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Ethnicity and Gender at Work - Inequalities, Careers and Employment Relations. Authors: Harriet Bradley and Geraldine Healy

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REVIEW

The publication presents research which is part of [The Future of Work programme](#) funded by the ESRC, specifically the findings of a study carried out by the authors entitled *Double Disadvantage – ethnic minority women in the trade union’s project*.

Bradley and Healy explore the issue of the continued gender and ethnic segregation that exists in the labour market and the potential role that trade unions have in challenging this. The authors explore this through the life and career development stories of women from four ethnic groups, who are actively involved in trade union activities. The authors examine the role that the government, employers and trade unions play in relation to equal opportunities. A large part of the book is devoted to the stories of these women, which are based on interviews with 57 women with African, African-Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani ethnic backgrounds. It is inspiring to read about the women’s commitment to social justice and the importance they place on contributing to their communities.



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The authors use a theoretical approach called intersectionality; an approach that integrates and links the variety of contexts and social processes at play without prioritising one analytical perspective, i.e. gender, class and ethnicity. This is also a way to address the issue of the 'double disadvantage' or multiple discriminations that the women experience, for example racist as well as sexist treatment excluding them from both union and employer structures to different degrees.

The historical background and the current state of affairs are explored in a chapter demonstrating the continued segmentation of the labour market and occupational segregation in the UK, but which also makes comparisons with Europe and the US. The statistics confirm that ethnic minority women remain clustered in certain occupations and that the majority of insecure, part-time, temporary jobs are filled by the young, ethnic minorities and women. The reality of the double - or multiple - disadvantage is clearly set out at the macro level. It is a very convincing and useful setting of the scene demonstrating the scale of segregation in the labour market, which sets the framework for the discussion that follows.

The authors address an interesting rhetorical shift in the area of equal opportunities, which some consider to be a paradigmatic shift. This shift involves a move from an equal opportunities approach with a group focus to a managing diversity approach that is focused on the individual. The authors question whether this is a paradigmatic shift, but consider that this discursive turn from 'equal opportunities' to 'diversity management' can have some dangerous implications. They demonstrate that the social justice principles underpinning equal opportunities are less visible or absent from the managing diversity approach, which foregrounds the business case in relation to equality and diversity. More importantly, they point out that a focus on individuals rather than the group has the potential to obscure structural explanations for disadvantages. This point really resonates in the context of the preceding chapters dealing with the history of - and the persistence of - gender and ethnic segregation that exists in the labour market.

The four unions chosen for the case studies were the Communications Workers' Union (CWU); the lecturers' union (NATFHE); the public services union (UNISON); and, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers' Union (USDAW). This stage of the research involved interviews with national union equality officers and minority ethnic women activists as well as analysis of documentary sources and attendance at various black workers' conferences and networks. The authors note that one effect of the Stephen Lawrence Task Group¹ was to highlight the importance of tackling racism in trade unions and provide a range of resources to support union members. However, the unions were in different stages in terms of the provisions for equality that they had in place. The equality structures in the unions have developed over time reflecting the history, strategic direction and resources of the unions. For example, whereas all the unions had equalities officers,

only two had race equality officers and not all the unions had equality advisory committees.

Bradley and Healey highlight the role and transformational potential of self-organised groups (SOGs) within the unions in involving people with ethnic backgrounds. The SOGs could be a black members' groups or a group for women, lesbians etc.

Through their involvement with the union, the women in the case study gained access to training, resources, information and contacts, which they thought was empowering for them personally and in the work place. One example is Marsha who worked in a male-dominated occupation and experienced serious harassment but did not get any help from management and was unaware of any existing procedures to help her. Joining the union meant she went on education courses and also came into contact with other women within the industry. Subsequently, she was part of forming a women's support group to tackle sexism and make it a recognised trade union issue. The diverse experiences of the women illustrate the complex ways that union involvement can lead to inclusion as well as exclusion in the work place.

The authors recognise that the women in their study are the people who stand up and challenge management and colleagues, and that this is clearly a path not taken by all. The women in the book do come across as extraordinary women, which is a potential weakness in terms of how representative the experiences can be said to be. However, this is also an incentive to further explore career developments of ethnic minority women.

Bradley and Healy make a strong case for the potential that unions have for challenging discriminatory work practices and for the role of self-organised groups for facilitating involvement of ethnic minorities in trade unions.

¹ The Task Group was set up to tackle institutional racism in the workplace following the findings of the Macpherson inquiry into how the police handled the investigation into the death of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager killed in 1993 in London. The Macpherson Report found that institutional racism played a part in the flawed investigation by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS).