were selected based on their ethnic backgrounds and experiences in the construction industry. The underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in leadership roles was widely acknowledged. More importantly covert discrimination was fundamental to most barriers faced by ethnic minorities in the industry. The level of discrimination was identified to be implicit and as such there are no obvious trails to be identified except accounts of individuals closely linked to the issues at hand. There were also indirect barriers created for industry professionals through formal organisational policies. It was identified that the drive for a more diverse workforce and ethnic minority empowerment would significantly benefit both management and employees. More importantly, this will open up the talent pool for professional roles in the industry. Overall, productivity and job satisfaction will directly and indirectly be improved if these sought-after progressive changes can be properly implemented.

Keywords: discrimination, empowerment, equal opportunity, ethnic minorities.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The construction industry remains one of the most valuable industries of today, and represents the building block of a community, being recognised as the largest industry in Britain (Dainty et al., 2007; ONS, 2018) and an important sector that contributes significantly to the economic growth of the UK.

In 2017, the construction sector contributed £113 billion to the UK economy, 6% of the total economic output, employing over 2.4 million workers (7% of the UK total) (House of Common Library, 2018). While some industries have changed profoundly in recent decades, the UK construction industry is recognised not only for its massive contribution to the economic but for overly-complex, lack of empowerment, wasteful practices in its project execution, reluctance in adoption to new ideas, reactiveness in its approach to human skill development, stereotype and discrimination of ethnic minorities in decision making positions. Majority of these issues have been debated in a sequence of popular industry reports, including Latham (1994) and Egan (1998). One of the key issues identified in the construction industry is its lack of inclusion or under-representation of black and minority ethnics in decision making roles (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), 2019).

In order to encourage and eliminate the barriers faced by ethnic minorities seeking a leadership role in the UK construction industry, this research project explores the challenges that lead to

underrepresentation of the groups. Previous research projects (see Steel and Todd 2005; Duncan and Mortimer, 2005; Agapiou et al., 1995) have identified numerous barriers that may be limiting the entry, retention and progression of ethnic minorities into decision making position in the industry, but as the sector evolves, further work is always needed to shed light on the nuances of these everchanging challenges. Thus, the aim of this research project is to contribute to the debate of empowering UK ethnic minorities into leadership roles. It is important to highlight that this study was carried out before the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent 2020 Black Lives Matters protests.

This research project focuses on ethnic minorities in leadership roles in the UK construction industry, roles such as craftsmanship, tradespeople, and administrative roles are beyond the scope of this paper.

## **ETHNIC MINORITIES AND THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY**

The UK construction industry as alluded to earlier, does not have a good reputation record when it comes to inclusive practices whether race or gender related.

### **Perceived image of the industry**

Prejudice is accountable primarily for the lack of diversity and equal opportunity (Fishbein, 2012). According to Gridley et al. (2012), this results in systemic assumptions about certain groups or people of certain cultural background being treated as superior over others. These assumptions in this context are based on race, culture, and ethnicity. Grounded in human behaviour, ethnocentrism and stereotyping and in many cases, it is central to human cognitive processing (ibid). The arbitrary social categorisation and stratification based on salient and physical identification features.

The construction industry poses an unwelcoming problem with an unpleasant and negative image. Previous research suggest employment practices and industrial relation often depicted as casual and informal approach to management of people (Lingard et al. 2008; Townsend et al., 2011), with Loudoun, (2010) adding that high rates of health and safety incidents and as such, the industry has gained the reputation of 'laddish culture' in a white, male dominated environment (Caplan et al. 2009). The stereotypical and ethnocentric tendencies implicit in the activities of the industry's dominant group. This rather negative image of being characterised with stereotyped male values and building site mythology affects the recruitment and empowerment of potential employees from outside the traditional cohort.

Despite positive intent public statements, there has been no significant change concerning equality and diversity. Hence, the importance of workforce monitoring, targets and compliance have been misunderstood; hence, they hesitate to set equality targets. The business case argument shows that construction is under-utilising the skills and talents of the UK population, especially from the ethnic minority groups resulting in decreased organisational efficiency and effectiveness. As a result, the industry's practices continue to foster such strong a perception that ethnic minorities face rejection at the recruitment and contracts offices of construction firms due to ingrained racism and exclusionary practices (Vershina et al., 2018). Ethnic minorities are considered as inferior and itself a barrier tough to surmount the ethnic minority group definitions given and how their cultural practices in the form of languages, religions and different lifestyles perceived as inappropriate (Fernández-Reino, 2016).

