Race for Opportunity

Leadership and Cultural Identity

An exploration into the perceptions of BAME women in the UK workplace
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1. Introduction

As a follow up to Race for Opportunity's (RfO) research 'Race to Progress: Breaking down barriers' released in 2011, the Institute of Education (IoE), University of London was commissioned to conduct some further research into the barriers faced by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) senior women focusing on leadership and identity with a particular emphasis on Bangladeshi and Pakistani women. As part of the project, White women who held senior leadership positions were also interviewed to ensure their views were included and to help understand whether racial identity actually had an impact on one's leadership style.

BAME women are seen as an ‘invisible’ group within organisations. Too often they are not represented in any significant way on employer management programmes or bespoke development and leadership initiatives.

We are not the first organisation to look at BAME women, but we are the first seeking to add insight into leadership and how cultural identity influences perceptions and experiences within the UK context.

Economic activity in the UK is a mixed picture with Pakistani and Bangladeshi women experiencing some of the lowest levels of employment in the country.

Methodology

130 women in leadership positions were interviewed or took part in focus groups to examine notions of identity and approach to leadership. The respondents were drawn from both private and public sector organisations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi/Pakistani</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black African/ Black Caribbean</td>
<td>40</td>
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The eight focus groups lasted between 1½ - 2 hours, each comprising 8 – 10 women. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in private offices or via telephone. These interviews lasted 30 minutes. All focus groups and interviews were transcribed.

The respondents were approached through the Race for Opportunity Champion Network. Participants self-identified as organisational leaders. All the women who participated were aged between 25 – 60 and categorised into senior or middle leaders. Their experience in the workplace ranged from five to 25 years. Their positions included CEOs, partners of professional firms, business owners, senior civil servants and senior public sector workers.

The semi-structured interview guide comprised a set of 12 open questions which examined constructions of leadership, barriers to leadership, exploration of personal
identity, perceived impact of identity on leadership style, and perceived differences between minority and majority ethnic women as leaders.

The Questions

The research study was initially aimed at BAME women that took part in the RfO Mentoring Circles. However, as more people became aware of the study it widened to include more leaders from BAME backgrounds. In addition to this it was crucial to seek the views from White women leaders on the notion of identity and leadership so their comments were also included. A different set of questions were asked for both sets of women as it was not a not a comparative study. (See appendix 1 for questions).

2. Key findings

- All respondents agreed that leadership was defined by the culture of the organisation, which in most cases was the western model of leadership i.e. White and male.

- 90% of BAME women believed they needed to leave their culture behind to move forward in the workplace.

- White women leaders did not see racial or ethnic identity playing any role in the notion of leadership, nor was any reference made to the need to understand other people's culture as part of being an effective leader.

- White women spoke about the need for vision, good teams making decisions and being able to inspire others.

- 70% of Bangladeshi/Pakistani women believed they were discriminated against by both White and Asian people in their organisation creating a dilemma between their own cultural beliefs and attempting to fit the company culture.

- 20% of all BAME respondents below senior management stated they received help from their line managers. In stark contrast to this over 75% of White women stated their continued growth was due to having a supervisor, champion, mentor or coach.

- 80% of BAME women believed their own cultural identity had impacted on the way they lead teams within the organisation. White women were less conscious of their identity and identified more with personality traits and leadership styles than with cultural identity.

- Only 50% of BAME women viewed their organisation as a place for progression for BAME staff.

- 40% of Bangladeshi/Pakistani women reported that they believe the clothes they wear for religious reasons shaped the way in which they are seen, with assumptions being made.
More than 18% of BAME women believed they were overlooked for high level projects with these opportunities going to White counterparts.

30% of respondents from the public sector felt that their particular skills and experiences were underutilised in the organisation with many having gained leadership experience outside the workplace in voluntary positions such as board members.

All of the women interviewed believed being valued was a fundamental ingredient in being fully accepted as part of the team and organisation.

All respondents agreed that progression only took place when there was an opportunity to develop and build excellent internal and external relationships.

40% of BAME women believed having a BAME mentor at a senior level within the organisation was crucial to the success of BAME women in organisations.

3. Leadership definition

The respondents were asked to provide a workable definition for leadership. The answers that they gave were not clear cut. Instead there was a mixture of culturally related answers that would not fit the normal discussion around leadership. However, there were certain generic words used to describe leadership:

“Supervise, inspirational, provide aspirations for others” (All Women)

Several women spoke about leading diverse groups of women and how that impacted on what they saw as leadership. Interestingly, some of the BAME women were at odds with defining themselves as leaders and referred to the western concept of leadership to assist with denying that they were already leaders. (See appendix 2 for Western leadership styles).

