

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Kele, Juliet, Cassell, Catherine, Ford, Jackie and Watson, Kathryn (2022) Intersectional identities and career progression in retail: the experiences of minority-ethnic women. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 29 (4). pp. 1178-1198. ISSN 0968-6673

Published by: Wiley-Blackwell

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12830> <<https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12830>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/48655/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

# Intersectional identities and career progression in retail: The experiences of minority-ethnic women

Juliet Elizabeth Kele<sup>1</sup>  | Catherine Cassell<sup>2</sup> |  
Jacqueline Ford<sup>3</sup> | Kathryn Watson<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Northumbria University, Newcastle Business School, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK

<sup>2</sup>University of Birmingham, Birmingham Business School, Birmingham, UK

<sup>3</sup>Durham University Business School, Durham, UK

<sup>4</sup>University of Leeds, Leeds University Business School, Leeds, UK

## Correspondence

Juliet Elizabeth Kele, Northumbria University, Newcastle Business School, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK.

Email: [juliet.kele@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:juliet.kele@northumbria.ac.uk)

## Funding information

Economic and Social Research Council

## Abstract

Contributing to scholarship on diversity and inclusion (D&I) and careers within UK retailing, this paper documents the lived experiences of minority-ethnic women working in retail. Given the extensive research on both the career obstacles faced by women in a highly feminized sector and the disadvantages experienced by minority-ethnic workers in the UK labor market more broadly, consideration of social identity categories beyond gender and their impact on retailing careers in the existing literature is limited. Here we use intersectionality theory to explain how individual-level identity categories, such as gender, ethnicity and religion, intersect with wider organisational practices, which disadvantage the career progression of minority-ethnic women in UK retail. In a service-driven sector dependent upon consumers, we conclude that there is a need to consider intersectional identity experiences and power relations within the customer-employee relationship, as this disproportionately affects minority-ethnic women and the realization of their career goals in retail.

## KEYWORDS

career progression, inequality, intersectionality, minority-ethnic women, retail sector

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2022 The Authors. *Gender, Work & Organization* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Much literature investigating the “business case” for diversity management has highlighted the benefits of aligning the talents and skills of diverse employees to tangible organisational outcomes (e.g., Dickens, 1999; Lorbieki & Jack, 2000; Shin et al., 2012; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011). However, within UK retailing, a sector conceptualized as highly feminized, both in terms of its workforce and clientele (Broadbridge, 2007, 2010; Pettinger, 2005), the more senior management roles continue to be largely occupied by men. The last 5 years has seen no improvement in real terms in the number of female retail CEOs appointed, with only eight female CEOs appointed in 2020 (24% of current 33 seats, with 5 remaining vacant), down from 11 (23% of 47 seats) in 2019 (Lim, 2021). Minority-ethnic individuals remain underrepresented in the highest retailing roles in 2021, comprising 4.5% of non-executive Board level directors (MBS, 2021). Extensive research documenting the disadvantages experienced by those from ethnic minorities in the UK labor market conclude that most face poorer prospects than the White British majority population, termed “ethnic penalties” (Berthoud, 2000; Clark & Drinkwater, 2007; Heath & Cheung, 2006). More recently, many UK reports (e.g., BITC, 2021; CIPD, 2017; EHRC, 2019; McGregor-Smith, 2017) highlight the persistence of inequalities for people from minority backgrounds and continue to document the underrepresentation of these minority-ethnic groups in senior roles in a variety of organizations in general. This paper seeks to further advance this scholarship by exploring the career experiences of minority-ethnic women working in UK retailing.

In the last 3 decades, there has been considerable analysis of the career enablers and obstacles for women in UK retailing (e.g., Broadbridge, 1998, 2007; 2010), yet there is little research examining these experiences through an intersectional lens. Consideration of the interconnectedness of gender with other social identity categories, such as ethnicity and religion, will afford us a greater cognizance of how the identities of workers intersect with wider organisational practices to construct and sustain career progression inequalities in the retail sector. Such intersectional analyses not only change the dominant narrative purported by the majority White population, by giving voice to underrepresented populations, they also create more holistic and accurate analyses, in examining how power relations and the intersectionality of inequalities manifest in different contexts (Bradley & Healy, 2008).

Intersectionality recognizes that socially-constructed identity categories (e.g., race, class, gender and sexual orientation) simultaneously interact with each another and with wider societal and power structures to construct experiences of oppression and privilege unique to each individual (Crenshaw, 1991). Originally conceived as the symbiotic relationship between gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989), intersectionality is increasingly advocated as a theoretical framework through which to better understand the lived experiences of minority-ethnic individuals in relation to their multiple disadvantaged socially-constructed identities (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Considering this, we recognize the myriad and diverse terminologies when classifying ethnicity. While grouping together those who are most subject to racism in the UK (Opara et al., 2020), the ethnic groups “BAME” (Black, Asian and Minority-Ethnic) classification, has severe limitations – a central criticism being that such “essentialist” terminology homogenizes experience (Atewologun & Singh, 2010). Moreover, the “BAME” term is also problematic in reproducing unequal power relations in excluding the “White” ethnic identity, which subsequently remains privileged (Garner, 2006). Hence, where necessary, we use the term “minority-ethnic” in line with the technical term used in the UK Census and describe our participants using the term “minority-ethnic women”.

### 1.1 | Study aims

Our research responds to calls to give voice to the lived experiences of minority-ethnic workers in the UK (Atewologun & Singh, 2010; Kenny & Briner, 2007; Tariq & Syed, 2018). In doing so, we use an intersectional lens and the linked notion of Acker’s inequality regimes to explore the intersectionality of inequalities for minority-ethnic women in terms of their career progression experiences. Moreover, although organizations are sites in which inequalities are generated and replicated (Acker, 2006; Winker & Degele, 2011), the systemic inequalities created

by the interplay between organisational practices and the intersectional identities of workers are seldom studied (Castro & Holvino, 2016). Our aim is to further advance the use of intersectionality in organization studies (Castro & Holvino, 2016; Holvino, 2010; Opara et al., 2020) in exploring the organisational practices and processes which reproduce career progression inequalities by empirically addressing the following research questions:

- (1) What are the career progression experiences of minority-ethnic women working at a large UK retailer?
- (2) How do intersectional identities influence these career progression experiences?

The structure of this paper is as follows. Our framing of intersectionality, drawing upon the notion of inequality regimes (Acker, 2006), is firstly explained, and is used to elucidate the career progression inequalities faced by minority-ethnic women. Thereafter, the context of the UK retail sector and the intersectional inequalities embedded in the nature of retail work, as well as within the organisational practices and processes, are outlined. We then discuss the methodology and the intersectional analytic approach adopted. The subsequent section presents our empirical study findings through an intersectional lens and discusses the importance of the customer-employee relationship in upholding inequality regimes in the retail sector.

## 2 | INTERSECTIONALITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION INEQUALITIES

Since its inception and roots in US Black feminist theory (Davis, 2008), scholars increasingly pay more attention to intersectionality, given its multi-dimensional approach to inequality (Kamenou et al., 2013; Winker & Degele, 2011). Intersectionality theory helps us to better understand how the social construction of categories of difference are interconnected with social justice, power, social context, relationality and inequality (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). However, an important challenge is how to define specific terms and operationalize intersectionality. Many intersectional scholars (e.g., Cho et al., 2013; McCall, 2005; Winker & Degele, 2011) thus suggest various operational approaches as an attempt to increase its methodological rigor. Within the workplace, intersectionality theory has been incorporated into Acker's (2006) "inequality regimes": the different goal-orientated organisational practices and processes which may produce inequalities based upon class, gender and/or race. These include establishing work requirements; organization of class hierarchies; recruitment; wage setting; supervision and informal interactions. These organisational practices add to the complexity of identifying and confronting the inequalities faced by minority-ethnic individuals in terms of both labor market entry and career progression in work; in addition to geographical location and their migrant status (first, second or third generation migrant) (McGregor-Smith, 2017).

