THE PROBLEMS AND EXPERIENCES OF ETHNIC MINORITY AND MIGRANT WORKERS IN HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS IN ENGLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Ethnic minority and migrant workers make up a significant part of the hotel and restaurant workforce in England – almost three-fifths (59%) of workers in the sector in London described themselves as other than white British in the 2001 census (Wright and Pollert, 2005: 27). While working conditions in the industry have been well documented as consisting of low pay, low status, with the exploitation of employees and lack of unionisation (e.g. Gabriel, 1988; Price, 1994; Head and Lucas, 2004; LPC 2005), little has been written in the UK about the actual experiences of ethnic minority and migrant workers (Wright and Pollert, 2005). Two recent exceptions are a study of low pay in London which included the hotel and catering industry (Evans et al, 2005) and research on Central and East European migrants in low paid jobs in the UK following the enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004 (Anderson et al, 2006).

This article is based on a research project on the experiences and problems of ethnic minority and migrant workers in the hotel and restaurant sector in three regions of England[1]. It argues that, while many workers in the sector experience the appalling working conditions listed above, issues such as low pay, long hours, bullying, racial harassment, lack of opportunities for promotion and discrimination were identified as problems affected by, or compounded by, their ethnic backgrounds or migrant status.

METHODOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

The research explores the work experiences, and routes to support and advice on workplace problems, of ethnic minority and migrant workers in three English regions: London, the West Midlands and the South West.

Qualitative interviews with 50 ethnic minority and migrant workers were carried out between May 2005 and May 2006. In addition, interviews were held with key informants to provide contextual information on features and trends within the sector affecting ethnic minority and migrant workers.

The research includes both 'ethnic minority' and 'migrant' workers, categories which, in real life, are complex, changing and overlapping. Some ethnic minorities (using the Labour Force Survey definitions) will also be migrants. Migrants (defined here as all those who were born outside the UK, Home Office, 2002) may or may not be defined as ethnic minorities, and may or may not be discriminated against. White Australian or Canadian migrant workers, for example, would not be. But Czech or Polish, for example, may not be 'visible' in terms of skin colour in the way black and Asian people are, but are 'visible' in terms of language and cultural characteristics, and may face discrimination. As many 'white' Eastern Europeans are now working in the hotel and restaurant sector, particularly since the EU enlargement in May 2004, it was felt to be important to include their experiences in the study.

While a sample of this size cannot be statistically representative of the ethnic breakdown of the sector, it provides a broad reflection of the range of ethnic groups and nationalities currently working in hotels and restaurants in the three English regions. The country of origin of participants covered Europe (France, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine and the UK), Africa (Algeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Somalia and Sudan), Asia (Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Korea and the Philippines) and the Americas (Colombia). The ethnic breakdown of the sample (self definitions using an aggregation of Labour Force Survey categories) is shown in table 1:

Table 1:
Ethnicity of the Sample

Ethnicity	**%**	**No. of interviewees**
White	36%	18
Bangladeshi and Pakistani	26%	13
Chinese and Other Asian	20%	10
Black	16%	8
Mixed	2%	1

Access to interviewees was through multiple routes, including trade unions, community organisations, employers, fieldworkers with community contacts and specific language skills and other informal routes. This approach provided access to a wide range of types of employment, from large hotel groups

to small independent restaurants, including some working 'informally' or whose status was 'undocumented'.

There is some ambiguity over the use of the term 'informal economy', but the literature generally agrees that the informal economy covers work involving the paid production or sale of goods or services that are unregistered or hidden from the state for tax and employment law purposes, but are legal activities otherwise (Ram et al, 2004).

Migrants in this study had a range of immigration or work permit statuses that affected their rights to reside and work in the UK. Some were 'undocumented' in the sense of not having the right to reside in the UK, either through having entered illegally or staying on after their permission had expired. Others had limitations on their right to work, for example those who had visitors' visas, which do not permit work, student visas that restrict the number of hours worked, or whose work permits had expired. Many, though, were EU passport holders who are free to work in the UK, although nationals of the Central and Eastern European states that joined the EU in 2004 are required to register before starting employment.

THE PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY ETHNIC MINORITY AND MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE SECTOR

The ethnic minority and migrant workers interviewed were found to endure many of the same working conditions for which the sector is known, such as low pay, often at or below National Minimum Wage[2] levels, long and unsocial working hours, excessive workload and high pressure, minimum, or sometimes below minimum levels, of paid holidays, lack of written information and contracts, job insecurity, poor health and safety standards and little training (Wright and Pollert, 2006).

This article, though, seeks to highlight some of the conditions and problems specific to, or affected in a particular way by, the interviewees' ethnic minority or migrant status. An interesting finding of the research was that many of the harsh conditions experienced were accepted by interviewees as the nature of work in the sector, and were often not perceived as particular 'problems'. Interviewees were asked whether they had had any problems at work, and, if necessary, were prompted with a number of possible areas where they might have had difficulties, such as pay, hours, health and safety etc. It was notable that a high proportion (around two-fifths) said that they had not had problems in their current job, or working in the sector. Yet of these, many also talked of aspects of working in the sector that they were unhappy with.

A Korean supervisor in a hotel in the South West of England typified an accepting awareness of the poor conditions in the sector. He felt that he couldn't

complain about his particular job, but recognised that overall the hotel industry was hard work and poorly paid:

> *No, no problem at all. But compared to other industries low income is the main problem. But it's not the organisation. It's general, hospitality industry in UK, so I can't complain about that[…] generally speaking, hotel industry is very hard. So I can't complain about that one. Do you know what I mean? That's why maybe not many English people want to work in the hotel industry.* (Male, Korean, hotel worker, South West)

His final point also shows an understanding of the differences in working conditions which migrant and native-born workers will consider acceptable.

PAY

Among the specific problems named, though, by the remaining workers, problems with pay were among the most common, including getting paid the correct amount, unpaid overtime, not receiving their fair share of tips, and, in the worst cases, not getting paid at all.

Workers' irregular immigration status sometimes meant that they ended up with no pay for work done. A cook in a Chinese restaurant recounted:

> *When I came to the UK, I worked for a restaurant and the owner was from Malaysia. Because the business wasn't very good, she kept delaying our wages. After weeks of not being paid, my friend and I decided not to work there any more. We asked her to pay our wages, which she had delayed to pay. For me, that was over five hundred pounds and for my friend, it was over a thousand pounds. She said that she didn't have any money to pay us. One night we went to see her to ask about the money again. Her husband, who was English, was shouting at us. My friend had a very big argument with him. In the end, he kicked us out of the restaurant. It was a very wet night. My friend and I packed our stuff and left the place without any money. We took the train to London and stayed with our friends for that night. The next day, we had to look for another place to live. We tried to call that Malaysian owner about the wages that she hadn't paid us, but they kept avoiding picking up the phone. After three weeks, I found another job in Chinatown. My work there was being busy and besides I can't speak English so I can't sue them. In the end, I just let it go.* (Male, Chinese, restaurant worker, South West)

For many ethnic minority workers interviewed the problem of low pay related to the nature of their work in the 'informal' sector in which they had been able to find work, in restaurants owned by members of the same ethnic

community. Many of these either earned below the National Minimum Wage, or were paid a flat rate per shift or per week, which was the same regardless of actual hours worked, making it difficult to tell their actual hourly pay. While it was observed that some workers who did not have a right to either remain or work in the UK found work in the informal sector, there were also many examples of workers who had the right to remain and work legally in the UK but who were working in the informal sector. In this research, this was particularly (but not exclusively) the case among Bangladeshi restaurant workers, and is likely to be a reflection of the limited labour market opportunities for this group of workers: UK government statistics show that unemployment rates for Bangladeshi and Pakistani men remain consistently high, and were 10-15 percentage points above that for white men in 2000 (Cabinet Office, 2003).

