Introduction
This report explores the barriers faced by Black and minority ethnic (BME) people with sensory impairment along the whole employment journey, from education and training through to interviews and in the workplace.

Most of all, this study points to the need to recognise that policy and practice are directed at either disability or ethnicity but rarely at both, failing to meet the needs of this most marginalised group. An integrated approach is required which also incorporates other forms of social division such as gender. Only in this way can we address discrimination of all kinds in a holistic manner.

Our research participants argue strongly for this kind of integrated approach. For them, regardless of how they see their own identity – as people with impairments or as members of minority ethnic groups – it is often difficult to make sense of the discrimination that they encounter, although they are quite clear that discrimination occurs.

Achieving the goal of integrated anti-discrimination practice will require better collection of equality monitoring data, better training for staff in both attitudes and service delivery, more accessible practices and strong promotion of good practice, wherever it occurs.

This will not be easy. The difficulties we had in conducting this study – in finding respondents and in gaining their trust – illustrate the difficulties that organisations will face. But face them they must if the Government’s declarations on social exclusion are to go beyond mere rhetoric. Offering an analysis of the problems facing ethnic minority populations is one thing; doing something effective about it is quite another.

Methodology
The research-based study embraced in-depth interviews with people with sensory impairment, including 30 people of Pakistani origin, three of Bangladeshi origin, eight of Indian origin, 28 of African origin and 20 of African-Caribbean origin. Of these, 25 people had a hearing impairment and 64 a visual impairment. Data from these interviews were supplemented by 18 focus group discussions with family and community members that examined community understandings of disability. In addition, six case studies critically evaluated the recruitment and retention policies of large employers [1]. The participants were drawn from South East England, the West Midlands and West Yorkshire.
The research findings

Seeking work and the role of training

Most respondents are keen to use pre-employment training, initially believing that such provision would help them to overcome any barriers to labour market participation. Training, however, does not always translate into enhanced employment opportunity because of the perceived negative attitudes of potential employers. People with sensory impairment find this frustrating:

"It [training] was brilliant, but then when I started looking into the workplace I was like … well, was there any point? 'Cos I just wasted quite a number of years and quite a substantial amount of taxpayers money 'cos I can’t get into work."

Training programmes, for example, could help disabled individuals obtain what they see as relevant qualifications. The qualifications, however, do not necessarily help them get employment because of the prejudice of employers:

"In the end, after all the training, the employers don’t consider us. Despite my qualifications, not even Sainsbury’s employed me. So it was not the training that is the problem, it’s the employers."

The experience of work

Many respondents commented on the reluctance of employers to make the necessary adjustments to capitalise on sensory impaired people’s full potential. In addition, individuals questioned for this report generally have low expectations of employment and their own capabilities. Low expectations sometimes mean that people do not maximise the opportunities available to them. They may stay in a job, not because it is fulfilling or offers good opportunities, but because they do not expect to get a better post.

The contradictory position of many organisations in relation to people with disability is reflected in the following quote from one of the organisations interviewed in this study:

"Well, our organisation is very small to be honest with you and we don’t cater for disabled people, not because we don’t want to, it’s because we haven’t got the facilities to cater for disabled, but saying that, we don’t discriminate [against] people who have disabilities."

While most respondents feel that their colleagues are reasonably supportive of them, there is concern that they are excluded from much of their workplace’s informal networking. This has a negative impact, not only on their
integration into the workplace, but also on their perceived chances of promotion:

"Perhaps there were some incidents here, the people who were promoted, where they had less qualifications than I had."

The experience of discrimination

It is difficult to disentangle the exact nature of discrimination and its relationship to other forms of disadvantage. Even in the areas of racism and sexism, which have been the subject of much scholarly activity, ambiguity remains regarding the nature of discriminatory practices. In the present study, some respondents are clear which part of their identity is the primary cause of discrimination. Most people, however, experienced discrimination per se and do not separate out different aspects of it: in a sense, it is immaterial which form of discrimination occurs if a person fails to be treated equally:

"Discrimination. I don’t know actually. It’s a really hard one, hard one to describe, you know, because you just don’t know whether they’re discriminating or whether they’re being genuine. So I really can’t answer that question because it is a difficult one to answer. Yes, I reckon a lot of companies do."