Within work, intersectional inequalities exist in the career progression experiences of women across different ethnicities in the UK. Firstly, educated minority-ethnic women (particularly from Black African and Pakistani/Bangladeshi backgrounds) are more likely to work in jobs far below their qualification level relative to their White counterparts (Rafferty, 2012). Moreover, ethnicity compounded by religion, results in a discriminatory "Islamic penalty" (Carmichael & Woods, 2000; Lindley, 2002) and appears to be greatest for Muslim women. This may be due to a combination of factors: traditional family values (Tariq & Syed, 2018), direct discrimination as Islamophobia (Kamenou & Fearfull, 2006; Storm et al., 2017) and from wearing religious attire (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013), in addition to a lack of social networks and access to bridging social capital (i.e., making inter-group connections) (Heath & Martin, 2013). Hence, the metaphor of "glass chains" has been proposed to highlight the cultural importance of faith and family for British Pakistani Muslim female professionals which may hinder the attainment of their own personal career ambitions (Arifeen & Gatrell, 2020).

Secondly, although minority-ethnic women are reportedly keen to progress their careers (62%, compared with 37% of their White counterparts), 66% also believe in the importance of networking for career advancement – with Indian women viewing networking as highly important (72%); compared to 63% of Chinese women (BITC, 2015a). The prominence assigned to networking highlights an understanding that social capital is a vital element in facilitating

career progression (BITC, 2015a, b) and that a lack of connections to the “right people” may hinder this progression (McGregor-Smith, 2017): a real-life example of the consequences of inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). As such, as the working lives of minority-ethnic women tend to be shaped by cultural, religious, and familial expectations, and exacerbated by the discriminatory structures and cultures of organizations, their career experiences cannot be viewed in isolation (Holvino, 2010; Kamenou & Fearfull, 2006). Although the BITC (2015a) *Survey Insights* report detailing the career progression experiences of minority-ethnic women is no longer available online, more recent research raises intersectional concerns. For instance, in response to the statement: “In my organization, your identity or background can have an effect on the opportunities you’re given”, 31% of 332 minority-ethnic women surveyed agreed, compared with 19% of 298 white women (CIPD, 2017, p. 22). The next section analyses how inequality regimes manifest and reproduce themselves in retail.

### 3 | RESEARCH ON INEQUALITIES IN RETAIL WORK

Career progression inequalities for minority-ethnic women may be categorized as embedded within both internal and external factors: the organisational diversity climate and customer-facing issues. For instance, internally, scholarship on the UK retail sector has identified the prevalence of Acker’s (2006) inequality regimes through a lack of female mentors (Broadbridge, 2007). In her review of UK retailing over 25 years, Broadbridge (2010) finds that, despite significant transformations, with technological advances, structural changes and the increasingly competitive nature of retail, career barriers for women tend to be both visible and invisible and have endured over this period. Notwithstanding the market-orientated shift in focus onto the importance of the customer during the 1990s (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001); necessitating emotional work (Hochschild, 1983) and the hiring of more women managers (Broadbridge, 1998, 2007), male-dominated cultural norms (Broadbridge, 1998) and the long working-hours culture inherent in the retail sector are still found to prevail (Broadbridge, 2002). These factors and the additional pressures of the “always on” culture of retailing, are believed to dissuade women with childcare commitments to apply for operational roles, such as store or area management (MBS, 2021, p. 32). The latest data from England and Wales shows that, in the period July 2020–June 2021, roughly two thirds (63%) of managers and directors employed in retail and wholesale are men (169,400 men and 99,700 women [37%]), and roughly two thirds (64%) of sales and retail assistants employed are women (278,600 men [36%] and 490,400 women) (ONS, 2021). These figures do little to negate the gendered claims made of the retail sector in terms of the work tasks (high degree of emotion management involved in customer-service work); the occupational structure (occupational gender segregation of the service sector) and nature of the retail environment (gendering of the products sold, e.g., clothing) (Pettinger, 2005). Indeed, research on inequalities in the retail sector has largely focused on gender as the central category of analysis (e.g., Chang et al., 2015; Nickson et al., 2005). We therefore build upon the limited retailing literature available which considers more than one aspect of visible demographic diversity in isolation (Foster & Resnick, 2013).

A core focus of the retailing literature is on customer-service employees, who, in their roles as the initial point of contact between the company and its customers (Ogbonna & Harris, 2001), are both emotional laborers (Hochschild, 1983) and esthetic laborers (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). Acknowledging the importance of these external, customer-facing issues, sociologists of work are increasingly delineating the role of the corporeal production of attributes linked to class and gender in the performance of esthetic labor (Nickson et al., 2012; Williams & Connell, 2010; Witz, et al., 2003), and are increasingly considering the impact of visible demographic identities, specifically in the retail service encounter (Foster & Resnick, 2013; Quach et al., 2017). These “embodied capacities and attributes” (Warhurst et al., 2000:4) may include voice, accent, dress style and physical appearance (Nickson et al., 2005) and are very prominent in the service encounter. Emphasis on the visible esthetic labor performance of their staff to embody a preferred “look”, may include implementing rules about their hair and make-up (Walters, 2016, 2018) or requiring the wearing of a certain type of uniform which helps to promote the company brand (Pettinger, 2005). The value placed on this “embodied” nature of esthetic labor leads to assumptions made by customers of the social identity

of retail employees based upon their physical appearance (Chang et al., 2015; Quach et al., 2017; Walters, 2018). In this regard, role theory states that certain “expectations” are assigned to roles based on social positions (Stets & Serpe, 2013) which may in this case link with observable demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, and ethnicity).

For instance, using social identity theory, Quach et al. (2017) discovered that employees who appear similar to customers (“mirroring”) and fit the expectations of how customers think service staff should look (“matching” from role theory), may yield competitive advantage for the retailer, as the physical embodiment of staff appeals to, and retains, customers (Nickson et al., 2012). Indeed, employers may engage in discriminatory behaviors, termed “look-ism”, based on appearance (Walters, 2018; Warhurst et al., 2009). This is especially the case for clothing retailers, who continue to value and prioritize the soft skills, esthetic and emotional labor of candidates over (fashion) qualifications and technical skills, such as previous retail experience, work ethic and customer service skills (Nickson et al., 2012; Williams & Connell, 2010). This has been clearly evidenced in the marketing and recruitment “look policy” of the fashion brand *Abercrombie & Fitch*, with managers seemingly favoring staff with lighter, as opposed to darker, skin tones to work with customers (Walters, 2018). Such discriminatory practices, based on using employees' bodies to display a store's “look”, ranks and segregates employees into sales-floor or stockroom roles based on appearance, and reinforces beauty-based discrimination (Walters, 2016). Shaped by wider societal power structures, such practices maintain Whiteness as the beauty ideal, considers minority-ethnic workers with lighter skin tones as “exotic” and discriminates against workers with darker skin tones (Walters, 2018). Such deliberate “organizing processes”, in which certain intersecting individual identities may become particularly salient and more (un)desirable than others, contribute to maintaining inequality regimes (Acker, 2006, p. 451). Context is important here: we are cognizant of the varying salience of different intersectional identities across social contexts (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016).

However, social identity theory can work in other ways, with social identity categories strategically used for individual benefit. In engaging in homosocial reproduction – the tendency of recruiters to select and promote those who are socially similar to themselves (Kanter, 1977) – via the process of “ethnic gatekeeping”, minority-ethnic shop-floor retail workers may overtly and covertly socially discriminate by restricting and controlling preferential access to job opportunities and work teams for those from similar ethnic groups (Harris & Ogbonna, 2015). In intersectional terms, while social identity categories may shape, and be shaped by, a given situation, in that moment and context, some identities may become more or less salient in an individual's self-concept (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). This gives further credence to the uniqueness and individuality of organisational experiences, notwithstanding any shared social identity categories (Opara et al., 2020).

Furthermore, customer service employees may find that emotional work (Hochschild, 1983) causes additional stress (Broadbridge, 2010), especially when the customer holds a far higher degree of power in the relationship (Korczyński, 2009). Given the increasing influence of the customer in retailing, who may be viewed as acting as a proxy or substitute manager for the employee (Harris & Ogbonna, 2015; Williams & Connell, 2010), sociologists have not significantly addressed analyses of power relations and potential alienation in this emotional labor performance (Korczyński, 2009). Hence, we argue that the retail environment is a particularly interesting setting to examine intersectional inequalities, given that it is a multifaceted gendered space in which both production and consumption take place (Pettinger, 2005; Williams & Connell, 2010). Moreover, as retailers increasingly recognize the business case for diversity (Foster, 2005), it is imperative to tackle the potential stereotyping or discrimination by customers of the “hard” and “soft” skills of retail employees, which are culturally affiliated and signaled by their gender (Chang et al., 2015).

In contributing to the literature and empirical research on women's retailing career experiences, we employ an intersectional lens and the linked framing of Acker's inequality regimes to better understand how the experiences of minority-ethnic women retail workers are distinct from their White female counterparts. We build upon previous intersectional studies exploring the organisational experiences of minority-ethnic women (Atewologun & Singh, 2010; Opara et al., 2020; Tariq & Syed, 2018; Walters, 2018), yet we also consider the intersectional inequalities embedded within organisational practices and processes (Castro & Holvino, 2016; Holvino, 2010) which replicate systemic inequalities in the context of the UK retail sector. In addressing our research questions, relating to the

intersectional identities of our minority-ethnic female participants and their retailing career experiences, we highlight the implications of a more holistic understanding of the intersectionality of inequalities for women from minority-ethnic groups in UK retail.

## 4 | METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 | Background

This research was conducted between the months of October and November in 2018. Before the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, despite operating in a difficult economic climate and with challenges frequently reported of the state of the UK retail sector by the media, trading and employment figures remained positive. Retail remains the largest industrial sector in Great Britain, employing at least 15.2% of the total population (Rhodes & Brien, 2018). This paper focuses on a large, British retail company, which provides a range of high-quality products and services, including clothing and food. The retailer provides staff with uniforms, to act as an extension of their brand for customer engagement, with distinctive types of dress assigned to different roles. We draw upon findings from a broader research project, which explores diversity and inclusion in the UK retail sector. The research reported here presents the findings of a focused study on the career progression of female minority-ethnic workers.

### 4.2 | The empirical study

In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with 26 minority-ethnic employees at different grades and locations, in varying roles and from across Great Britain. Of the 26 interviewees, 14 were male and 12 were female. Table 1 provides descriptions of our female research participants, which became our focus.

We were initially exploring the accounts of the 26 minority-ethnic staff, yet during data analysis, it became apparent that the accounts from the male and female participants focused on quite different career progression

TABLE 1 Table of participants

Code	Gender	Ethnicity	Religion	Age	Partnered	Disability	Caring responsibilities
B 6	F	Asian/British Asian (A/BA)	Muslim	30	Yes	N/A	No
W	F	Black/African/Caribbean/ Black British (B/A/C/BB)	-	50s	-	-	Yes
L 1	F	Other (Indian)	Hindu	40s	No	No	No
L 8	F	(A/BA) (Pakistani)	Muslim	37	No	N/A	N/A
L 11	F	B/A/C/BB	-	30s	No	No	No
L 12	F	A/BA (Bangladeshi)	Muslim	36	Yes	No	2 children, Husband
L 15	F	A/BA	Agnostic	25	No	No	No
M 12	F	A/BA	Muslim	40	Yes (Married)	No	No
M 13	F	A/BA	Hindu	30s	Yes	No	Yes (2 children)
M 14	F	B/A/C/BB	Christian	50s	-	No	No
M 15	F	B/A/C/BB	Born again Christian	50s	No	-	-
M 16	F	Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	N/A	20s	No	N/A	N/A

experiences, such that it was prudent to investigate the intersectional inequalities expressed by the minority-ethnic female employees. Hence, our analysis here focuses on these 12 women. All participants agreed to the interview being audio-recorded and understood that their confidentiality and anonymity would be guaranteed throughout and after the process. An advantage of the semi-structured interview design meant that the questions could be separated into different areas. These were informed from the ongoing literature reviews. The questions asked about “feelings of being included or excluded” and “feeling a valued member of the workforce”. Additional questions asked participants to consider how their earlier responses were grounded in “being an employee from a minority-ethnic background” and the impact of their “ethnicity or cultural background” on their career objectives/career progression goals. In this regard, participants were also asked whether they had experienced “stereotypical perceptions” from colleagues or issues potentially “interpret[ed] as racial discrimination”. Through the insights of our intersectional framing, our goal was to discover the relationship between the intersectional inequalities embedded within organisational practices and processes.

### 4.3 | Data coding and analysis

Template analysis was the method chosen, whereby data is organized and analyzed according to themes, rendering the vast amounts of textual data into more manageable “chunks” (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Given the richness and enormous quantity of information gathered via this qualitative research, the interview data was uploaded to the data analysis software, NVivo 10 Plus. A member of the research team (first author) inductively created a preliminary set of parent nodes: an initial template of general themes related to the factors thought to contribute to different career progression experiences for the minority-ethnic retail workers. Thereafter, the interview transcripts were carefully read again, and data re-analyzed by the first author using an “intersectional sensibility” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795). Some themes were removed, and data coded to create a new list of themes and sub-themes, which addressed the impact of the intersectionality of inequalities on the career experiences of the participants. As the coding process progressed and the themes were increasingly cross-checked by the other research team members to ensure reliability and validity (King, 2004), it was at this stage that the shift in focus to the experiences of minority-ethnic women was necessary, given the different and more complex concerns expressed. The first author then conducted a deeper intersectional analysis of the new list of themes and sub-themes to examine how the intersecting identities of gender, ethnicity, age, and religion unique to each individual produced different experiences. This helped to better understand the data collected and capture the different nuances within it.

Each of the main themes derived from the transcripts spoke to the intersections of identity characteristics (gender, ethnicity, religion and age), with the sub-themes representing the intersectional inequalities resulting from those themes, (e.g., feeling included or excluded). Six main themes were identified, each housing several sub-themes. Each of the themes were found to be interconnected with each other, reflecting how intersectionality cuts across each theme. This also demonstrates how the multiplicity of identities shape the inequalities experienced by these minority-ethnic women. Tables 2 and 3 conveys the themes that reflect their experiences of inequality owing to their intersectional identities of gender, ethnicity, religion and age and how their individual identities intersect with the wider organisational practices that create career progression inequalities.

This interplay between individual and organisational identities leads to minority-ethnic women feeling excluded and unable to achieve their career goals. We now turn to the findings of this study and discuss the thematic identities, which were the most salient during fieldwork: the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and religion.