Thoughts on Leadership

"The person who sets direction, that sets the strategy which makes sure the people are pulling together and actually sets the way of working" (Senior White Woman Leader)

"You have to make people respect you, this includes your own black people and a lot of time is involved." (Senior Black African Woman Leader)

“I think the way women define leadership is totally different from a man. We still have this way of thinking that is defined by a man and actually a woman’s way of leading is so different to the way that a man does." (Senior Asian Woman Leader)

“I think that leadership is having the passion to make things better.” (Senior Black African Woman Leader)
80% of all the women viewed leadership as the opportunities that you are given through both the external and internal factors of socialisation - in other words the nature v. nurture debate of whether you are born as a natural leader or can be developed as a leader.

In contrast, among the White women leaders, there was no mention of racial or ethnic identity playing any role in the notion of leadership. The White women leaders who were interviewed spoke about the need for vision, good teams, making decisions and being able to inspire others. There was no reference made to the need to understand other people’s culture as part of being an effective leader.

4. Challenges in asserting the role of leader

All of the women interviewed were asked whether they ever experienced any barriers in their journey to becoming a leader. None were able to deny facing challenges as a minority leader and most had examples of personal experiences that could be included in the discussion. 70% of BAME women felt that their leadership style was being questioned in the eyes of others whom they believed held stereotypical and prejudiced views on how they perceived a BAME woman should lead. 20% of respondents (mainly Asian) felt that high level leadership positions were indirectly not being made available if they had childcare responsibilities.

70% of Bangladeshi/Pakistani women who attended focus groups believed that they were being discriminated against by White and Asian people in their organisations. This meant that that were being pulled in one way by their own cultural beliefs along with attempting to fit the company culture.

White respondents were asked whether they thought employees responded differently to them as White women compared to BAME women. Interestingly, most of the White respondents admitted that this was not something that they had thought about before. However the vast majority believed that it was an important question that needed to be asked.

20% of the BAME respondents who were still embarking on the journey to becoming senior leaders received help from their line managers. In contrast to this at least 75% of White women interviewed were able to state that their continued growth was because of either having a supervisor, sponsor, mentor or coach. Much of this support came from the organisation believing that the person had real potential.

Thoughts on challenges

“I think that there is also an issue around people thinking that ethnic minority women cannot lead because they may appear to have less confidence or assertiveness or because of coming across quieter, they may not speak up, perhaps not expressing their views as forcefully as their White counterparts.”
All of the women who participated in the interviews and focus groups were asked whether they thought their own identity had an impact on their leadership style. 80% of respondents believed that their own identity had impacted on the way they lead teams within their organisations.

Interestingly, whilst BAME women were able to identify easily with this question the White women interviewed appeared less conscious of their identity and therefore found the question difficult to answer. In response to the question on identity, White women spoke about personality traits. Therefore the White women identified more with personality traits than with cultural identity. The women from BAME backgrounds have been accustomed to being asked the question “Where are you from?” meaning not geographically but where are their biological parents from, or “you speak well -how did you learn English so well?” In contrast to this all of the White women that were interviewed except for the ones that had an accent or a surname that was ‘ethnically’ sounding had never experienced such detailed questioning.

Thoughts on Identity

“Sometimes I go to places and people will say “do you realise you are the only black person here?” I do not really notice because over time I have built up a strong sense of identity of who I am and how other people perceive me. I say always retain who you are.”

(Asian Woman Leader)

“Part of my identity is also my experience of life, it makes me who I am, not just my colour and gender - so I would put that on an equal par as being a woman, being Black and my experiences”

(Black Caribbean Woman Leader)
6. Workplace culture

60% of the women believed that their workplace environment was very much about who spoke the loudest, and who knew the right people which determined who had the most influence. They felt that, to survive, you needed to be an effective net-worker. In addition to this 60% of the women saw that breaking through the ‘silent wall of knowledge’ was a real challenge for women and particularly for BAME women, who felt they were often not made aware of the ‘unwritten rules’ of an organisation. 80% of the BAME women said they were the only person of colour at their grade within their building.

Cultural stereotyping in leadership

Many of the women that took part in the study commented on the way in which they were perceived as leaders. When some of the senior women were appointed to their current position they said the challenge was breaking down the preconceived stereotype that their team members held onto. Instead of thinking that the team should have been developed in understanding diversity, the issues that arose focused on the BAME leader and not the team. Therefore they felt the BAME leader was not seen as competent for the position. The following quotes highlight some of the BAME women’s experiences.

