

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
REMOVING BARRIERS: RACE, ETHNICITY AND EMPLOYMENT
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Minority Ethnic Groups' Labour Market Experiences: Diverse, Different and Disadvantaged

Introduction

I warmly welcome the Committee's Inquiry into the experiences of minority ethnic groups and employment in Scotland. The SPICe (2015) briefing for the Committee offers important insights into this topic and I would like to expand on its points in this written evidence.

The importance of naming race and racism

There is a trend in social policy in Scotland, and also across Europe, to stop using the term 'race' and replace it with 'ethnicity' (Goldberg 2006; Delanty 2008; Tomlinson 2013). Some policymakers and practitioners argue that since race is a fallacy, because it has no basis in reality, it is harmful to continue to use this term and to classify individuals and groups in this dubious way. For sure, there is no biological evidence for race, but race is still a salient social category. Thus, race is a paradox. It has no scientific basis but is infused with meaning and shapes our politics and social relations. Substituting race with ethnicity is unhelpful in trying to understand minority ethnic groups' labour market experiences because it unwittingly masks the very real processes of racism and racial discrimination that shape the life chances of minority ethnic groups in Scotland (Netto, Sosenko and Bramley 2011).

Taking race and racism out of our repertoire of social policymaking makes it extremely difficult to understand why and how minority ethnic groups, who have better educational outcomes compared to their white counterparts, underperform in the labour market. Minority ethnic groups are disproportionately underemployed and over-concentrated in insecure, low paid and low skilled employment. This is not a problem of a poorly qualified and under-skilled supply of minority ethnic labour but a problem of institutionalised racial discrimination in the labour market. It is only by naming racism and analysing how race shapes the labour market experiences of minority ethnic groups that effective policy can be developed and implemented to combat labour market discrimination.

Appreciating the complexity of minority ethnic groups' experiences

The development and implementation of effective policy to address minority ethnic groups' unequal experiences in the labour market requires an appreciation of complexity. It is deeply problematic to speak of 'minority ethnic groups' as this implies a homogeneous experience of very different groups in the labour market. It is important to break down 'minority ethnic' and understand both the particularities of experiences of specific groups and what experiences might be shared across different groups. For instance, the experiences of fourth generation Scottish Pakistani groups are very different from white Polish migrants who settled in Scotland after 2004. Thus, we need

to be more exacting in how we use the term 'minority ethnic' and consider who is included in this category—and why. I question the helpfulness of using minority ethnic as a category to merely mean those who are not 'white Scots'. Not only does this unnecessarily homogenise different racial and ethnic groups in Scotland, it makes it extremely difficult to understand how whiteness operates as a racial category of privilege and how white Scots also have competing ethnicities.

Furthermore, it is of critical importance to understand how gender, social class and age intersect to shape the labour market experiences of different minority ethnic groups. For example, minority ethnic groups in Scotland have a larger proportion of young people (SPICe 2015). As a consequence of the economic crisis, we are seeing young people—of all racial and ethnic backgrounds—disproportionately affected by changes in the structure of work such as the increase use of zero hours contracts (ONS 2012). To understand the minority ethnic experience in the labour market means we have to analyse how race and age interact in particular ways that disadvantage young minority ethnic workers. Also, minority ethnic women must negotiate both a racist and sexist glass ceiling in the labour market which depresses their pay and promotion opportunities and overconcentrates them in insecure and low paid work (Emejulu 2008; Netto et al 2014; Kamenou, Netto and Fearfull 2014). Thus to understand what is happening to minority ethnic groups in the labour market we must understand how race, class, gender, age and migration patterns intersect in particular ways that shape outcomes for different groups.

Policy responses to addressing racial discrimination in the labour market

Given that positive discrimination is not a viable policy option in Scotland, a secondary consideration should be to extend the so-called 'Two Ticks' scheme to minority ethnic groups. This scheme has had some success in boosting the numbers of people with disabilities in the recruitment and promotion process. Schemes such as these that seek to address structural discrimination in recruitment rather than focusing on perceived deficits in labour supply will be most effective, in my view. Furthermore, there is a need for better linkages between anti-poverty and equalities policies. Since minority ethnic groups are disproportionately poor, due to their unequal labour market experiences, anti-poverty policies, such as the forthcoming Social Justice Action Plan, must embed and promote positive action on race and gender equality to ensure that targeted action to combat racism and sexism in the labour market and in other institutions are effectively addressed.

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