### **Exclusion of ethnic minorities**

CITB (2005) revealed that the construction industry is trapped in a cycle of exclusion whilst the industry tends to attribute the low representation of ethnic minorities as the inability to attract new entrants, based on the industry's perceived image as heavy, dirty and tough. Previous research into barriers faced by ethnic minorities in the construction industry also suggested the limited access for entry, lack of support, lack of empowerment and nepotism (CCI, 2008; Ahmed et al., 2008) which favour those individuals with prior family-based links, thus the key to joining the industry is to have a family member within the industry. Unfortunately, potential ethnic minority entrants do not tend to have these links.

The crucial exclusionary practice is that employers are reluctant to take a risk by employing or empowering an individual who does not fit the traditional stereotype (Construction Skills, 2007). Consequently, employers detest the potential legal consequences of a future accusations of racism or harassment, and this may make them reluctant to recruit people from ethnic minority backgrounds (ibid). Also, employers using subtle discrimination and issues of being able to fit in to give white candidates the edge over their ethnic minority counterparts, concerning either recruitment or progression on the job (CEMS, 2002; CABE, 2005).

However, some employers have been known to place ethnic minorities and other individuals of minority backgrounds in vantage positions at work for 'duplicity'. This practice is commonly known as 'tokenism'.

### **Ethnic Minority as Token Employee**

In affirmative or positive action application, ethnic minority groups face the problem of being the "token" employee group representative rather than an individual who attained their position based on merit or equal rights (King et al., 2010). According to Renzetti and Curran (1992), this action may be associated with stereotypes, and consequently, the individual becomes a victim of ridicule and discrimination. Kanter (1977) regards tokenism as being boundary heightening, where the workers of the dominant group (white males in the context of the construction industry) exaggerate the difference between them and the token (ethnic minority) employees. For example, the exclusion of Muslims from informal networks of which membership is essential for career enhancement by organising social events that do not revolve around the dominant culture, such as drinking after work (Bertoli et al., 2020). The project manager has the duty of care to create a greater level of inclusion of non-traditional entrants in all the activities of his project.

Having explored existing literature on the industry's image and barriers faced by ethnic minorities in gaining entry into the industry as well as lack of progression, the next section considers the method adopted in achieving the research aim.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

The problematic nature, as indicated by the literature review of empowering UK ethnic minorities into a leadership role (which is the area of study), has noted human elements and their interactions as the underlying factors. An interpretivist philosophy is adopted to help with the meaning that individuals attach to events. The research took on a qualitative approach. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to identify potential participants. Using this approach, twelve construction professionals interviewed for this study. Semi-structured interviews allowed the research to explore the previously identified themes in the literature review as well as allowing for the exploration of emergent themes and ideas, hence not only relying on pre-identified concepts. All respondents were based in the UK. A wide range of experience was sought after to acquire a variety of opinions. Interview questions explored views in areas including equal opportunities, unfair treatment and how practices can improve. Although there are statutes against discrimination, previous literature has always identified the abundance of discriminatory practices particularly when dealing with ethnic minorities.

Thematic analysis was adopted for the data analysis. A focus on the intricate meaning across the transcribed data, allowed for a better understanding of the shared meanings and experiences from the interviewees' responses (Aboagye-Nimo et al., 2013). Thematic analysis carried out on the data collected helped in systematically identifying, organising and offering insight into patterns of themes across the data (Braun et al., 2014). Stringent ethical considerations were made in the study. In further ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, Peter Pan (PP) was used as a pseudonym for all interviewees. Standards of the Social Research Association were strictly adhered to.

### **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

All interviewees have a wide range of experiences in the construction industry, and from various construction firms. They had worked from semi-large to large construction company. Due to the interpretivist nature of the study, it was important to understand respondents experience in the industry as well as their educational background. This would offer better understanding of their opinions as well as their perceived experiences. The qualitative data has undoubtedly outlined the critical impact white male-dominated cultures have upon ethnic minorities in attempting to stay and progress into leadership roles. Some respondents outlined the negatives effect of discrimination, and lack of empowerment with particular emphasis in on-site practices such as bullying. These are all fundamental barriers to the increasing lack of representation among new entrants.