LONG HOURS

While long hours are a feature of the sector for the majority of workers, our research found that those working informally in small restaurants within their own ethnic community tended to work the longest, or most unpredictable hours, with unpaid overtime being common. A 50 to 60-hour working week was usual for many in this group, with staff expected to stay until the work is done without extra pay, as this waiter in an Indian/Bangladeshi restaurant reported:

> *For example, if the restaurant closes at 2am and customers arrive at 2am, we are expected to serve them until 3am. We do not get paid for extra hours. Even if five customers arrive after closing time, the manager expects us to serve them and we do not get paid on an hourly basis, they pay us on verbal contract, but they don't keep their promises. If you disagree with them you have to leave.* (Male, Pakistani, restaurant worker, West Midlands)

And workers in Chinese restaurants often suffer exploitation at the hands of employers due to their irregular migration status. One cook in a Chinese restaurant described her life in this way:

> *My life here is only working and sleeping. I get up and go downstairs to work. After finishing working, I go back upstairs again to sleep. Nowadays, I don't feel as if I have any feelings any more. (Female, Chinese, restaurant worker, South West)*

BULLYING AND RACIAL HARASSMENT

Bullying and verbal abuse was found to occur in hotels and restaurants, particularly kitchens, to an extent that would be unlikely to be tolerated in other

sectors. For some it was a normal part of the job, "just the mentality of the kitchen" (Ghanaian, female, restaurant chef, London).

But for ethnic minority and migrant workers the abuse took particular forms. A Korean waitress had left a previous job in a hotel because of problems with colleagues and the chef.

> *The chef is English and then he always shout at us waitresses […] don't know if is because we can't speak English very well like him.* (Female, Korean, hotel worker, South West)

In other cases 'bloody foreigner' had been used as a term of abuse by chefs to waiters and waitresses. A Portuguese waitress felt this was a common experience:

> *The only thing I always noticed since I arrive in England was the racism against other people, foreign people. And I was a victim of that.* (Female, Portuguese, hotel and restaurant worker, South West)

In one hotel, a male manager had subjected several staff to serious bullying over a period of months. Two female staff interviewed (Filipino and Ukrainian) had received no support from the Human Resources department, who were aware of the bullying, and believed that the bullying had an ulterior motive of getting rid of long-serving employees and replacing them with cheaper casual staff. One described it like this:

> *They will give you stress until you go away […] probably we have long service, which they don't like. So they prepared to have casual staff, young ones […] because they want always casual staff […] so that they can save money, money, money.* (Female, Filipino, hotel worker, London)

Her observations were consistent with the increasing casualisation of the workforce, with one waitress noting that she was only one of two permanent employees left in the restaurant out of a staff of 15 who would all formerly have been permanently employed.

Racial abuse from customers was encountered by some Bangladeshi and Somali waiters in small restaurants. This was described by a head waiter in a Bangladeshi restaurant in the West Midlands:

> *It's mainly the customers who have some kind of weird notion that we are all inferior species. Mostly they will start by calling you 'Blackie' or 'Black Bastard'. Sometimes staff will retaliate and then all hell breaks loose. Strange thing the Police seem to side with the racists […] it used to be a regular thing on a*

> *Saturday night, but nowadays it has reduced – say once a month.* (Male, Bangladeshi, restaurant worker, West Midlands)

BARRIERS TO PROMOTION

Interviewees identified a number of difficulties that inhibited, or they believed would inhibit, their chances of job progression in the sector. Discrimination on grounds of race, ethnicity, nationality and age were seen as factors, as well as limitations imposed by work permit or visa rules. The hospitality sector employs many students, but their visas restrict them to 20 hours work a week, which some felt limited their opportunities for progression, even though they may be studying in the UK for at least three years.

