Radiant and Brighter is a Glasgow based Community Interest Company which has been running for just under three years. We are a social enterprise committed to reinvesting into the community. We support Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities to overcome social, cultural and structural obstacles in order to use their talents, qualifications and previously acquired skills for enterprise and employment. Using a tailor made holistic approach we focus on the needs of our clients, taking a community development approach that allows dialogue and group work. Through this, we provide training and support to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities, businesses and organisations in order to create a culture of sustainability, partnership working and entrepreneurship.

Introduction

We would like to take the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Equal Opportunities Committee on the issue of race, ethnicity and employment. We wish to highlight some of the key areas where our Radiant and Brighter service experience illustrate continuing barriers that lead to unequal outcomes in employment for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities.

Barriers that lead to unequal outcomes in employment for Black and Minority (BME) communities

One of the challenges for BME communities is the unattainable expectations from employers and other agencies. These are sometimes the same expectations for all people from all walks of life. However, they can be unattainable particularly for BME communities seeking employment. For example often people are expected to have work experience from within the UK. This is a barrier especially to people who have not been in the country long enough or those who have not been allowed to work previously due to immigration controls. Even when people have been volunteering for long periods of time employers often claim paid work experience which people from other countries may not have. We found that even qualifications, skills and work experience from countries of origin are overlooked and not considered to be work experience.

Another unattainable expectation is one of employers requiring references. When people have not been in the country long enough, they may not have what employers consider to be an acceptable reference. For example if an asylum seeker has acquired refugee status within less than 6 months of arriving in Glasgow it is likely that they have not had enough time to get a reference. Usually it will require someone who has known them longer than 6 months which they will not have. We have discovered through our work that many times, the BME communities are not
even aware of this issue and even when they are it is too late thus delaying or making it difficult to find employment.

Furthermore, the period between seeking asylum and acquiring refugee status which can be months or several years is a major barrier to equal employment opportunities. People are often unemployed for long periods of time which eventually creates long gaps of unpaid employment. Even when people have been volunteering in leadership or project management positions, they are still not readily acceptable in the job market where employers want paid work experience. Moreover, some people especially single men, sometimes end up homeless shortly after acquiring refugee status. This is because once they have acquired refugee status, they are required to leave the accommodation which will have been made available to them through the asylum process. This increases the period of unemployment as they can’t find employment while they are homeless. As a result they end up unable to get employed due to long unemployment periods.

Another issue is one of direct discrimination in the work place. Through our work, we have discovered that contracts are often not honoured by employers. While this can be the case for employees from all walks of life, we found that people from BME communities felt that in their situations were worse. For example, they were made to do the shifts no one else wanted and were even forced to do unpaid overtime, often doing more than 60 hours a week where they are contracted to do 35 hours. One of the people we spoke to even told of how everyone else where they worked was given a new work uniform and they were the only ones given an old one by their employer.

Unequal employment outcomes are also sometimes a result of negative attitudes in some bigger and long established organisations towards people from BME communities. Many of the clients we spoke to who were receiving mainstream support had a negative experience and did not feel supported, many times feeling very demoralised. They felt like they were treated with no respect or like they were ‘worthless children’, sometimes being shouted at or spoken to in a rude manner. This is a double sided barrier to equal employment opportunities. Firstly, it erodes the confidence of people looking for jobs and makes them feel hopeless. This can result in a lack of confidence when in an interview but can also lead to stress which may result in depression and therefore resulting in reduced job opportunities. Secondly, it makes it harder for grassroots organisations to receive funding for the work they do. This is because funding organisations say they will not fund similar services so they end up funding those they know when in fact they are not delivering good quality services. This ‘thins’ necessary support on the ground, thereby reducing available opportunities for quicker and more meaningful transitions into the job market.

Many people who come through our support also say that the support they are given from many long established organisations is often generic training which does not take into consideration their abilities or skills, therefore does not help them find a job. This is especially the mandatory programmes which last months, taking them away
from more beneficial support from other grassroots organisations. The mandatory courses reduce opportunities for support from other organisations and also reduces time for job search. Often after spending 5 months or more, they have to start all over again searching for work and reconnecting with other support services, thereby delaying their opportunities for employment.

Lastly, often there is a lack of information. This is both on the part of the BME communities and support organisations. People from other countries are at a disadvantage because they often do not know how the job market works or indeed the employment system. For example, they are not often aware of job search engines or methods. The information they have is usually based on what their own communities know. Often people rely on people from their own country to give them information. This can often be because they have no trust for support organisations, thereby becoming more reliant on their own communities which may not be aware of available opportunities. On the other hand, we have discovered through working with BME communities that many organisations do not take the time to ask what people’s existing skills or qualifications are. This often results in support organisations overlooking key skills which could lead to better opportunities.

Pheona Matovu
Director
Radiant and Brighter Community Interest Company
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