TABLE 2 Table of themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Example quote
1 Gender	Feeling included	"No, I never come across that it would make a difference ... No-one's ever come up to me and said, oh ... because I'm a female or, even a male, no one's ever come up to me or anything like that" (B6)
	Able to achieve career goals	"There's more women working as customer assistants, but once you come to managers, it's probably like an even split between us, I've never felt held back because of it" (L15)
2 Ethnicity and its intersection with gender	Feeling excluded	"When I think about it, when she's saying "you move like you're in the Caribbean" ... How does the Caribbean move? Do you understand me? How do the Caribbean move? When you have your appraisals she brings that up again" (M15)
	Career progression barriers	"I was talking to my colleague, she's Indian as well, actually, ... The second time she applied [for the position] they was like "well, we need to find out if we can employ someone like you", and it was to do with her race" (L1)
3 Religion and its intersection with gender and ethnicity	Feeling excluded	"So without realizing, a lack of awareness or training for the people who are organizing events, you know, if someone's observing Ramadan, fasting for 30 days during the summer heat, they can't participate in sports events because they'll pass out without water or anything. But it's the things like that, that people haven't thought outside the box" (L8)
	Career progression barriers	"My manager from Pakistan, but he didn't like where I'm from, my parents are from Bangladesh ... But I had colleagues who's from Bangladesh and he used to make negative comment on the floor and even said stuff to me ... say it in a laughing, joking way" (L12)
4 Age and its intersection with gender and ethnicity	Younger participants feel able to achieve career goals	"I think when you look younger people do treat you differently. They think you don't know what you're doing. But as soon as you put a number to your age they're a bit taken aback, because I'm 30 years old and people think I'm 22 ... Like everyone in this store is shocked at my age" (B6)
	Older participants feel unable to achieve career goals	"I feel that there isn't a lot of scope ... There was an apprenticeship that came up, but again, if felt like, it wasn't necessarily applicable to someone my age, and the progression that might come from it. I know some people who have gone on that but felt like once they'd been on it, it didn't seem like it was going to help or assist them to progress any further than what they were already doing now, so that made me feel, again, well, what's the point?" (W)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Themes	Sub-themes	Example quote
5 Disrespectful customer interactions	Frequent discriminatory comments/discriminatory behaviors	“Oh, you speak really good English”. Yeah, I do. I was born here, raised here, my parents sent me to good schools, so yeah I would hope so” (L1)  “Some customers, I think they were a bit like racist, and they complained about me and my colleague [to my male line manager] – they said they don't want to see us [at the café cashier desk] when they're eating, and we were actually moved; we were actually moved” (M14)
	Achieving potential/ Responsibility/Training	“I feel like I haven't faced any obstacles to my career because I might be like from a BAME background or whatever, but I think that's also because of the level that I'm at, I've only been with the business for a year and a half and I think I see potential for more stumbling blocks, the more senior I become” (L15)
6 Structural obstacles or perceived barriers (physical/intangible)	Little communication	“In the two and a half years that I've been here, I find that you're not necessarily notified of anything that might come up” (W)
	Few D&I practices	“There's new people that have come in at the top level, but middle management is still definitely the old timers ... Middle management is hard to infiltrate, because they're the ones who influence the majority of the people's lives in terms of inclusion” (L8)

TABLE 3 Participant-linked table of themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Present for participant
1 Gender	Feeling included	B6; W; L1; L8; L11; L12; L15; M12; M13; M14; M15; M16
	Able to achieve career goals	B6; L1; L12; L15; M12
2 Ethnicity and its intersection with gender	Feeling excluded	L1; L8; L11; M14; M15
	Career progression barriers	L1; M14; M15
3 Religion and its intersection with gender and ethnicity	Feeling excluded	B6; L8
	Career progression barriers	L12
4 Age and its intersection with gender and ethnicity	Younger participants feel able to achieve career goals	B6; L15; M16
	Older participants feel unable to achieve career goals	W; M13; M14
5 Disrespectful customer interactions	Frequent discriminatory comments/ discriminatory behaviors	W; L1; M14; M16
6 Structural obstacles or perceived barriers (physical/intangible)	Achieving potential/Responsibility/ Training	W; L8; L15; M13; M14; M15
	Little communication	W; L8; L12; M13; M14; M15
	Few D&I practices	W; L1; L8; L11; L12; L15; M14; M15; M16

## 5 | FINDINGS

Our findings highlight how the context of the UK retail environment at an organisational level intersects with systemic assumptions made at a societal level, which disproportionately affected the interviewees. The singular identity marker of gender does not function individually as a facet of disadvantage for our participants, yet its interconnectedness with ethnicity and religion result in manifold experiences of disadvantage, particularly in the service encounter. We now provide detailed discussions of findings around the most pertinent themes taken from Table 2.

### 5.1 | Intersectionality of gender and ethnicity

Almost all (9/12) of the participants interviewed were ambitious and wished to progress their careers. Generally, women who had recently started at the retailer were more positive about achieving their potential and felt as though they could, and wanted, to progress. Career progression experiences turned less positive in the pursuit of more senior positions, though the majority felt that gender was not the main issue. This may be due to the female-dominated nature of retailing and/or the fact that they were fluent in English. A lack of diversity in senior management appeared to be a central factor leading to feelings of exclusion. The almost non-existent minority-ethnic (female) representation at senior levels in-store, and more so at the company's head office, was very noticeable:

"It is very male-dominated and it is very white dominated in the high positions. If you go into a store, you know, your sales advisers are mixed ethnicity, gender whatever, age as well, but as you go up it becomes more male, more white" (L1).

"We were at our annual conference recently ... I noticed that out of all the senior leadership of the business talking to us, 95% of them were White. That's the kind of thing where I'm like thinking, right, if I'm a person that wants to progress, I'm not really seeing anyone that I can identify with there ... I'm not seeing any representation, I'm not seeing myself reflected there" (L15).

As such, gender was for these women not considered a hindrance to career progression solely on its own, which is interesting, given the under-representation of women in more senior roles in retail as a whole (Broadbridge, 2008b; Lim, 2021). Rather, gender became complicated when combined with other intersecting identities, which then formed multiple types of inequalities. Six participants felt that the challenges to progress, be accepted or receive recognition were greater for them compared to their White female British colleagues, supporting BITC (2015a) findings. Furthermore, they felt as though they were not asked about their career aims and ambitions as much as their White counterparts. When reflecting on their ethnicity and cultural background, many participants (8/12) felt disenfranchised and demotivated to pursue progression and promotion due to multiple negative experiences, including inappropriate stereotypical comments and behaviors from senior colleagues in the workplace and negative perceptions based upon appearance.

"Some of the managers on the desk wasn't very nice. They had their favorites, so you got pushed out and you just didn't feel a part of the team. I just felt all alone, like I didn't belong or they didn't want me to feel belong. ... There was a manager that was making them remarks [about my ethnicity], and the [senior manager] she knew what was going on, but she just ignored it, because they wanted me out of that position, yeah, it was very sad" (M15).

It appears that this participant's ethnicity rather than gender, is most salient in her work experiences, perhaps attributed to working in a female-dominated team. Sadly, she is made to feel excluded, an "outsider" (Atewologun &

Singh, 2010), with instant out-group classification, based on her skin color. This excerpt demonstrates the power of line managers in shaping career progression and maintaining organisational inequalities. An Indian interviewee told the following story, detailing the visual metaphor used by recruiters, about not getting a promotion:

"I think me not getting the [London store] position, I would say that, because I wasn't actually given a good reason. I think the fact that I had performed, or the store had performed particularly well ... it was given to somebody who was white - female, but white ... I can't think of any other reason why I didn't get the role. The feedback was "we don't see you..." almost like they didn't see me as the store manager, in the future" (L1).

