

What are the barriers to increased racial diversity within the third sector?

3 January 2020

Anika Mohideen, postgraduate researcher at University College London, shares her insights from her research into the current barriers to racial diversity in the UK charity sector.

The current overall institutional make-up of charities in the UK is overwhelmingly white and middle-class.

Currently, only 9% of charity employees and 6% of CEOs are from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups (NCVO, 2018; ACEVO, 2019). These figures are problematically low when you take into account that 14% of the overall UK population are BAME, and in London and other major cities (where most charities are located), this percentage rises to 40% (GOV.UK, 2014; Charityjob, 2018).

This lack of racial diversity within civil society is reflective of wider problems with institutional racism in the UK and presents unique ethical issues in the sector, which need to be urgently addressed.

The third sector aims to improve access to opportunities, wealth, and privileges within socio-economically disadvantaged groups in the UK. Consequently, in order to embody the values that they purportedly represent, it is crucial that charities give everyone access to equal employment opportunities, and are representative of the diverse communities within the UK that civil society is working to empower.

In order to investigate lived experiences of racial marginalisation within civil society I conducted ten in-depth qualitative interviews with BAME third sector professionals in London. This research informed my Master's thesis in Public Policy at UCL. The interviews identified multiple interlinking barriers to racial inclusivity within the sector that generate the following cycle:

1. The lack of BAME people within the third sector, especially in leadership roles, prevents BAME people from feeling included.
2. It also prevents BAME people from being supported and progressing within the sector.
3. BAME people leave the sector early on in their careers
4. The lack of representation prevents inclusion

This cycle causes a constant diversity deficit. Participants identified how this cycle plays out in different ways, due to the interconnected barriers that make the third sector both constantly inaccessible and unattractive for BAME staff.

- **The intersection of race and class**

Participants identified that a crucial barrier to BAME people working in the third sector is the intersection between race and class.

Entry positions into the third sector are poorly paid or unpaid, which is financially inaccessible to a lot of BAME people due to the prevalent intersection between being an ethnic minority and working-class within the UK.

Thus, BAME individuals, as well as anybody from a lower-class background, may not have the financial security to work their way up the third sector career ladder. This generates a predominantly white, middle-class, work culture, especially within management teams that is isolating and disengaging for BAME people.

- **Racist experiences at work**

All participants were highly aware of their race at work because the third sector is generally a white-dominated environment.

Participants unpacked varying experiences of racism, which presents a challenge for BAME people joining the sector. Some participants experienced indirect racism and **microaggressions** that they couldn't define or challenge, but which made them feel marginalised.

Additionally, it was informally discussed between colleagues that direct racism was taking place in the sector, and not being dealt with effectively, presenting a challenge for BAME staff.

- **Predominantly white management**

Another barrier that was identified by every participant was that the management of most third sector organisations is predominantly white. Due to management themselves being white and not personally experiencing racial oppression, they fail to fully understand or prioritise racial under-representation and prejudices within the organisation.

This was noted to be partly due to their lack of education and exposure to racial issues, as well as racial guilt. The discomfort of openly discussing racial issues within predominantly white institutions was highlighted as a barrier to why the diversity deficit is not being effectively dealt with

- **The pipeline problem**

Participants identified that the inability for BAME people to progress professionally and reach leadership roles was another factor causing BAME under-representation, particularly in terms of diversifying white management teams. When BAME staff were present at work they are concentrated in low-level roles, with a lack of career progression, even when they had years of experience within the sector. This pipeline problem of BAME people failing to progress up the career ladder within charity organisations was highlighted in every interview as a challenge to retaining and attracting BAME talent.

- **Hiring biases**

Another barrier to racial diversity that interplays with a disproportionately white management and the pipeline problem is unconscious racial biases within organisational hiring.

It was noted that the reason hiring biases are able to exist in civil society is because of a limited recruitment process that often consisted of interviews with only members of white senior staff. Participants felt that white leadership often has unconscious tendencies to favour those with similar backgrounds and interests to them and that's why BAME people were failing to enter and progress within the sector.

- **The lack of BAME co-workers and role models**

In order to prevent feelings of isolation, which discourage BAME people from working in the sector, all participants said that organisations needed to have a higher representation of BAME staff, especially in senior roles to provide allies, support networks, and role models.

Participants explained how as a BAME person they are more inclined to work in a racially diverse organisation. Thus, we arrive at a circular problem because there would have to be a high level of BAME people in the sector in the first place, especially in leadership roles to encourage more BAME people to apply.

- **Internal social barriers**

Participants explained that another key reason that there is a lack of racial diversity, especially in leadership, is because of a “white” social culture in third sector organisations, which is not inclusive to BAME staff.

This social culture is centred on drinking and going to the pub after work, as well as bonding over traditionally white, middle-class activities, such as skiing and golf.

This white-dominated culture was noted to be contributing to the pipeline problem because informal networking often takes places in white spaces.

The 10 participants identified multiple interconnected barriers to ending the constant cycle of BAME underrepresentation in the third sector.

Firstly, leadership needs to genuinely acknowledge that institutional racism is embedded within the daily practices, programs, services, work culture, hiring, and promotions of third sector organisations.

Once this has been acknowledged the sector needs to come together to identify and deconstruct racist practices with holistic actions that are more than just lip-service or filling diversity quotas and tackle the roots of racism.

For the full results and analysis of the participant’s transcripts please download the complete research: **Barriers to Increased Racial Diversity within the UK’s Third Sector**. If you’d like to get in touch please email anikamohideen16@gmail.com.

Find out more about ACEVO’ work on diversity in the charity sector and sign up to our leadership principles.

Photo by [Henry & Co.](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Posted in: [Leadership](#)

Tagged: [Blog](#), [diversity](#), [Diversity and inclusion](#), [guest blog](#)

Not an ACEVO member?

[Apply to join](#)

If you have any queries please email info@acevo.org.uk
or call 020 7014 4600.

5/28/2020

What are the barriers to increased racial diversity within the third sector? – ACEVO

Registered charity (No. 1114591). Company number: 3514635.

Registered office: 150 Fenchurch St, London, EC3M 6BB.

This website uses cookies to improve your experience. [Privacy & cookie policy](#).

[Cookie settings](#)

[ACCEPT](#)