*Table 1: Interviewees' profile*

<b>PP#</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Self-ascribed ethnicity</b>
PP1	Assistant Site Manager	Under 25	3	Diploma	Black African
PP2	FO Manager	31-40	4.5	Postgraduate	Black African
PP3	Director	41-50	27	Degree	Irish
PP4	Project Manager	31-40	15	Postgraduate	Black African
PP5	Technical Manager	31-40	5	Sch. cert	Black African
PP6	Supervisor	40-50	12	Diploma	Portuguese
PP7	Site Manager	25-30	3	Degree	Bangladeshi
PP8	Apprentice Site Manager	31-40	8	Degree	Black African
PP9	Senior Site Manager	41-50	9	Postgraduate	Black African
PP10	Document Controller	Under 25	4	GCSE	Black Caribbean
PP11	Site Supervisor	25-30	6	Degree	Pakistani
PP12	Director	Over 50	30+	Degree	British

The interviewees expressed genuine interest in joining the construction industry, although none of them were employed through formal or officially arranged Human Resources interview procedures. Some interviewees were employed as part of the council ethnic minority quota while others were employed due to recommendations from personal contacts. The rest were also employed based on recommendations from contacts of friends.

### **Progression in the workplace**

Most of the respondents expressed difficulty in ethnic minority progression into decision making position. Views expressed included:

*[White colleagues] do not allow us to progress because maybe they think we [ethnic minorities] will take their jobs - (PP3)*

This showed some implicit reservations that some ethnic minority respondents harboured with regard to progression or promotions at work. This was also noted by Greed (2000) and Dainty (1998) as a barrier to ethnic minority workers in the industry. Thus, the view expressed by PP3 and others was not simply an assumption.

Other interviewees added:

*Progression to higher position means moving from company to other as I have done to attain Project Manager position, but obviously, I cannot move as finding another job with the current climate of Brexit is very difficult - (PP4)*

PP4 believes it is difficult to progress in the same organisation. He adds his past experience of having to switch organisations in order to attain a more senior role. The notion of changing employers if one wants to move up the ladder was not so simple as explained by PP1. The economic climate i.e. readily available employment opportunities greatly affect the ease of ethnic minorities progressing in the industry because some believed they had to change organisations. In a more drastic situation, some interviewees were terrified of losing their jobs.

*I cannot afford to lose this job so I will do anything to make sure I stay at work, even if it requires me to work seven days and get paid for five. The company took a chance on me, and I will not throw that away - (PP1).*

The above shows that some workers are in a position whereby they are greatly concerned about losing their jobs. This is reinforced by the concept of workers gaining roles through personal contacts. PP1 did not believe he had the right contacts that could enable him to gain another job at the time of the interview.

### **Equal treatment**

During the interview process, it was also discovered that many companies possessed equal opportunity statement and policies, but only a few practiced what was covered in the document. Most respondents stated that they believe the policies were not adhered to. This shows a discrepancy between implementing equal opportunity policies and formulating organisational policies when dealing with matters relating to ethnic minorities. However, some interviewees expressed that they were not aware of specific policies that covered equal opportunities for ethnic minorities.

*Having developed an equal opportunity policy means the company has thought of implementing the policy, and as such, they are responsible people, but many companies do not have such policy - (PP12).*

One important point raised was overt resentment from white male peers and managers toward ethnic minorities. All of the respondents acknowledged the discrimination of ethnic minorities faced include but was not limited to racist name-calling, jokes, harassment, banter, bullying, intimidation and in some cases, physical abuse in the form of violence. A typical example of behaviours considered inappropriate was mocking ethnic minorities racial origin and ill-mannered accent imitations. The industry has frequently tolerated and generally accepted such culture which points the sector as one where racism could prevail.

Workplace culture was another point raised by some interviewees as maintaining the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities. Those in decision-making positions were overtly hostile towards ethnic minorities as they resisted changes to policies and procedure which might threaten the dominance of white colleagues in the organisation, hence ethnic minorities were forced to comply with such uncomfortable practices. Many of the respondents expressed the feeling that they received less support compared to their white peers and that white colleagues regularly received more feedback on their performance. PP12 added that some managers feared being labelled as racist for giving negative feedback to ethnic minorities. On the other hand, many respondents pointed out that negative feedback was used in many cases to prevent ethnic minority progression to a leadership role.

As part of unfair treatment, respondents complained of the stereotypical assumption made about them that ethnic minorities are lazy and do not know how to carry out their jobs effectively. They believed they required more academic qualifications and also had to '*put in double the effort*' as their white peers '*in order to be taken seriously*'.

### **Overall culture change**

The key to attracting and retaining ethnic minorities was agreed to be intertwined with and overall change in the industry's culture. Industry ingrained practices, for instance, unfair terms and conditions and word-of-mouth recruitments were cited as being in need of change if the industry is to be regarded as a sector providing a fair and equitable workplace environment. Many of the ethnic minorities experienced both direct and indirect discrimination. As stated in an earlier section, overt discrimination in the form of racial name-calling, jokes, harassment, banter, bullying and intimidation is prevalent in certain workplaces. In addition, covert discriminatory practices including stereotyping and exclusion from groups, which hinder ethnic minority career progression. The practice of exclusion was also identified.