In this excerpt, the interviewee outlines the discriminatory labor practices operating within this London store, describing how she does not believe that she fits in with the stereotypical view of what recruiters believe a store manager "should look like", even though she was able to evidence high performance in a prior role. This may perhaps be due to the emphasis afforded by this store to esthetic labor (Williams & Connell, 2010): the wish that their managers reflect the customers. Indeed, our participant is aware of her own self-positioning in relation to the wider context, explaining that she was of Asian heritage in a "very White area": her ethnicity became her most salient identity in this context.

All participants felt that their career progression may either be facilitated, or hindered, by managerial influence, consequently impacting upon available opportunities. In these two excerpts, as well as the comment below, in examining these experiences through an intersectional lens, we can see how wider power structures and their values are imbued within the retailing context, excluding those who are different and maintaining social inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991):

"It took me a long time to believe it and to accept it, because I just thought "does this thing really still go on?" and I think "wow, it does", because you want to be blocked out from it, but it still goes on, it still goes on" (M15).

Here, we find that our participant's perceptions and sense of how diverse employees are treated are being reshaped by the power structures in the retail sector. This statement demonstrates a stark awareness of the existence of inequality regimes, whereby organisational outcomes and decisions produce systemic career progression inequalities. These frameworks of social power also affected and marginalized those who had progressed at the retailer. For example, when our participants were successful in progressing their careers, they were often greeted unfavorably with negative "box-ticking" comments:

"I've had my [colleague] who was literally in tears not long ago just because of comments of her being promoted because she was black and that was the only reason" (L11).

In this context, where participants can see their colleagues harassed, belittled, and victimized, it is not surprising that they experience these stereotypical perceptions of their ethnicity or cultural background as detrimental to their career progression and ambitions. Such bigoted comments are sadly reflected in the recent BITC (2021) report.

## 5.2 | Intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and religion

Gender, compounded with ethnicity and religion, also negatively affected the career progression of the interviewees. While there were positive instances of cultural awareness, such as Halal meat made available at annual staff parties, many interviewees cited a lack of cultural understanding and empathy in the workplace. Consequently, employees

could feel excluded, and, over time, these issues could negatively affect their levels of ambition and discourage their applications for promotion. Participants described their employer as unaware, “not thinking outside the box” and therefore unable to accommodate their needs around religious observances and practices, for instance, scheduling team meetings at Eid or organizing sport events during Ramadan. Such cultural unfamiliarity reflects a lack of intersectional sensibility (Cho et al., 2013). For example, greater flexibility in schedules, not solely for certain employees, could have wider benefits:

“Whether it's saying, as a business, “Ramadan, if it affects anybody, please adapt the [lunch] breaks”, because you'd adapt it for somebody who was pregnant, or you'd try, because they might need to eat at a certain time or whatever. It needs to be a blanket approach though. If anybody's got anything personal or cultural that needs addressing at a certain time, I think, as a business, we could probably do more around it” (M16).

Here, rather than the company adapting for every employee, the retailer could instate an equitable, flexible lunch time policy within specific time boundaries i.e. applicable and accessible to everyone, not solely due to a specific need. Adapting relatively inflexible organisational practices for a privileged few, while overlooking those with multiple intersectional characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, interwoven with religion) as is suggested by this participant, is unjust and contributes to sustaining systemic inequalities (Acker, 2006). This lack of cultural and religious awareness meant that some White colleagues were seen to be uncomfortable around those from a minority background, which bemused some of our interviewees, both those working as front-of-house staff and in support services:

“A lot of people just can't even relate to you. I think it's lack of awareness of other cultures and religion ... even within my team, a lot of the lawyers, you can tell they don't interact with any BAME people because of their background, where they come from and who they, you know – I'm probably the only BAME person they know. It's a really sad state of affairs; it's a bit bizarre like, because a lot of them have lived in London” (L8).

While staff may have lived in multicultural cities, there is a perception that they have minimal cultural literacy, as they have interacted mainly within their own social and ethnic networks. This lack of intersectional sensibility and understanding of cultural differences led to individuals being incorrectly categorized based on one aspect of their identity, with ignorant comments being made by their colleagues:

“I think that most of them think that if you're black, you're a Muslim. A lot of people, they don't know the difference ... I was looking at the uniform and then somebody came and said “are you ordering that?” [Hijab] And then somebody said “yes, she's black”. So, you know, they don't... I wasn't ordering it, because I am not a Muslim, but I was just looking” (M14).

These are particularly inconsiderate and discriminatory remarks: our participant was not wearing a hijab in store at the time, which clearly signals that she would not order one for her uniform. Alas, unfamiliarity with religion and ethnicity coincided with generalizations made based on skin color. Such comments could be reduced, should the retailer provide sufficient D&I training to educate their staff on appropriate behavior.

While gender and its intersection with both ethnicity and religion resulted in multiple inequalities, other identity categories did not appear as salient in the retail context, although participants did note them: “*You've got your LGBT [staff] and then disability as well. It's great at entry level, we do have disabled people*” (L1). Mirroring the literature (e.g., Broadbridge, 2007, 2010; MBS, 2021), participants noticed lesser diverse representation in more senior positions at the retailer. More importantly, nine participants called for the retailer to pursue policies, practices, and strategies to make D&I more important, for example:

"In terms of misconduct, I think there should be stronger policies against people that say negative things about race and religion" (L11).

"I think we are talking about having like BAME specific mentoring, or progression development plans, targeting those BAME employees, and also training for those line managers in HR [best practice] as well in store, because a lot of the feedback I've got is just the lack of awareness" (L8).

Additional multiple identity categories, such as sexual orientation, while briefly mentioned by a few, were left largely unchallenged. Regarding age, three younger participants tended to be more optimistic in being able to achieve their potential, while others were very wary of the lack of minority-ethnic representation at higher levels and several senior colleagues had lost hope, as shown by this comment from an older participant:

"I just feel like there's always this clique thing at work. You feel like you're not in that thing, you feel like you have to fight to get something. I was very interested in climbing up the ladder, but it's just like gone flat now, I'm not bothered, I'm not interested anymore" (M14).

### 5.3 | Intersectional inequalities in the retail service encounter

So far, we have highlighted how inequality regimes existed that were based on intersectional identities and that there was a lack of intersectional sensibility within the organization, particularly around religion and ethnicity. However, the impact of these two factors was exacerbated by the way in which intersectional inequalities are embedded in the organisational practices and processes characteristic of the retail-specific service encounter (Castro & Holvino, 2016; Holvino, 2010). In terms of recognizing and accepting intersectional identities in the retail context, while five participants said that they had never experienced any form of unequal treatment and racial discrimination at work, our interviewees received significant prejudice from customers. Two examples are offered below:

"Oh, you're the Store Manager? Oh..." and you know what they're thinking, because [City district] is a very White area, and it's the older customer as well. So you can just see... And not being able to say my name. My name is not difficult, it's two syllables. "Can I shorten it?" "That is a shortened version, madam" ... "Can I call you Phillipa or Sue?" or whatever. No" (L1).

"I was making the coffee and my colleague was on the till ... Some customers, I think they were a bit like racist, and they complained about me and my colleague ... the manager was called, listened to the customer, they didn't come and question us what happened ... they said they don't want to see us when they're eating, and we were moved; we were actually moved. So, it was hiding from the customers, they said they don't want to see us" (M14).

Such disparaging comments or behavior from customers highlight customer expectations about the identities and the social position of the employee (Chang et al., 2015; Stets & Serpe, 2013). The first excerpt demonstrates a lack of "matching" on the part of the customer (Quach et al., 2017) where the customer simply does not expect that a minority-ethnic woman can be a store manager. However, given the power afforded by the store manager status, the first interviewee can challenge the remarks, whereas the second can do very little. Such experiences demonstrate how the intersection of race and gender becomes markedly salient within the retail service encounter, where the expectation is that the worker services the customer. The second quote is very undermining. In this instance, the customer is engaging in discriminatory "lookism" behaviors, based on appearance (Nickson et al., 2012; Warhurst et al., 2009), prejudicing workers, such as our participant, with darker skin tones (Walters, 2018). Of concern here is

that no procedural organisational policy appears to exist – or rather, the manager lacked the training or inclination to enforce the policy – which supports employees through experiences of discrimination or abuse from customers.