Thoughts on stereotyping

“I am an Asian woman, plus I wear a headscarf and I do think some people find it difficult to relate to that. I think once you know what you are talking about people will say she knows what she is doing, but it is breaking through that barrier and the challenges.”
(Senior Asian Woman Leader)

“I think you are prepared, as a Black person, if you are managing White people to come across a couple of issues. What made it really interesting was the fact that Black people weren’t receptive to me leading them as well. This came as a bit of a surprise. So you end up with a situation where they either expect you to let them do what they want without you doing anything to challenge what they are doing...”
(Public Sector, Senior Black Caribbean Woman Leader)

Communication awareness and access

Over 18% of BAME women managers expressed concern that they were being held back in the organisation. These women believed that they were recruited for their skills and experience, however, the opportunities to work on high level and specific projects never extended to them.
80% of public sector women (that were in middle management) stated their particular skills and experiences were underutilised and for many their leadership experiences were gained outside the organisation in voluntary positions such as board members.

29% of Asian women felt there was a need to be compliant as workers in the organisation. Many situations led to the Asian women waiting to be told that they were good or that they should go for a position. Interestingly, the notion of compliancy was voiced more firmly in the South than the Midlands or North of England. The professional BAME women in the Midlands and North of England appeared to be more politically aware and more forceful in ensuring that their voice was included in the organisation. Both internal and external networks of support for BAME leaders appeared to be more embedded across the Midlands and North of England than in the South. However, coping with childcare and work life balance was mentioned more frequently by Asian and White women. Black African and Black Caribbean women did not mention this as a barrier at all.

Training and development

At least 70% of the women interviewed mentioned that there was some kind of development programme in place for employees to attend. Some of the training on offer included a mixture of internal and external management programmes that consisted of one day – 12 months funded post-graduate courses. 70% of BAME women accepted that in order for them to attend any of these programmes it would depend on the kind of relationship that had been established with their line manager as their line manager’s support was crucial to their overall development. At least 30% of the BAME women mentioned that their organisation did not have formal leadership or management programmes and that instead the emphasis was on you to prove yourself as an asset to the organisation. Women from the public sector mentioned the need to be nominated by line managers to progress through the different grades. Some of the organisations were moving towards e-learning as a way to reduce costs in workforce training.

Key findings from RfO's 'Race to Progress: Breaking down barriers' research also highlighted inadequate training for ethnic minority workers. The survey revealed ethnic minority employees had been on fewer than two training schemes in a year and almost a third of Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani workers had not been on any training course in the last year. White workers and interestingly African workers who had been on more than two.

Being valued

All of the women were asked the following question: Do you consider being ‘valued as an important element of being accepted in the organisation? If so what does being valued look like? For all of the women interviewed, being valued is seen as a
fundamental ingredient in being fully accepted as part of the team and organisation. In essence, being valued meant receiving respect and appreciation for the generation of new ideas and hard work.

Thoughts on being valued

“It is really hard to put it into a bottle, but you really know when someone values you. There is something in the tone of voice.”
(Private Sector Senior Asian Woman Leader)

“Oh definitely, recognition of what I’m doing, what I’m contributing to the success. It could also be that people approach me for my opinions on things. That I am asked to take things on as well, a project or something like that, so valuing my contribution and my abilities.”
(Private Sector White Woman Leader)

“I like my organisation to be valued as well and I like the people in the organisation to be valued in exactly the same way I hope to think that everyone in the organisation values each other.”
(Private Sector African Caribbean Woman Leader)

“It is really important to me that the people I am leading or have chosen to come into my organisation because they like my leadership, they value that leadership”
(Private Sector Senior Asian Woman)

RfO’s ‘Race to Progress: Breaking down barriers’ research found that feeling valued, proper pay and adequate training were the three basic demands shared by workers from all backgrounds. See chart 1 below:
Support mechanisms for women within organisations

All of the women agreed that progression only took place when there was an opportunity to develop and build excellent internal and external relationships. Much of the leadership progression was through the agreement of line managers – therefore, in order to move on, it was all about relationships and whether the women fitted the organisation. Having a mentor and receiving good mentoring from other BAME women already ‘on the top of the game’ was seen as crucial to the success of BAME women in organisations by 40% of the BAME women interviewed. Both White and BAME women had underestimated the importance of marketing themselves and networking in the appropriate social circles. 40% of the women were aware of some kind of leadership or talent programmes and believed that these were available to some women inside of the organisation.