Several workers believed that discrimination had played a part in limiting their chances of promotion. A Sudanese woman who worked in a fast-food restaurant felt that white/British workers are more likely to get promoted, even though they may be inexperienced and a Turkish waiter who had previously worked in a London hotel had not been promoted in more than three years in the job. He was not able to put his finger on the reason, although there was a suspicion of racism:

> *My managers, how can I say? They weren't kind of racist, but I always felt there was something and I knew, because I really tried to get one step more, you know, one step up. And I don't know, always something happened [...] and I was the oldest guy in that job, I mean, always something happened and I go no further, I don't know why.* (Male, Turkish, restaurant worker, London)

A Filipino woman, working in a hotel for 25 years, who had reached supervisor grade, also believed that discrimination had played a part in limiting her opportunities for promotion:

> *White skin, they promote, even though they haven't got much education [...] they are new face, they are young.* (Female, Filipino, hotel worker, London)

This experience of older, longer-term ethnic minority staff being overlooked in relation to promotion was also confirmed by a key informant from the GMB trade union, one of two main unions representing workers in hotels and catering, who noted that they had often not received training.

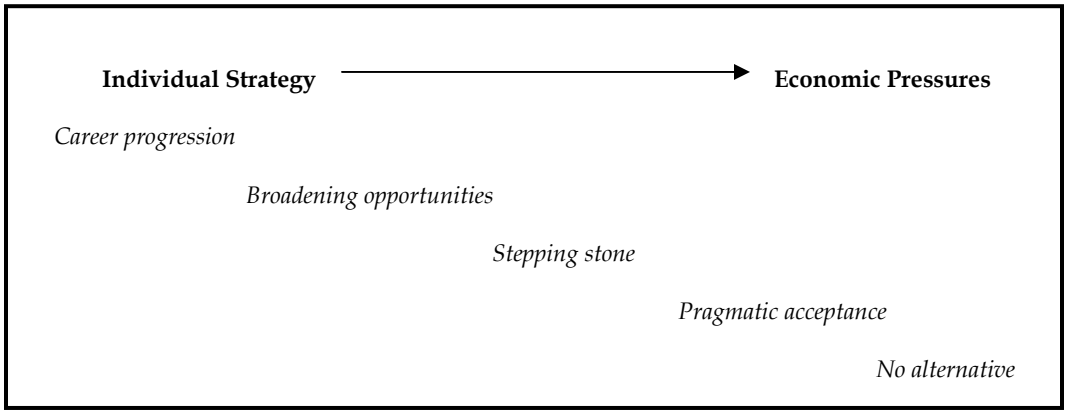
The research observed a number of presumptions about the suitability of staff for some 'front-of-house' jobs, based on factors such as ethnicity, gender and age. There was evidence of employers expressing preferences for white staff: an employer organisation representative told how employers welcomed the availability of Eastern European workers, partly on the grounds that 'they are

good-looking people', which may also be interpreted as a reference to their 'whiteness'. And an informant who worked for a catering recruitment agency told how he had been cautioned to 'go easy on black recruitment' by one of his hotel clients, who wished him to provide 'a balance' of white and black staff to their hotel, on the grounds that it was what their customers wanted.

CONCLUSIONS

As a way of conceptualising the motivations and strategies of ethnic minority and migrant workers in the hotel and catering sector, a typology (See Figure 1) has been developed, which can also be seen as a trajectory from a position where individuals feel they are acting strategically in relation to their work choices to one where economic factors and limitations play a greater role in determining their choices. Workers may not occupy only one position within the typology, and are likely to move between the different categories during their working lives in the sector.

Figure 1:
Typology of Workers' Motivations for Working in Hotels and Restaurants



In describing each of these categories, it will also be shown how three key factors have a significant impact on the experience of ethnic minority and migrant workers in the hotel and restaurant sector:

- immigration status;
- working in the informal sector;
- discrimination in the labour market and employment.

Workers in the *Career progression* category were pursuing a career in the hospitality industry – usually in large hotels or prestigious restaurant kitchens – which they had chosen out of interest or as providing a means to travel abroad.

Most in this group had European Union passports (many were Eastern European nationals who gained the right to work in the UK in 2004) and had significantly greater opportunities for progression than those limited by permit or visa requirements that restrict work, such as those on student visas who can only work for 20 hours a week, or those whose immigration status does not allow them to either reside or work legally in the UK. However, the position of some interviewees who continued working after their permit expired shows how easily workers may slip from one of the more 'privileged' categories, where a successful career is a possibility, to the category of *No alternative* having no legal opportunities for work in the UK.

