



# **d**ifferent women **d**ifferent places



a study of the lives and  
experiences of black and  
minority ethnic women  
leaders...

...same gender, different race



## Executive Summary



*Different Women, Different Places* is a groundbreaking report, the first of its kind to focus on successful black and minority ethnic (BME) women in the workplace, whom we have termed “Different Women”. This study presents a new and dynamic perspective on the factors that guide successful BME women, bringing to light findings of value to HR and diversity professionals, government bodies, businesses and organisations, as well as BME women themselves.

The study comprised three strands: a detailed online survey, which solicited opinions from 300 women; three discussion forums; and one on one interviews. Over half of the participants described themselves as “black”, a third as “Asian” and most of the remainder as “mixed”. The research crystallised the distinctive talents and knowledge of these BME women as something that others can learn from. Their success is interpreted in the context of their values, character traits and life experiences, and the strategies that have helped them overcome obstacles and navigate the often resistant power structures of government or the corporate world.

*The Different Women, Different Places* study has started the process of filling the gap in our understanding of the specific experiences, needs, competencies and contributions of BME women leaders. Further work is still required to shed more light in this

area, particularly as regards the situation of BME women leaders across Europe, and the position and challenges of young BME women today.

## The 8 factors for leadership success

The women’s leadership qualities were one of the key areas explored in the study, which has identified eight factors – listed in bold here – that were crucial to their success. Whilst none of these factors are individually unique to Different Women, it is their combined impact that distinguishes these women.

Firstly, the women have **bicultural competence**, being familiar with both British values and the norms of their ethnic group. This gives them the ability to manage and lead across cultures, an asset that is highly valuable in today’s increasingly globalised business environment. This cultural breadth and learning, from the challenges and experiences they have faced because of their race and gender, also give them the ability to see things from **multiple perspectives** and thus often come up with novel solutions to problems. The women have a reserve of **cultural capital** from experience gained outside the workplace through voluntary work or activities with community or religious organisations. This stands them in good stead in terms of building up leadership and motivational skills.

The women can be termed **transform-actional leaders**, a term the study has coined to describe the fact that the women are both transformational, being able to challenge the status quo and implement change within their organisations, and transactional, regularly delivering results without affecting the overall direction of organisational travel. Discrimination, which many of the women had experienced to different degrees, helped them develop



**self-mastery**, a sense of assuredness in their innate talents and a resilience to deal with challenges and setbacks. The women also have **power, presence and passion**, being able to communicate their views with conviction and enthusiasm, and hold the attention of others.

The study found that these successful women largely characterised themselves as having a **values driven leadership** approach, being guided not so much by monetary rewards as the desire to make a positive contribution to their organisations and communities. Many of the women felt they derived their values and inner strength in part from **spiritual belief**, which they felt was in no small way fundamental to their success.

### **Formative experiences influence leadership success**

The formative experiences of the women were often cited as providing a positive impetus for their later successes. A key foundation for success was the high expectations, positive messages and support received from parents and family. By contrast, some women felt that teachers and career advisors tended to communicate downbeat expectations, and were more of a hindrance than a help.

The impact of experiencing different cultural norms while growing up, and for some spending part of their childhood in an environment where they were not a visible minority was a bonus; increasing confidence, ambition and discipline, and embedding a strong sense of identity and purpose.

### **Exploding stereotypes and myths**

Different Women challenge stereotypes of and myths about BME women by visibly demonstrating that they can lead, perform and deliver results at the highest levels, using their race, gender and ethnicity as strengths. They have developed and implemented effective strategies for achieving career success, overcoming formidable barriers and challenges along the way. These strategies derive from their diverse cultural backgrounds and multiple identities, the challenges and struggles they have faced, and also their need and desire to establish and demonstrate credibility.

Discrimination, direct and indirect, presents clear barriers to the career progression and success of Different Women. The main obstacles were identified as organisational culture and style, lack of recognition and invisibility of the women, limited access to growth and development opportunities, lack of career planning and advice, and being from a BME group.