In summary, our findings reveal the existence of multi-layered and complex inequalities in UK retailing, a space in which gender does not function as an individual, isolated identity, but simultaneously interacts with ethnicity, religion and class, as well as wider structural inequalities, to create and shape less favorable career progression experiences for minority-ethnic women.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

Our findings highlight three key areas that impact upon the career experiences of minority-ethnic women and account for how intersectional identities influence their career progression experiences. The first is that despite the feminized nature of retail (Pettinger, 2005), our participants faced multiple career inequalities due to their intersectional positioning as minority-ethnic women. Second, there is a lack of intersectional sensibility within the company and, particularly, an unfamiliarity with religion and ethnicity. Third, the intersectional identities identified are embedded in organisational practices characteristic of the retail sector customer service encounter. Hence, the contribution of our work is to highlight how the multiple intersectional identities of employees – gleaned through assumptions made based on physical appearance (Nickson et al., 2005) – interact with, and manifest in, the unique retail environment and may or may not conform to consumers' expectations (Stets & Serpe, 2013). We now address each of these in turn before examining the conceptual and practical impact of the link between these three factors.

Where authors have previously noted the existence of Acker's (2006) inequality regimes in the UK retail sector, they have identified these regimes in terms of working long and unsociable hours (Broadbridge, 2002), being built upon and valuing a traditionally masculine organisational culture (Pettinger, 2005), and the lack of female representation in senior managerial roles, as well as a lack of mentors (Broadbridge, 2007, 2008a, b). Using an intersectional lens, we find that due to the multiple subordinate-group identities (Healy et al., 2011; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016), minority-ethnic women continue to face a multitude of challenges working in this sector. Power inequalities embedded in retail structures and in the customer-employee relationship interact with each another and with the multiple identity markers of ethnicity, religion, and gender for minority-ethnic women, to negatively shape their career progression experiences and may strengthen their self-perceptions of being the “outsider” (Atewologun & Singh, 2010).

In terms of career progression, our findings show that many of our participants (9/12) were ambitious and wished to progress their careers. They felt that gender as an identity marker of its own did not lead to any feelings of exclusion, nor was it detrimental to their progression. This may be because of the attributes and skills of emotional and esthetic labor associated with feminine performativity (Pettinger, 2005), are sought after and innately embedded in this highly feminized retail context (Broadbridge, 2010). However, we have demonstrated that the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity resulted in multiple types of inequalities and impacted upon their career experiences. Supporting and advancing previous scholarship, but within the UK retail sector context, we found that the intersection of gender and ethnic identity categories, which function as visible indicators of affiliation with less powerful groups, bring with them distinct challenges (Atewologun & Singh, 2010). These findings echo other career progression accounts of minority-ethnic women in intersectional organisational studies (Atewologun & Singh, 2010; Castro & Holvino, 2016; Tariq & Syed, 2018; Walters, 2018).

In relation to intersectional sensibility, most interviewees (8/12) perceived that their ethnicity hindered their career progression due to the lack of cultural and religious awareness among fellow colleagues and managers. They received stereotypical comments from senior colleagues and experienced colleagues belittling their achievements. This absence of intersectional sensibility (Cho et al., 2013; Healy et al., 2011) had an important impact on access to progression and opportunities. Nine participants felt strongly that the retailer needed to implement more D&I initiatives and training to raise awareness of different identity groups. A lack of cultural awareness and understanding from colleagues and managers, aggravated by a lack of socialization with minority-ethnic groups outside of the workplace,

led to issues of essentialism (the generalization of separate identity categories into one collective identity) and negative perceptions made based on appearance. This could cause misinformation about diverse cultures, which, left unchallenged, resulted in stereotypical perceptions and racial discrimination. Furthermore, akin to work by Harris and Ogbonna, (2015), our study finds that managers appeared to overlook their responsibility to ensure fairness through employing informal discriminatory practices, such as recruiting those with the “right look” and desired esthetic labor (Walters, 2018; Warhurst et al., 2009; Williams & Connell, 2010) to store manager roles.

Our third point concerns organisational practices and cultures characteristic of the UK retail sector. As organizations are sites in which inequalities are generated and replicated (Acker, 2006; Winker & Degele, 2011), the extent to which our minority-ethnic female participants reported that they had experienced discriminatory behavior from customers was very high. This is surprising, given that the retail sector is described as feminized (Broadbridge, 2010), with a greater proportion of female esthetic laborers (Warhurst et al., 2000). Given the necessity for retail workers to embody certain social and cultural capitals which espouse feminine performativity for boosting sales, especially in fashion retail (Pettinger, 2005; Walters, 2018), it could be argued that navigating the gendered retail space may be less challenging for female employees. However, our findings highlight how the context of the retail environment at an organisational level intersects with systemic assumptions made at a societal level, which disproportionately impacts upon our participants. Within the inequalities entrenched in organisational processes (Castro & Holvino, 2016; Holvino, 2010), our minority-ethnic female participants are disproportionately affected by discrimination from customers in comparison to their White counterparts. Akin to prior scholarship, the appearance of customer-service retail employees seems to intersect not solely with gender, but also with ethnicity (Castro & Holvino, 2016; Walters, 2018; Williams & Connell, 2010), and age (Foster & Resnick, 2013).

Furthermore, the importance placed on the “embodied” nature of esthetic labor results in customers making assumptions of the social identity of front-line staff based upon their physical appearance (Chang et al., 2015; Quach et al., 2017; Walters, 2018). Appearance is significant in retailing, as this is a space in which, in most cases, the level of seniority of an employee is visibly reflected by their uniforms. Customers may falsely conclude that staff are lacking in certain forms of social and cultural capital (Pettinger, 2005) required in their role and discriminate against them in word or action. In intersectional terms, the processes and systems of “capitalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and nationalism” which (re)produce social inequalities (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 200) have granted power to certain groups; namely, the White, middle class. These groups can maintain this power and have employed it against others, creating social hierarchies (Crenshaw, 1991). Given the “feminization” of service (Pettinger, 2005), the power disparity in this situation may be further heightened, when female employees serve male customers in the retail service encounter, as the gender (and possibly ethnicity) of the employee become more salient in this context. Hence, we propose that the power relationship between customer and employee, while causing alienation at the best of times, may be exacerbated between a minority-ethnic female employee and clients in higher positions of privilege (Korczyński, 2009). This supports the argument made by Healy et al. (2011, p. 484) in that “such organizational interactions are clearly themselves the product of the gendered, racialized and classed structures in the wider society”.

Socialization processes and human interactions over time create a pattern of expectations of roles and the individuals who tend to be performing the role (Chang et al., 2015; Stets & Serpe, 2013). As such, our findings illustrate that the expectations of customers tend to conform to the enduring outlook in UK retail that managers tend to be (White) men (Broadbridge, 2007). This mismatch demonstrates a misalignment – a lack of “matching” – of customer expectations of both the role itself and the individual performing the role in terms of social positioning (Nickson et al., 2012; Stets & Serpe, 2013) and results in a negative effect on trust and satisfaction in the relationship (Quach et al., 2017). Such a lack of “matching” between how customers think retail service staff should look and their real-life experiences points to how gendered and racialized assumptions interwoven with power relations are firmly embedded within retailing.

