
RACE, FAITH, SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE FUTURE OF PROFESSIONAL PATHWAYS IN BRITAIN IN 2021

BY MUNTASIR SATTAR

The odds are long for young British Black and Minority individuals to make it into elite occupations. Data suggest that BAME are under-represented in professions such as engineering, banking, and law. The experiences of three young professionals who are Black and Muslim offer insight into how entrenched barriers are; their journeys also illustrate how mentors, networks, and other forms of social and cultural capital were vital in their pathways. The professional pathways of three individuals in London in their mid-20s who all went to state schools offer clues about how barriers are circumvented and how successful transitions from education to careers are made.

According to the Sutton Trust (2020), people in Britain's top jobs are five times more likely to have attended a private school than the general population. Sam Friedman's work has shown how ossified the class structure is, pointing out that only 10% of working class children reach managerial positions and even when they do, they are paid less than those from middle class backgrounds. The picture of social mobility is bleak; exploring the data by ethnicity does not offer very much hope (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). A study by the Royal Academy of Engineering indicates, about 12% of the country's workforce identifies as Black or minority, and in engineering, less than 8% identify themselves as such (2020). Mass N'dow Njie, a barrister who is one of three professionals profiled in this essay, notes that of more than four hundred pupil barristers, only thirteen were Black and few were from state schools according to the latest report published by the Bar Standards Board (Tsang, 2020).

ASPIRATIONS

However, there is evidence of cases of individuals whose pathways from education to employment are illustrative of the success that can be achieved in modern Britain.

Sara, an engineer, decided on her career direction early, a field that would play to her strengths in maths, as early as in Year 9 when the subject came up at school. Mass, a barrister, chose law early as well when he was intrigued by his sister's university assignments. Mariyam, a banker, decided on her career pathway after attending events at a professional organisation. Becoming better acquainted with possibilities and analysing the job market (and pay packages) helped her make the decision.

Mass, the second in his family to go to university after his sister, draws attention to the lack of role models in his field. "There were several moments where I doubted whether I could become a barrister. I didn't see people like me represented at the bar and I thought that I would need to change myself in order to "fit in" so that I would stand a chance of making it." Mass elaborates, explaining that it would have been advantageous had he seen someone take that pathway and learn how to navigate pitfalls. As Hashi Mohammad writes, "never underestimate the power of seeing someone who looks like you – someone whose struggles you may relate to – occupying a place where you hope to be one day" (Mohamed 2020).

Mariyam recalls how her aspirations and interests in finance were formed though her parents had little understanding of the industry. The summer before she started university she went

to a networking event where she met people who worked in the industry. After understanding financial markets, she became curious and pursued a degree in accounting and finance accordingly.

MENTORS AND SUPPORTIVE FACTORS

Mass remembers how disappointed he felt when he was not admitted to Oxford University and felt his pathway to law would be impossible. After working in different industries from sports to finance and setting up his own business, his sixth form law teacher and mentor encouraged him to apply for pupillage – a period of practical training required to become a barrister.

Meanwhile Mariyam credits organisations like SEO for informing and supporting her aspirations. There are “a lot of fantastic schemes out there for ethnic or disadvantaged students, organisations like SEO London, that introduce students who would not know otherwise about skills that they need, how to turn up for interviews, how to apply to not just banking but law, consultancy, professional roles.” Such organisations help young people learn about, and break soft barriers, and therefore “level the playing field” as they partner with banks and other institutions.

Her first job was the result of networking. Though Sara points out that students of colour tend to “struggle to utilise their networks,” Mariyam refers to networking as a vital tool to securing her first role. Someone “putting in a word for her” made the difference.

JOINING THE WORKFORCE

Sara’s first job after university was in the construction industry and was one of very few women and people of colour. The industry is “male dominated, not all women get the same opportunities” and points out that women’s experiences vary widely in engineering. She notes that she was treated in a collegial manner, always placed with a female engineer, which she appreciated, and worked with a Black colleague in her first role. Though conscious of being viewed differently because of her hijab, she expresses her satisfaction; rather than encountering prejudice she has been recognised for an award in her industry.