In addition, being of the same gender is not a unifying factor. BME women are of the view that the image and presence, leadership and communication style of white women are more positively perceived in the workplace. Moreover, in some cases, the relationship between the two groups is characterised by unhealthy competition and a lack of cultural appreciation and understanding.

The women make clear that their diversity represents talent in many different shapes and forms. Organisations need to recognise that their traditional approaches to recruitment and talent management may not successfully identify and nurture BME professionals, and may therefore fail to uncover and tap into this rich source of experience and capability.

### **Searching for a level playing field**

On the thorny issue of what obstacles the women had faced in their working lives, it was notable that organisational culture was regarded as the most significant barrier. Many participants feel excluded from mainstream channels of communication or decision making in their organisations because, as BME women, they just didn't seem to fit into their working environment. The women often felt they had to work that much harder or be that much better qualified than their peers in order for their contributions to be recognised.












Faced with discrimination, often in quite subtle and insidious forms, the women developed various coping strategies, such as identifying allies in the workplace or choosing to be exceptionally reasonable in order to improve dealings with colleagues. Nevertheless, two fifths of survey respondents said that they were preparing to leave their current employer, either in the hope of finding a more inclusive working environment or to set up their own businesses.

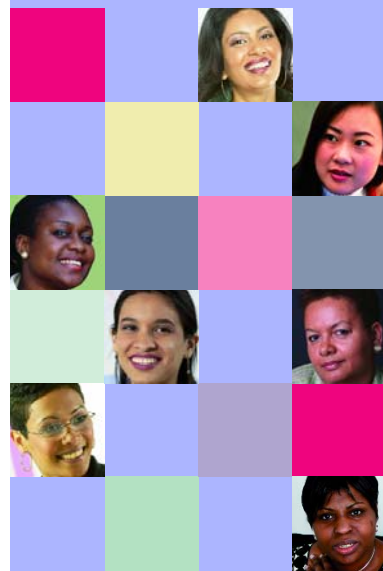


## Acting on the research findings

While it is often said that women come up against a glass ceiling preventing them from rising through the ranks, for BME women that ceiling could be said to be “a glass ceiling reinforced by concrete”, reflecting the greater difficulty for them to make it into the top echelons of organisations, especially without compromising who they are.

To ensure that the talents and values of BME women are fully appreciated in the workplace, the report recommends that certain actions be undertaken by three key audiences – broadly speaking, government and policymakers, employers and their HR/diversity managers, and the women themselves. Full details are contained in the research report.

-  The **Equality and Human Rights Commission** should seize the opportunity presented in its combined new structure and extended remit to ensure that their collective experience and indepth knowledge of the various diversity strands is effectively integrated and used to address the needs of BME women and other multiple identity groups.
-  The **Ministers for Women** should establish a strategic forum where BME women, business and community leaders can engage and shape the issues impacting their local communities, to access and consult a broader cadre of successful black and Asian women leaders.
-  **Policymakers in the Education Sector** should ensure that teachers and career advisors introduce BME girls to the full gamut of career and employment opportunities available to them, where appropriate utilising the Different Women as role models.
-  **Diversity Practitioners** should move towards a more integrated approach to diversity, implementing strategies, policies and actions that have as their focus the challenges faced by BME women and other multiple identity groups, together with the added value that they offer to employers and organisations.
-  Recommendations for **Employers** include:
  -  conducting a cultural capital audit to identify and leverage the extent and nature of community leadership undertaken by BME women.
  -  reshaping their approach to talent management with more inclusive identification, development and promotion of BME women.
  -  acknowledging, valuing and integrating the difference that BME women bring as positive and significant contributors to organisational success, by publicising the achievements and contributions of BME women through internal communication vehicles.
  -  designing bespoke learning and development programmes tailored to meet the specific needs of BME women leaders.
  -  extending the cultural competence of managers, senior executives and other key employee groups engaging with BME women, using as a development tool the eight factors for leadership success identified by this study.
-  **Black and Minority Ethnic Women** wishing to further extend their leadership capabilities would do well to take stock of what makes them unique and seek ways to leverage these factors to best effect in performing in their leadership roles.





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