In sum, much of the existent literature on careers in UK retail demonstrates that despite many rapid changes in this feminized sector over several decades, the retailing culture remains masculine, with low female representation at senior managerial levels (Broadbridge, 2008b, 2010; Lim, 2021). The current findings add to a growing body of



literature using intersectionality theory and, akin to previous work (Acker, 2006; Atewologun & Singh, 2010; Tariq & Syed, 2018), has investigated the intersections of gender with other social categories of difference in organizations. We argue that retail is an important site to investigate the intersection of gender, ethnicity and religion. Given the structure and masculine culture of the sector, retailing is a space within which gendered and racialized practices and processes are reproduced; hence, maintaining inherent inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). This unfortunate mirroring of wider societal power structures has imbued the systemic inequalities resonating from organisational practices (Castro & Holvino, 2016; Holvino, 2010) in the UK retail sector, which means that minority-ethnic women, the “multiply burdened” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 152) tend to experience greater inequalities due to their multiple subordinate-group identities (Healy et al., 2011). Employing intersectionality as a theoretical framework in this research to give voice to minority-ethnic retail employees directs our attention to how their career progression experiences are co-constructed through the symbiotic interaction of their multiple identities with wider social systems (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). The advantage of our intersectional thinking here is in appreciating that disadvantage is not “additive”: identities interdependently “interact” and cannot be understood in isolation (Crenshaw, 1989). Indeed, the additional contribution of our work is to highlight how these interactions are manifested within a distinctive organisational context: that of retail. As such, we build upon previous studies and argue that when certain attributes of customer service staff, such as physical appearance (Nickson et al., 2005), do not conform to the expectations of the consumers, as stipulated in role theory (Stets & Serpe, 2013), staff can feel high levels of alienation (Hochschild, 1983), which disproportionately affects minority-ethnic female retail employees. This alienation, caused by multiple negative experiences during the retail service encounter, can lead to minority-ethnic women feeling unable or discouraged to achieve their career goals.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Embracing the call to advance its methodological application (McCall, 2005) and further extend the intersectional footprint across organization studies (Castro & Holvino, 2016; Holvino, 2010), this research uses intersectionality as a theoretical lens to examine the experiences and perceptions of minority-ethnic women working in UK retail. We have examined the systems, structures, and power relations specific to the retail context which uphold inequalities for minority-ethnic female workers, and our individual-level analyses give voice to these women, underrepresented due to their multiple minority positions (Atewologun & Singh, 2010; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). We found that minority-ethnic female retail workers who are “multiply-burdened” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 152) – whose identity comprises many “minority” categories – are more likely to face challenges in progressing their careers than their White counterparts in the sector. This research sought to increase our knowledge of the career progression experiences of women from minority-ethnic groups at a leading UK retailer and illuminate the impact of intersecting identities on this progression. The focus of this research is timely, given that there is limited academic research giving voice to UK minority-ethnic workers and their attitudes to and experiences at work (Atewologun & Singh, 2010; Kenny & Briner, 2007; Tariq & Syed, 2018).

Conducting research with individuals with multiple subordinate identities, as opposed to one single subordinate identity characteristic, offers a more profound understanding of their lived experience and the inequalities faced by these groups. Adopting an “intersectional sensibility” through its use as a theoretical framework (Cho et al., 2013) has enabled a more “worldview” approach to data analysis. The multiplicity of identities of each participant – their whole self – is holistically valued and evaluated in the esthetic labor performance (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007; Witz et al., 2003) in the customer-employee relationship (Korczyński, 2009), which takes place within a gendered retail context (Pettinger, 2005).

While the findings presented here offer useful direction and a basis for additional research into the UK retail sector and intersectionality, one limitation is the relatively small sample size of the study. Small scale qualitative studies, however, have the advantage of enabling close insight into the lived experiences of our participants. Further

intersectional case studies, which give voice to disadvantaged or underrepresented workers, either within retail or in other sectors, would yield additional insights into how the intersectionality of inequalities manifests in different contexts and how power relations within different firms fundamentally contribute to the subordination of distinct groups (Bradley & Healy, 2008). Furthermore, we argue there is a need to focus on the power relations and intersectional identities at play in this retail service encounter (Korczynski, 2009). This is important, given the centrality of many retailers' ethos and mission of "putting the customer at the heart" of what they do. As such, future studies investigating the career progression experiences of minority-ethnic women could examine the potential misalignment with the traditionally feminine culture expected and experienced in the (retail) service encounter.

There are several practicalities of our analysis that could be addressed by HR practitioners. As organizations not only recognize the business case for diversity (Foster, 2005), but embrace inclusive practices (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011), the first is that a recognition of inequality regimes at work could enable interventions aimed at challenging the in-built disadvantage in the workplace. These interventions would need to address structural inequalities and ensure that line managers are rewarded for their promotion of members of traditionally excluded and disadvantaged groups. Line manager accountability is important, given the significance they have on opportunities for career progression, as noted not just in this research but in that of others too (e.g., CIPD, 2017; Healy et al., 2011). A second stream of work could focus on intersectional sensibility in terms of enhancing the understanding of the general workforce of the experiences of different groups and a recognition, or education in this case, of how privilege works and the consequences for minority-ethnic workers. Other examples could include education about different cultural groups who may be part of the workforce, as called for by Atewologun and Singh (2010). Furthermore, in the same way that many UK retail organizations and other companies have outwardly celebrated Pride as a way of demonstrating support for LGBT workers, similarly some celebration of the achievements of minority-ethnic workers would be a positive step. The recent publicity around the Black Lives Matter movement provides an added impetus for such interventions. Thirdly, there is an education piece to be done for customers. As UK employers sign up to the "Service with Respect" campaign launched in July 2020 (Institute of Customer Services, 2021), retail companies are increasingly displaying signs highlighting a "low tolerance policy" toward the abuse of customer service staff. By explicitly naming racism as a form of abuse in these policies, this highlights to minority-ethnic workers that such abuse will not be tolerated. While they may not necessarily be able account for the opinions and attitudes of customers, organizations can put policies in place to support staff when discrimination or abuse happens, such as appropriately managing both the abusive customer and supporting the member of staff at the time of the incident and then having a follow-up (team) meeting with the employee.

In conclusion, in a service-driven sector dependent upon consumers, there is a need to consider intersectional identity experiences and power relations within the customer-employee retail relationship, as this disproportionately affects minority-ethnic women and their everyday lived experiences of work. As minority-ethnic women continue to experience more subtle, indirect, every-day forms of discrimination in the UK retail sector (Harris & Ogbonna, 2015), it is important that their voices are heard, and such discrimination addressed.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

## ORCID

Juliet Elizabeth Kele  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4324-8685>

## REFERENCES

- Acker, Joan. 2006. "Inequality Regimes. Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations." *Gender & Society* 20(4): 441–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206289499>.
- Arifeen, Shehla R., and C. Gatrell. 2020. "Those Glass Chains that Bind You: How British Muslim Women Professionals Experience Career, Faith and Family." *British Journal of Management* 31: 221–36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12387>.

