

Women use strategies to overcome discrimination in large law firms

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(Phys.org) -- Women and people from ethnic minorities have to employ special strategies to overcome institutional discrimination when working in large law firms.

A report into diversity in the legal profession was presented by academics attending the British Sociological Association's Annual Conference, held at the University of Leeds between 11th and 13th April.

Dr. Jennifer Tomlinson from the Leeds University Business School and Professor Daniel Muzio, University of Manchester, interviewed 32 [white women](#), and 27 women and nine men from ethnic minorities who were based in firms in London, the south-east of England and the north-east. Twelve were partners in their firms, 29 were non-partner solicitors, 10 were trainees, seven were barristers and the 10 others were

academics, executives and paralegals.

Dr. Tomlinson told the conference that: "Our [respondents](#) developed a range of strategies to respond to and manage the challenges they face, ranging from assimilation through to withdrawal. These career strategies were articulated by our respondents as they attempted to grapple with and overcome biased opportunity structures within the profession."

For some the discrimination had included sexual advances from seniors and racist remarks, she said.

The researchers found that among the strategies that some pursued was to assimilate into the "dominant, white, masculine" culture, by "taking up the hobbies, customs and dress of the dominant work group" or by compromising on their values and their aspirations for family life.

Dr. Tomlinson said: "For Asian women, the most commonly mentioned issue concerned clothing, with many making conscious decision to wear Western rather than traditional Asian dress at work, so as not to look 'too ethnic'.

"For our white female respondents, assimilation involved minimising the visibility and impact of family life, by concealing family pictures in their offices, returning to work quickly after maternity and generally subscribing to stereotypically masculine career trajectories, or 'managing like a man'."

One lawyer in her 30s told the interviewers: "The hours that are required make it very difficult to be a woman and have a family and be successful, and it saddens me because I feel it's forcing me to have to choose. The fact that I need to stay up till midnight, two, three, four in the morning to carry on working doesn't make it any easier. I would love to be a partner one day that's always been my aspiration. I feel like I

have to choose between the two [career and family] and I don't like it."

Another interviewee said: "I did not take time off to go to school sports days. You sort of felt that if a bloke took time off to go to school sports day everybody was saying what a good father he is."

Other women compromised their personal integrity by not complaining about sexism. One woman barrister said that there was: "a lot of sexism, very casual sexism, at the Bar. I think there still is. The older barristers would hit on you, and that was perfectly acceptable. And I think they kind of assumed you would go along with that because you needed their patronage in order to get on'."

One black solicitor told the researchers about an incident with a colleague in an office: "As I walked in he joked that he thought I was one of the cleaners because all the cleaners were black and they didn't have any other black lawyers in the firm. I went to him the next day and said I was upset because he was my supervisor at the time, he said that if I mentioned it to any of the partners he would say that the comment had never been made and that the other colleagues in the room would back him up."

Other lawyers adopted another strategy - 'playing the game' - in order to get on, said Dr. Tomlinson, "volunteering to sit on committees and enthusiastically pursuing networking opportunities within their employer or in the wider profession. This is crucial since, as discussed earlier, in the informal and personal world of the legal profession, decisions are often based on impression management, fitting in with important clients and winning personal favour with leading partners.

"One female Asian solicitor spoke of being 'pretty much on every committee I can be' to ensure her name was known and in order to facilitate connections with more senior colleagues."

One white solicitor told her: "When I was probably six months into my training contract I decided that I needed to be very clever about the way I networked within the firm in order to secure a job, because at that stage jobs were few and far between. I found out who was powerful, I found out who the biggest clients of the firm were, I found out where the power base in the firm was, and I applied myself in that direction very, very carefully."

But networking and bringing in new clients was difficult for some women and lawyers from ethnic minorities. One woman told the researchers: "The men play golf and they all go out on golf days and they are spending the whole day out of the office, then get drunk at dinner afterwards and then spend several days talking about it and it's very unusual to have a female at these events. The only reason I know what it is like first hand is that my husband is a solicitor and I would join him at the dinner afterwards - there would be one female for every 25 men."

One Muslim said: "It's a profession which drinks the whole time, and I am reluctant to go to an event which is alcohol dominated. I came here very self assured and I still am, but do I think I can be the best at what I do? No, because I don't think I'll ever be able to build the relationships that people who are not Muslims will be able to build."

Other strategies adopted by women and lawyers from ethnic minorities included finding better working conditions by moving to a new area, sector or specialism, one favoured particularly by women wanting more flexibility to raise a family. Nine of those interviewed were considering leaving law altogether.

Another strategy was to reform the system, though this was only possible for those who had climbed to positions of power. Examples of reforms included campaigning to make a barristers' chambers develop maternity support policies, changing and making more transparent partnership

promotion criteria, lobbying for diversity and equal opportunities issues within professional associations, and engaging in outreach activities to mentor and recruit disadvantaged groups.

Dr. Tomlinson said that Law Society surveys had revealed that lawyers from ethnic minorities were over-represented in the legal aid sector, and were more likely to work in small high street firms or as sole practitioners, while barristers from ethnic minorities were heavily concentrated in a few chambers, drawing much of their work from their own communities and specialising in criminal defence and immigration rather than more lucrative commercial work.

She said that there was: "extensive evidence that while overtly discriminatory practices have largely been dismantled, the top echelons of the legal profession remain not only dominated by white, upper-middle class men, but as sites of subtle institutional discrimination."

The research was carried out for a project funded by the Legal Services Board, directed by Professor Hilary Sommerlad of Leicester University, together with Professor Lisa Webley and Liz Duff of the University of Westminster.

More information: The report from the research can be seen at: [www.legalservicesboard.org.uk/ ...ession final rev.pdf](http://www.legalservicesboard.org.uk/...ession_final_rev.pdf)

Provided by University of Leeds

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