Mariyam’s experience similarly was positive and also notes her appreciation for mentors and colleagues. Like Sara, her industry is not very diverse, but credits her professional development to mentors who warned her that her industry is very white and privileged, “things can be disadvantageous in a cut-throat environment. It is very competitive, it requires you to be assertive and forthcoming. One mentor was also from a minority background and told her while on a graduate scheme, “don’t advertise you’re Muslim.”

Mass has also been recognised during his pupillage as barrister of the month while working at Blackstone Chambers. He set up a charity in April 2020 to correct for the lack of Black and Minority representation in law, attempting at once to create opportunities while fueling the ambitions of young people. Bridging the Bar launched its mini-pupillage pilot scheme in December of 2020. Already 1600 candidates have expressed interest and over 60 sets of chambers have committed to supporting the scheme.

IS THE FUTURE OF WORK MULTICULTURAL?

Sara, Mariyam, and Mass all articulate positive experiences in the workplace, noting how their identities are accommodated in different ways. “Colleagues are conscious of Ramadan, and sensitive to *sunnah fasting*³¹ too,” said Sara, for whom being visibly Muslim was a positive, takes positivity with a pinch of salt, as the “industry is not moving or changing.” Mariyam notes:

Social mobility is difficult, a vast majority of shareholders come from one ethnic background and that may not change overnight. It’s rare to see those in senior positions from diverse backgrounds, to a certain degree, people of colour still need to conform to the social norms.

They point out that workers of colour have more to prove, and feel that they have less margin for error. Mariyam also notes an incident when a colleague made a derogatory comment about her faith in an Islamophobic micro-aggression in front of her.

Sara notes the difficulty in the workplace for people of colour regardless of faith:

If you make a mistake, as someone of colour, it’s turned into competence. If you’re anything ‘other’ to white upper class male, it’s about your track record, but if it’s a white male, it’s his potential. It’s like starting on the backfoot.

Mariyam, Sara, and Mass each are in the minority in their workplaces and in this way share a similar experience as Black British Muslims in a diversifying workforce. Each describes adapting to their work environments, but Sara and Mass both address the ways the workplace is adapting to them.

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Mass’s experience has helped him recognise that workplaces have to accommodate the increasingly diverse workforce. In a Tweet³² that went viral, he wrote and posted a photo of himself in a barrister’s wig:

Making the argument that applies to the rest of the workforce, in an article he recently published, made the case for embracing and accommodating diversity. He shifts the onus

³¹ Days of the year in which fasting (abstaining from food, drink and sexual activity between sunrise and sunset) are recommended following in the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as opposed to the Month of Ramadan fasts which are obligatory for those who are able to.

³² Ndow-Njie, M [@massndownjie]. (2019, 26 July). You don’t have to have gone to Oxbridge [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/MassNdowNjie/status/1154761680242581505?s=20>



from individuals who work to acquire social and cultural capital.

If all barristers try to ‘fit in,’ then we will alienate aspiring barristers from underrepresented groups at the Bar. If we all adopt the same accent and claim to have the same interests, it will seem as if these things are hidden qualifications for the job. If we embrace ourselves, our unique stories and our varied cultures, we can create a ‘new normal’ in the profession. In this new normal, there will be no such thing as the ‘conventional’ image of a barrister. Instead, barristers will be as diverse as the society that we live in and as diverse as the clients that we represent.³³

Mass’ argument and Sara’s reflection show that employers and workplaces stand to gain from understanding the change that is beckoning. Rather than being anxious about their performance and how they are seen, Sara sets the challenge for them to accommodate minorities like herself. Being a minority, she explains, “forces you to work and work with your back against the wall, we worry and not think about their potential. We don’t have a level playing field.”

Leveling the playing field and accommodating diversity, as business is finding out, is key to productivity and profitability. Three young Black British Muslims’ experiences illustrate the ways in which the future of work is shaping up.



DR MUNTASIR SATTAR
Researcher

³³ Ndow-Njie, Mass. (2021) The only story that I have: Mass Ndow-Njie. Counsel Magazine. <https://www.counselmagazine.co.uk/articles/the-only-story-that-i-have->

SECTION 3.6

HEALTH & WELL-BEING