

# The evolving equality agenda



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My interest in diversity was sparked in Africa where I was born in post-colonial Kenya, to Hindu Punjabi parents. I remember a stratified society – the English community were leaders, the Asian communities were professionals/business owners and the local Kenyans did a variety of jobs. Despite language differences, the communities intermingled. I recall celebrating a variety of festivals

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and revelling in the choice of foods (ugali cooked over an open fire; roast dinners and spicy curries). I loved the variety in clothing – brightly patterned African wraps/headaddresses, sparkly saris and cool linen suits.

As British citizens, we left Kenya in 1972 to join relatives in England. I recall leaving a colourful sun-drenched Nairobi, tearful farewells and arriving in grey London. The family settled on the outskirts of Bristol. My teachers at the local comprehensive school and family encouraged my academic and extra-curricular development. The school suggested I apply to Oxbridge, something my family would never have dreamt of, which is how I came to New Hall.

I found study at Cambridge incredibly challenging and lost confidence in my abilities. I was tempted to leave, but with the fantastic support from tutors and friends, I completed my degree. I thoroughly enjoyed University social life, and joined various societies meeting intriguing people from all over the world. Forty years on, I still cherish the friendships I made at University.

Between 1994 and 2001 I worked at BBC Pebble Mill as an Equal Opportunities Officer. As a public service broadcaster



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Rohini with her husband and colleagues. Rohini with colleagues in Nepal. Rohini and her husband Chris, during their time in Nepal with VSO. Commemorating World Aids Day in Nepal.

the BBC has a guaranteed income through the licence fee, but audience research showed that not all sections of the public felt they were getting a fair deal. White middle-class men were generally satisfied with the mix of news, politics, history and sport, but women, people with disabilities, young people, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, gay, lesbian and transgender people, people living in rural areas, working class people and many

other communities felt that the BBC was not reflecting their lives in its radio, television and online output.

In order to redress this imbalance, I set up ten equality working groups across England, made up of journalists and professional staff. Each region developed a customised action plan:

- **Attracting a diverse workforce** - the BBC wanted to attract people from a range of backgrounds so they could draw on their life experiences to infuse creative programming and make daily news reflective of the issues people cared about. BBC staff went to careers fairs ►►



at many different universities, advertised in specialist press like *The Pink Paper*, *Eastern Eye* and *The Voice* and ran a series of workshops for graduates from diverse backgrounds explaining the range of recruitment options on offer – the BBC needs lawyers and accountants as well as journalists!

- **Portrayal monitoring** - the BBC wanted to enrich its output by having as many different voices on air as possible. It wanted people from all backgrounds to appear both as ordinary members of the public and as professional experts, not just in stereotypical roles e.g. BAME people talking about racism. Portrayal Monitoring was undertaken to count the number of women, young people etc appearing on BBC output, and their role. This analysis confirmed the output was heavily “male, pale and stale” so Community Researchers were appointed to develop a diversity contacts database which all BBC journalists had access to.

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- **Building an inclusive culture** - the BBC wanted to be an employer of choice and support all staff to balance home and work responsibilities, whilst building a career. BBC sites in London and Birmingham had workplace nurseries, which were later replaced by Childcare Vouchers. Staff were offered flexible working opportunities. Managerial roles were done on a job-share basis. Staff training about Equalities, Tackling Harassment and Managing diverse teams was organised, and staff turnover records kept. Targets (not quotas) for Women, BAME and people with disabilities in the workforce were set and monitored.

The BBC has made some progress, but significant challenges remain as the recent debates about gender pay parity and ageism/older women presenters demonstrate. The equality agenda is constantly evolving, and the BBC needs to embrace inter-sectionality.

One of my personal ambitions had been to do Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) – Sharing Skills, Changing Lives. After the catastrophic Asian tsunami in December 2004, I applied and in September 2005 my husband Chris and I arrived at The Department of Education in Nepal. We spent 18 months working with Nepalese colleagues on monitoring the progress of the United Nations *Education for All* plan. This aimed to make a free quality primary education available for every child, regardless of gender or caste. There are 75 education district offices, and 28,000 schools, spread across the mountain,



Rohini at the colourful market place.

hill and lowland zones. Our role was to monitor whether international aid money was enabling Nepal to provide primary education in eleven local languages by tracking the effectiveness and efficiency of the education system. Every six months international donors like the UN, EU and individual countries would meet in Nepal to discuss our monitoring report and on-going challenges – some schools did not have toilets for girls, which was especially problematic when they started menstruating. Toilets were built. UNICEF also offered a pot of cooking oil for every girl that completed a Term of schooling, and this incentive helped increase retention rates. VSO worked with parents to explain the benefits of education.

Living in Nepal offered deep experiential learning; we witnessed the “Jana Andolan”

(People’s Movement); the removal of the corrupt King leading to a fledgling democracy. Illiterate women protested with their kitchen utensils, students organised marches using pressure-cooker bombs, villages co-ordinated lights on/off demos and gay and lesbian people rallied outside the Royal Palace. It was a privilege to see mass mobilisation result in political change.

Diversity has enabled me to practise *Ubuntu*; the South African idea that our humanity is defined by our connections with others. The pandemic has demonstrated just how vital connection is for all humanity.