Specifically, there is a tension between the perception of disadvantages that arise from disabilism and those resulting from racism. Some respondents argue that negative attitudes to disability have a greater impact on their lives. However, it is not always possible to identify racial discrimination when it manifests under the guise of disabilism.

The role of organisations and networks

Deaf respondents have been able to organise themselves as a distinct group within society, based on their use of British Sign Language (BSL). This allows them to have a sense of communal awareness and identity. The relationship between deaf people from BME populations and disabled organisations is, however, complex. Social networks, which support ‘deaf identity’ and the use of BSL can be seen to support Western ideas and values. Further, some minority ethnic disabled people argue that the political agenda of disabled organisations tends to give their concerns a very low priority. Consequently, voluntary and community organisations are not seen as particularly helpful in securing employment for disabled BME groups:

"There are no black disabled people, if our organisations are anything to go by. They just don’t have black disabled people. And they are quite happy to tell you [this], even though they have funding for the whole community."
The patterning of discrimination and its impact on different minority ethnic populations has a direct effect on people with sensory impairments from those populations. Not only are unemployment rates higher for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women and men (usually about three to four times as high as for their white counterparts, and six times as high for Bangladeshi women), but also, once in employment, these people are more likely to be found in low-paid jobs. This is reflected in poverty rates: 60 per cent or more of Bangladeshi and Pakistani households – whether employed, self-employed or unemployed – are living in poverty [2].

Families and the social context of sensory impairment

Members of the family and “community”, although accepting the merits of the social model of disability, struggle with putting its ideas into practice. The social model has some value in clarifying current debates, particularly since it produces an understanding of disability in relation to the attitudes and barriers imposed by an unjust society.

Disability can be seen as a social issue, in which systematic discrimination not only leads to loss of independence and lack of choice for disabled people, but also excludes them from activities and roles that are taken for granted by the majority of the population. Autonomy, inclusion, control of resources, independent living and claims to equal citizenship are important symbols in the positive re-framing of disability.

Many of the community respondents were highly committed and well-meaning, but they were not well informed about the multifaceted nature of disabilism and racism. Consequently, their role in supporting people with impairments, as they battle against discrimination, is not always fully realised.

Many respondents feel that their disability caused their families to become over-protective. This has a negative impact on the ways in which disabled BME individuals interacted with society and could limit access to information and other programmes of assistance:

"Because although they’re [families] protecting the child, they are also hiding the child away … Locking them away in a house is fine, but they aren’t going to have a good life like that, they will be totally isolated."

Such “over-protection” was also open to misinterpretation by others. Participants’ comments indicated that others had perceived any difficulties in coming to terms with disability within BME communities as due to generational or cultural conflict. Consequently, Black and South Asian parents’ attitudes to disability tend to be portrayed too often in terms of culture rather than circumstantial or contextual factors, such as a relative ignorance of disability and its implications, and a lack of confidence in negotiating their lives within wider society.
Education, expectations and self image

Sensory-impaired people report different experiences, depending on whether they went to special schools designed to cater specifically for their needs or to mainstream schools. For example, some deaf interviewees in particular found the experience of mainstream education problematic. Any difficulties in communicating were perceived by the schools as a sign of educational ‘backwardness’. This had profoundly negative effects on their sense of self-worth and value. The internalisation of poor self-esteem is often carried into adult life where similar experiences are repeated.

More generally, people’s experience of schooling has far-reaching implications for adulthood. When things go wrong for children at school, their personal and social development is impeded and overall quality of life reduced significantly. On the other hand, a positive experience of schooling increases confidence, encourage high expectations and broaden opportunities.