*They had secret meetings and did not inform us [of what was discussed], except when they want our help (PP7)*

PP7 believed this practice was clearly preventing him from accessing vital information and opportunities that would prevent him from progressing to a decision-making role. From the data and opinions of the participants, a change in leadership strategies and an increase in recruitment of ethnic minorities would be imperative in the eradication of unfair treatment.

#### *Leadership*

Ensuring equal opportunity across the industry will create a real change for ethnic minority access, treatment and progression within the sector. Fundamentally, these changes required, only become apparent if driven by a well-developed business case for diversity rather than externally imposed legislation. The fundamental prerequisite in achieving the necessary change required to create a fair and equitable workplace environment is a full commitment of equal opportunity by the industry leaders.

#### *Practice and Policies*

The industry needs to develop robust, pragmatic and comprehensive equal opportunity and diversity policies as this will be invaluable to the industry's evolution. This research project suggested that construction organisation take the lead (having robust policies relating to their employees) and from clients (insisting on diversity and equality measures being in place before tendering for a project). The implementation of an industrywide code of practice was suggested as a useful way of communicating the rights and responsibilities of individuals across the entire sector and beyond.

#### *Progress Monitoring*

The above progress needs to be monitor in ensuring appropriate action are taking place and that any problem areas identified at an early stage can be rectified. Consequently, it sends out a strong message regarding the industry's commitment based on what is expected and the importance of achieving it i.e. ensuring equality by empowering ethnic minorities in the industry. Ideally, setting up a central group aimed at progress monitoring across the whole sector and identifying appropriate diversity targets for the underrepresented group. The central group should also set up a benchmark among construction companies so that diversity could be measured in relation to size and operations.

#### *Discrimination in the workplace*

This research sought to begin the discourse of empowering ethnic minorities in the construction industry. By highlighting the positive aspects of empowering workers, it is important to highlight the ongoing challenges as well. Some of these have been presented throughout the paper, but this section will compile the revelations presented by interviewees. In cases of discrimination, it is noteworthy to identify that these practices do not always have to be direct or explicit, as the implicit or perceived acts are equally 'unacceptable'. The discrimination endured by the interviewees led to the development of following themes:

- Exclusion from work communications

- Lack of recognition for productivity
- Organisational equality policies as tick box exercise
- Job insecurity
- Perception of unequal treatment for 'white' colleagues in comparison to others
- Effective leadership

Although interviewees highlighted their challenges, it was evident that they had not raised these concerns directly with decision-makers of their organisation. Raising these issues and observing management's reactions/responses would enhance the workplace discussion significantly. A key topic that is thus worth exploring in future research is the effect of candid communication and the promotion of organisational transparency on the empowerment of ethnic minorities in construction firms. However, these were beyond the scope of the current study and these have been recommended for future research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The UK construction industry has made conscious efforts to increase numbers of ethnic minorities it attracts in recent years, but this has not been reflected in the area of leadership roles (which is explored in this study). Findings from this paper suggested that ethnic minorities still face considerable barriers at every stage of their careers.

The experiences of ethnic minorities described in this study illustrate a belief of severe discrimination against them. The discriminatory workplace environment where ethnic minorities face extensive barriers to entrance and progression within the construction industry needs to be eliminated. In the construction industry's informal culture (e.g. amongst most small and medium sized firms), the danger of institutional discrimination occurs as noted by Oakley, (1999):

*"Institutional discrimination can take place through routine practices, informal culture or official policies of an organisation".*

In addressing the current exclusionary and discriminatory environment, this research project recommends a holistic approach starting from leadership structures and a conscious increase in the intake of ethnic minority employees.

Clearly, the industry suffers from institutional discrimination against ethnic minorities, which could have damaging implications for the sector's competitiveness, image, and future development as the number of white workers declines in an era of skills shortage. The increasing awareness of what constitutes direct and overt discrimination, and how a particular section of society is continuously excluded through the traditional system and practices is a step in the right direction. For fairness and equitability of ethnic minorities, the new awareness must be made to reflect throughout the entire construction industry.

This study is part of a larger study that will utilize an action research approach in future to identify the suitability of implementing measures that are aimed to improve the ethnic minorities' abilities to attain more senior roles in the industry.

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