Similarly, workers who were *Broadening opportunities* for work in general, not just in the hotel and restaurant sector, by coming to the UK intending to learn English and/or to experience living in another country, tended to be from the Eastern Europe accession states, many having left their home countries due to limited opportunities resulting from high unemployment.

For others, working in the sector was a *Stepping stone* to a specific objective, such as studying for a new career, or retraining in the work for which they qualified in their home country, and were supporting themselves by working in hotels or restaurants. For these workers, however, it was unknown whether they would indeed achieve their goals and move into other work, or whether they may become 'trapped' in the sector and slide into the *Pragmatic acceptance* or *No alternative* categories.

Many of the interviewees, particularly those who had worked in the sector for some years, could be said to have a *Pragmatic acceptance* of their position, based on a broad knowledge of the overall 'tough' conditions of the sector. In some cases they expressed themselves as reasonably satisfied with their jobs, either with the rewards or perks available or the job satisfaction gained. However, this satisfaction or acceptance was often based on a comparison with worse conditions in their home countries, or on the hardships suffered while trying to get to the UK. This concurs with Jones et al's (2006) study of South Asian workers who expressed a degree of satisfaction with their poor - in UK terms - working conditions as they were 'judging the present conditions against the yardsticks of economic desperation from which they have recently escaped' (ibid: 146). Some interviewees in this category, who had the right to remain and work legally in the UK, were working in the informal economy, which had a significant impact on their employment conditions, including rates of pay, and ability to raise any grievances or improve their working conditions. Some collusion between owner and employee over 'cash-in-hand' working was noted here, particularly in small ethnic-minority owned restaurants, which was also

found to be common practice in order to disguise non-compliance with the National Minimum Wage (NMW) in research by Ram *et al* (2004). Furthermore they suggested some collusion by the state with the workings of the informal economy, noting the gap between the enactment of the NMW regulations and their enforcement (Ram *et al*, 2004).

Other workers felt themselves to be limited to working in the sector by lack of alternative employment options and found little satisfaction in the work. Some of those in the *No alternative* category had no legal right either to reside or work in the UK, in particular some Chinese restaurant workers interviewed. However, this was not the case for all. For a small number, lack of educational qualifications or work experience limited their options, but several had degree-level qualifications from their home countries, indicating that other factors were restricting their options, such as limited labour market opportunities and racial discrimination. It has been shown that unemployment rates for Bangladeshi and Pakistani men in the UK are significantly higher than for white men (Cabinet Office, 2003). Research among workers in Asian restaurants by Ram *et al* (2001) concluded that: "Immigrants and second-generation ethnic minorities often found themselves working in co-ethnic restaurants because of a lack of opportunity rather than a particular desire to work in such places" (Ram et al, 2001: 367).

While it can be difficult to prove that direct race discrimination is affecting employment and promotion opportunities, the preference shown here by some employers for 'white' staff, suggests that there may be additional barriers in this sector where there are assumptions about what are desirable characteristics of 'front-of-house' staff, based on both gender and ethnicity, as Adib and Guerrier (2003) note.

This typology of workers motivations and positions within the sector, linked to their immigration status and labour market opportunities, goes some way towards understanding the high level of tolerance of poor working conditions and reluctance to identify or address 'problems' highlighted in this research. Workers knew that employers would readily replace them if they raised grievances, and indeed dissatisfied workers felt that their only option was to leave rather than seek to resolve problems. Thus the ready availability of jobs and labour was used by both employers and employees, contributing to the cycle of high labour turnover, and frustrating attempts at collective organisation or improving working conditions in the sector.

NOTES

1. The research project 'The Experience of Ethnic Minority Workers in the Hotel and Catering Industry: Routes to Support and Advice on Workplace Problems' was funded by the European Social Fund and Acas and carried out by the Working Lives Research Institute, London Metropolitan University.

2. The UK National Minimum Wage rose in October 2006 to £5.35 an hour for those aged 22 and over, £4.45 for those aged 18 to 21, and £3.30 for 16 and 17 year olds. From October 2005 it was £5.05, £4.25 and £3.00 respectively.

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