Respondents often place great emphasis on not recognising or representing themselves as disabled:

"I never consider myself disabled. I consider myself as being normal, if there is anything like normal. I’m an individual who’s career-minded, who wants a career. I’m not disabled. The only thing is, I am a bit restricted in what I can do. That’s it. I’m not disabled."

Most see their visual or hearing loss as an impairment. This means that they see themselves as having to engage with society using a different set of tools, but not as having an ‘incapacity’. Their responses accord with a social model of disability, in which the consequences of impairment are believed to be produced by an inability within society to accommodate difference.

Conclusion

Long-term change will not occur without effective and determined political intervention. This requires a recognition that disabilism – like racism – can be institutionalised and not solely the consequence of the behaviour of ignorant or uncaring individuals.

Difference and diversity should be acknowledged, while enabling individuals to achieve their full potential. This will only occur when employers, policy makers, ethnicity and disability organisations learn to listen to the Black and minority ethnic disabled population. In addition, those working in the fields of ethnicity and disability need to gain understanding of each other’s aims and practices.
There is no denying the complex nature of the issues. But the key to successfully changing policy and practice lies in Government and employers joining to actively promote integrated policy and practice.

Policy recommendations

- Government and employers must recognise and address the existence of “institutional disablism”. This form of discrimination must be strongly challenged, with the goal of achieving a positive approach to the employment of disabled people and a real increase in the options open to those seeking work.

- Disability organisations, both statutory and voluntary, must focus on raising “race” higher up the agenda. They need to reconsider their own attitudes and practices in order to ensure that they are meeting the requirements of race relations legislation, as well as their obligations under disability legislation.

- Government departments – particularly the Department of Work and Pensions – need to pinpoint circumstances in which people may fall into gaps between disability and ethnicity policies. They should remedy this by structuring policy in an integrated way.

- Job applications should not include a declaration of disability until after the shortlisting stage.

- Employers must be trained to conduct interviews that do not discriminate against disabled people.

- The Government should establish a quota system for employing people with sensory disabilities from the black and minority ethnic communities. This system would help reduce the likelihood of social exclusion for people with sensory impairments.

- Media and advertising campaigns intended to change the public awareness of and attitude to disabilities (co-ordinated by charities or Government) should stress a “social model” of disability.

- The Department for Education and Skills to ensure that British Sign Language is offered as a subject in all schools, from early years onwards.

- When visual images of people are included in literature published by any organisation, including corporations, Government or charities, they should not only reflect ethnic diversity but also portray positive role models of disabled people.

- British Sign Language support and equipment should be available at all stages in the employment journey, from careers advice to job centres and interviews.
Employers have a duty to eradicate discrimination in the workplace. Many respondents described a subtle form of discrimination once they were in work, which limited their opportunities for professional development and promotion.

Employers need to ensure that they are meeting legislative requirements for people likely to face more than one form of discrimination.

Government and voluntary organisations should work together to adopt a benchmarking or target system to measure the effectiveness of employment service providers (eg careers advisers, job centres etc) when supporting sensory disabled black and minority ethnic clients.

All relevant agencies need to ensure that their monitoring procedures effectively capture data on disabled people from minority groups.

Terminology

**Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups:** for the purposes of the study, this term refers to people living in the UK who are Black or Asian, of African, Caribbean, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Indian heritage.

**Disability:** according to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (2005) a person is defined as having a disability if they have a mental or physical impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

**Social model of disability:** the social model of disability recognises that some people who have impairments are affected not only by their own disabilities, but also by the barriers that exist in a society that does not take account of their needs. These barriers may be in the physical, organisational or personal aspects of society – for instance, multi-storey buildings without lifts, information not available in large print, or negative attitudes of other people.

**Disablism:** Discriminatory, oppressive or abusive behaviour arising from the belief that disabled people are inferior to others [3].

**Sensory disability:** a loss of sight or hearing or both.

References


Miller, P., Parker, S. and Gillinson, S, *Disablism: How to tackle the last prejudice*, DEMOS, 2004

Partner organisations

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