RfO’s ‘Bridging the Value Gap’ toolkit was created as a conversational tool for senior leaders, line managers and individuals to bring value to direct relationships and organisational culture.

RfO’s ‘Race to Progress: Breaking down barriers’ research found that more than a third of workers want a mentor, but do not have access to one.

The report recommended that an ‘active’ sponsor approach is something businesses should consider as a valuable tool alongside their mentoring activities. The role a sponsor can play is to introduce individuals to different networks and actively promote the individual’s skills and talents within their sphere of influence to open doors and facilitate progression.
7. Conclusion and recommendations

This report provides an examination into the leadership perceptions of women who are leaders in public, private and voluntary sector organisations. The research has identified the common features which are found among successful women leaders. They include:

- Line-managers that understand them.
- The need to gain leadership experience both internally and externally.
- Importance of having a mentor.
- Opportunities to be sponsored by a senior manager.

The research shows that some of the factors enabling women leaders to build successful careers are found within their organisations while others are external. The organisational structure, working environment, mentoring activities, line manager’s confidence and leadership style are all factors which can promote success, according to the women participants in the study.

“I think that something needs to be done about equipping Black women to navigate around organisations. Unfortunately, we do not have the same networks e.g., our fathers were not necessarily bankers and so we don’t have the same network circles. This means we have to learn how to play the game as nobody is telling us.”

(Private Sector, Senior Black African Woman Leader)

Opportunity Now’s recent research piece 'What holds women back? Women and men's perceptions of the barriers to women's progression' gives a comprehensive review into this particular gender issue. View this online at: http://www.bitcdiversity.org.uk/barriers
Recommendations

Action for Employers

1. Employers to engage in benchmarking and to use workplace data to identify demographic information on BAME women at different levels within their organisations and identify where development/interventions are needed to map progression rates and to create inclusive action plans.

2. Employers to actively review all of their gender programmes and initiatives for inclusion of women from diverse Black and Minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds and put action plans in place to address zero or low inclusion.

3. Organisations need to embed cultural awareness/training into all people management activities and manuals.

4. Senior/Board level and Line managers to engage in mentoring with BAME women within the organisations talent pipeline to better understand the notion of leadership and cultural identity for ethnic minority individuals in the UK and the opportunities and challenges that arise as a result.

5. Employers to offer mentoring to all employees.

6. An ‘active’ sponsor approach is something employers should consider as a valuable tool alongside their mentoring activities. The role a sponsor can play is to introduce individuals to different networks and actively promote the individual’s skills and talents within their sphere of influence to open doors and facilitate progression.

Action for Individuals

7. Individuals and employers to consider introducing mentoring circles as a tool for peer mentoring, development and professional networks.

8. Actively seek out sponsors both internally and externally.
### QUESTIONS (1:1 interviews)

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<tr>
<th>BAME</th>
<th>WHITE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong> How would you define the term leadership?</td>
<td>How do you define leadership?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2.</strong> Is your current position a leadership role? If yes what characteristics determine this?</td>
<td>When did you first recognise yourself as a leader?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3.</strong> Are you working in a voluntary/unpaid capacity at leadership level in order to gain leadership skills? If yes, please give examples.</td>
<td>Have you experienced any barriers in your journey to becoming a leader?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.</strong> Have you ever encountered any challenges in asserting the role as a leader? If so, please describe them.</td>
<td>Do you think that your own personal identity has an impact on your professional identity, and if so, how?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5.</strong> Do you feel that your skills/experiences are being fully used?</td>
<td>Do you think that people respond differently to you as a White women leader than let’s say a BAME woman? If so, in what way is the response different?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6.</strong> During your time at your current employment have you had the opportunity to acquire the skills to hold a leadership position?</td>
<td>Do you think that ethnic minority women may face particular barriers to being perceived as leaders?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7.</strong> What kind of training is available to potential leaders in your organisation? (7b) - Is there a formal procedure for applying for a leadership role?</td>
<td>Why do you think there are so few BAME women managers / leaders at the senior level in organisations?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>8.</strong> Are there any other women from your cultural background working in your team/ at your level in the organisation?</td>
<td>Do you consider being ‘valued ‘as an important element of being accepted in the organisation? If so what does being valued look like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9.</strong> Do you think that ethnic minority women may face particular barriers to being perceived as leaders?</td>
<td>Have you taken a different route into employment due to discrimination in your preferred profession (e.g. under qualified to have a management position in current role, so cant apply for higher posts. Adequately skilled/qualified in preferred field or study or profession)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. Do you consider being ‘valued ‘as an important element of being accepted in the organisation? If so what does being valued look like?

