

**Subject:** Poverty and Black and Minority Ethnic Groups  
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### **Subject Information**

Racism and discrimination have no place in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. Since coming to power in 1997, the Government has been committed to ensuring equality of opportunity for all so that hard working individuals and groups can share in the growing prosperity of contemporary UK society.

The Government has introduced legislation and regulation in two key areas in order to tackle the discrimination faced by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) and the consultation document *Equality and Diversity: Making it Happen* which will create the single equality body—the Commission for Equality and Human Rights—both set out our vision for an inclusive society and propose the necessary steps that will make that vision a reality.

### **Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000)**

The murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent public inquiry carried out by Sir William Macpherson set the framework for amending the 1976 legislation outlawing racism and discrimination within the public services. The Macpherson Report provided 70 recommendations to the government in order to tackle direct and indirect racial discrimination not only in the police service but also within the public authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

We accepted these recommendations and strengthened the existing legislation by placing a positive duty on public authorities to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equal opportunities and encourage good relations between people of different races. By creating this new enforceable duty, public authorities can now be held to account for their efforts to eliminate racial discrimination when carrying out their functions.

### **Equality and Diversity: Making it Happen (2002)**

Whilst the government is committed to tackling inequality based on gender, race and ethnicity, and disability, we are aware that protection from discrimination must also be extended to other groups at risk of discrimination due to their age, sexual orientation, religion or belief. The introduction of these new 'equality strands' from the European Commission necessitates the updating of the current equalities machinery to incorporate these new issues but also to better reflect the dynamic of discrimination based on individuals' multiple identities.

The proposal to create a single equality body, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR), demonstrates the government's commitment to promote equality in all its forms but also our determination to tackle the multidimensional nature that discrimination can often take. We envision that the CEHR will have two key functions: to undertake investigations and to enforce equal opportunities within public authorities but also to raise awareness about how inequality manifests itself in Britain today.

### **Tackling Poverty by Challenging Discrimination**

Despite variations between BME groups, in comparison to white households all BME

households have higher rates of poverty<sup>1</sup>. In addition, BME workers are overrepresented in low paid employment, more likely to be unemployed and underrepresented in senior management positions in the labour market<sup>2</sup>. The experience of poverty among BME groups can be linked to discrimination in the public and private sectors. Institutional discrimination within public authorities prevents families from accessing services equally through the design and delivery of services that are not tailored to the needs of local communities. Discrimination in the recruitment and progression of BME workers is further exacerbating the problem of low paid employment and unemployment amongst BME groups.

Often, challenging discrimination is the key to preventing poverty among BME groups. We recognise that we still face some key challenges in reducing poverty among BME groups. That is why we have introduced key legislation and regulation in order for public authorities to take seriously their duty to reduce unlawful racial discrimination and to positively promote equal opportunities in their functions. The creation of the CEHR will also support this process by sparking a national debate about destructive effects of discrimination in British society.

### **Comment**

Whilst the government has shown commitment to reducing discrimination and by implication the poverty faced by Black and Minority Ethnic communities through legislation and regulation aimed at tackling direct and institutional discrimination, the real impact of this commitment has yet to be experienced by many BME groups.

BME households are still disproportionately poor. Using UK figures, two-thirds of Pakistani and Bangladeshi households and one-half of Black non-Caribbean households are living in poverty<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the unemployment rate for all BME groups is double that of whites with 10.4% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi and 12.9% of Black groups unemployed compared to whites with an unemployment rate of 4.4%<sup>4</sup>. While government has tried to address poverty 'through the backdoor' by tackling discrimination, it may be that this approach is of limited effectiveness.

The introduction of the National Minimum Wage, Tax Credits and the New Deal are meant to demonstrate that the government is serious about poverty. However, it is unclear how these universal approaches to anti-poverty have specifically reduced poverty rates within Black and Minority Ethnic communities. Furthermore, given the institutional discrimination within public authorities identified by campaigners and Macpherson coupled with the government's acknowledgement of its existence, it is surprising that robust monitoring and evaluation plans are still not in place to ensure that the government's own anti-poverty policies do not replicate the discrimination found in the administration of other public services. By attempting to address discrimination without specific policies in place to address its unmistakable consequences, namely poverty and inequality, the government has placed itself into an equalities cul-de-sac.

### **Notes**

1. Brown, U. et al (eds) (2002) *Poverty in Scotland 2002: People, Places and Policies*. CPAG/SPIU: London.
2. Cabinet Office Strategy Unit (2003) *Ethnic Minorities and the Labour Market*. HMSO: London.

3. Brown, U. et al (eds) (2002) *Poverty in Scotland 2002: People, Places and Policies*. CPAG/SPIU: London.

4. Ibid