11. Have you taken a different route into employment due to discrimination in your preferred profession (e.g. under qualified to have a management position in current role, so can’t apply for higher posts. Adequately skilled/qualified in preferred field or study or profession)

12. Would you recommend your workplace/employer to women from a BAME background? If not, why not?

As a leader have had the opportunity to receive mentoring/coaching? If so was the mentoring/coaching on a personal or professional basis?

Do you consider a mentor/coach to be a sufficient ingredient for effective leadership?

QUESTIONS (Focus Groups)

1. How would you define the term leadership?
2. How much of your identity forms part of your own leadership style?
3. Is individual identity valued within the organisation as a way to progress – or in your option, is the only way to progress by adopting the ‘culture ‘or and the identity of the organisation and leaving your own identity at home?
4. How important is the notion of ‘family’ to your current employer?
5. Do you feel that your cultural or ethnic background means you have a different conception of leadership?
6. Do you feel that you needed any specific support because of your ethnic background?
7. Have you taken a different route into employment due to discrimination in your preferred profession? (e.g. under qualified to have a management position in current role, so cant apply for higher posts. Adequately skilled/qualified in preferred field of study or profession)
8. Has balancing work and home life been difficult due to cultural/traditional responsibilities and expectations, and has this become a barrier to you pursuing promotion?
9. Did you feel able to negotiate your starting pay? If not, why not?
10. Do you feel valued at work? If not, why not?
11. Would you recommend your employer to women with your ethnic background? If not, why not?
# Western Leadership Styles

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Theories</th>
<th>Strengths:</th>
<th>Weaknesses:</th>
<th>Personal Reaction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Path-Goal Theory</td>
<td>Using a Path-Goal Theory approach to leadership has several positive features. Firstly, this theory attempts to incorporate the motivation principles of the expectancy theory and second its model is practical and easy to use.</td>
<td>Although there are several positive aspects of Path-Goal Theory, it fails to explain the different roles of leaders and managers. The time constraints to effectively deploy is very narrow.</td>
<td>Although in an attempt to clearly visualize the vision, I sometimes get caught up in the overall progress and save little time to consider the individual.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Situational Theory</td>
<td>Situational leadership provides a straightforward approach and is easily used. Another strength of this approach, is the fact that it teaches leaders flexibility.</td>
<td>Situational leadership has been criticized for several reasons, one the lack of evidence in its reliability. Second, it does not fully address interaction of groups verse individuals.</td>
<td>The situational approach has flexibility and allows leaders to place individuals into a workflow where they will accomplish the most, or be most productive.</td>
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<td>Transformational Theory</td>
<td>Transformational leadership theory provides a broader view of leadership, it places a strong emphasis on followers needs, values, and morals.</td>
<td>Some suggest that this approach treats leadership as a personality trait rather that a behavior. It is also unclear as to whether or not this leader is a visionary.</td>
<td>I am able to communicate the positive and the negatives about implementing new technologies. I offer to staff the reasons why we need to change and how it will affect them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership Theories</td>
<td>Strengths:</td>
<td>Weaknesses:</td>
<td>Personal Reaction</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Style Approach</strong></td>
<td>Style approach helps leaders distinguish when they need to be task orientated and when the need to be relationship orientated. What is the task and who is best fit to complete it, or what needs to be done and how to approach it.</td>
<td>Style approach suggests that most effective leadership styles are high-high style (i.e., high task, and high relationship).</td>
<td>Style approach has good qualities, and it is important to understand you type of leadership styles, I have often looked back at a situation the needed a direct and quick action to be taken. There was no time for input just action and a direct order from me.</td>
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<td><strong>Trait Approach</strong></td>
<td>Trait approach gives us the ability to understand traits about leaders, if they obtain qualities like intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability. Focuses more on the leader rather than the follower.</td>
<td>Although there are perks to understanding one’s traits, how does it measure up to understanding the situation or task at hand. There has been no research conducted on outcomes and trait approach employment.</td>
<td>I believe that traits and personality have much to do with a leaders ability to lead, and also feel that understanding oneself will help when employing other leadership theories.</td>
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Transport for London
Business in the Community
137 Shepherdess Walk
London N1 7RQ
t: +44 (0) 20 7566 8650
f: +44 (0) 20 7566 1877
e: www.bitcdiversity.org.uk

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