- Atewologun, Doyin, and Val Singh. 2010. "Challenging Ethnic and Gender Identities: An Exploration of UK Black Professionals' Identity Construction." *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: International Journal* 29(4): 332–47. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02610151011042394>.
- Berthoud, Richard. 2000. "Ethnic Employment Penalties in Britain." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 26(3): 389–416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713680490>.
- Bradley, Harriet, and Geraldine Healy. 2008. *Ethnicity and Gender at Work - Inequalities, Career and Employment Relations*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Broadbridge, Adelina. 1998. "Barriers in the Career Progression of Retail Managers." *International Review of Retail Distribution & Consumer Research* 8(1): 1–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095939698342878>.
- Broadbridge, Adelina. 2002. "Retail Managers: Their Work Stressors and Coping Strategies." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 9(3): 173–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0969-6989%2801%2900020-0>.
- Broadbridge, Adelina. 2007. "Dominated by Women: Managed by Men? The Career Development Process of Retail Managers." *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* 35(12): 956–74. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09590550710835193>.
- Broadbridge, Adelina. 2008a. "Barriers to Ascension to Senior Management Positions in Retailing." *Service Industries Journal* 28(9): 1225–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642060802230148>.
- Broadbridge, Adelina. 2008b. "Senior Careers in Retailing: An Exploration of Male and Female Executives' Career Facilitators and Barriers." *Gender in Management: International Journal* 23(1): 11–35. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17542410810849105>.
- Broadbridge, Adelina. 2010. "25 Years of Retailing; 25 Years of Change? Reflecting on the Position of Women Managers." *Gender in Management: International Journal* 25(8): 649–60. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17542411011092318>.
- Business in the Community (BITC). 2015a. *Race at Work 2015 Survey Insights. BAME Women and Their Experiences of Career Progression*. [https://race.bitc.org.uk/system/files/research/raw\\_bame\\_women\\_insight\\_03032017.pdf](https://race.bitc.org.uk/system/files/research/raw_bame_women_insight_03032017.pdf).
- Business in the Community (BITC). 2015b. *Race at Work. London: Business in the Community*. <https://www.bitc.org.uk/report/race-at-work-2015/>.
- Business in the Community (BITC). 2021. *Race At Work 2021: The Scorecard Report*. <https://www.bitc.org.uk/report/race-at-work-2021-the-scorecard-report/>.
- Carmichael, F., and R. Woods. 2000. "Ethnic Penalties in Unemployment and Occupational Attainment: Evidence for Britain." *International Review of Applied Economics* 14(1): 71–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026921700101498>.
- Castro, Mayra R., and Evangelina Holvino. 2016. "Applying Intersectionality in Organizations: Inequality Markers, Cultural Scripts and Advancement Practices in a Professional Service Firm." *Gender, Work and Organization* 23(3): 328–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12129>.
- Chang, Joshua, Antonio Travaglione, and Grant O'Neill. 2015. "How Can Gender Signal Employee Qualities in Retailing?" *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 27: 24–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2015.07.004>.
- Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. 2013. "Toward a Field of Intersectionality: Theory, Application, and Praxis." *Signs* 38: 785–810. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>.
- CIPD. 2017. *Addressing the Barriers to BAME Employee Career Progression to the Top*. [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/addressing-the-barriers-to-BAME-employee-career-progression-to-the-top\\_tcm18-33336.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/addressing-the-barriers-to-BAME-employee-career-progression-to-the-top_tcm18-33336.pdf).
- Clark, Ken, and Stephen Drinkwater. 2007. *Ethnic Minorities in the Labour Market: Dynamics and Diversity*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/ethnic-minorities-labour-market-dynamics-and-diversity>.
- Crabtree, Benjamin F., and William L. Miller, eds. 1999. "Using Codes and Code Manuals: A Template Organizing Style of Interpretation." In *Doing Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed., 163–178. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing Inc.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine In Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, Vol. 1989, 139–67. University of Chicago Legal Forum. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43: 1241–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.
- Davis, Kathy. 2008. "Intersectionality as Buzzword." *Feminist Theory* 9(1): 67–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086364>.
- Dickens, Linda. 1999. "Beyond the Business-Case: A Three-Pronged Approach to Equality Action." *Human Resource Management Journal* 9(1): 9–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-8583.1999.tb00185.x>.
- Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). 2019. *Is Britain Fairer? The State of Equality and Human Rights 2018*. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/is-britain-fairer-accessible.pdf>.
- Foster, Carley. 2005. "Implementing Diversity Management in Retailing: Exploring the Role of Organisational Context." *International Review of Retail Distribution & Consumer Research* 15(4): 471–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09593960500197693>.
- Foster, Carley, and Sheilagh Resnick. 2013. "Service Worker Appearance and the Retail Service Encounter: The Influence of Gender and Age." *Service Industries Journal* 33(2): 236–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2011.614341>.
- Garner, Steve. 2006. "The Uses of Whiteness: What Sociologists Working on Europe Can Draw from US Research on Whiteness." *Sociology* 40(2): 257–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038506062032>.

- Ghumman, Sonia, and Ann M. Ryan. 2013. "Not welcome Here: Discrimination towards Women Who Wear the Muslim Headscarf." *Human Relations* 66(5): 671–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726712469540>.
- Harris, Lloyd C., and Emmanuel Ogbonna. 2015. "Ethnic Gatekeeping on the Shopfloor: A Study of Bases, Motives and Approaches." *Work, Employment & Society* 30(1): 59–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017015606338>.
- Healy, Geraldine, Harriet Bradley, and Cynthia Forson. 2011. "Intersectional Sensibilities in Analysing Inequality Regimes in Public Sector Organizations." *Gender, Work and Organization* 18(5): 467–87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2011.00557.x>.
- Heath, Anthony, and Sin Y. Cheung. 2006. *Ethnic Penalties in the Labour Market: Employers and discrimination*. Research Report No 341. Department for Work and Pensions. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130125104217/http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2005-2006/rrep341.pdf>.
- Heath, Anthony, and Jean Martin. 2013. "Can Religious Affiliation Explain 'Ethnic' Inequalities in the Labour Market?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(6): 1005–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2012.657660>.
- Hill Collins, Patricia, and Sirma Bilge. 2016. *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hochschild, Arlie. 1983. *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Holvino, Evangelina. 2010. "Intersections: The Simultaneity of Race, Gender and Class in Organization Studies." *Gender, Work and Organization* 17: 248–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2008.00400.x>.
- Institute of Customer Services. 2021. *Service with Respect*. <https://www.instituteofcustomerservice.com/news/service-with-respect/>.
- Kamenou, Nicolina, and Anne Fearfull. 2006. "Ethnic Minority Women: A Lost Voice in HRM." *Human Resource Management Journal* 16: 154–172. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-8583.2006.00010.x>.
- Kamenou, Nicolina, Gina Netto, and Anne Fearfull. 2013. "Ethnic Minority Women and the Scottish Labour Market." *British Journal of Management* 24: 398–413. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2012.00811.x>.
- Kanter, Rosabeth M. 1977. *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kenny, Elyn J., and Rob B. Briner. 2007. "Ethnicity and Behaviour in Organizations: A Review of British Research." *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 80(3): 437–57. <https://doi.org/10.1348/096317906X156313>.
- King, Nigel. 2004. "Using Templates in the Thematic Analysis of Text." In *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*, edited by Cassell C.M., and G. Symon, 256–70. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Korczynski, Marek. 2009. "The Mystery Customer: Continuing Absences in the Sociology of Service Work." *Sociology* 43(5): 952–67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509340725>.
- Lim, S. 2021. *Who Changes CEO in a Global Pandemic? UK Retail CEO Tracker 2021*. London: Korn Ferry. <https://www.kornferry.com/content/dam/kornferry/docs/pdfs/retail-ceo-tracker-2021-final.pdf>.
- Lindley, Joanne. 2002. "Race or Religions? The Impact of Religion on the Employment and Earnings of Britain's Ethnic Communities." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28(3): 427–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830220146536>.
- Lorbieki, Anna, and Gavin Jack. 2000. "Critical Turns in the Evolution of Diversity Management." *British Journal of Management* 11: 17–531: *Special Issue*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.11.s1.3>.
- MBS Group. 2021. *Diversity and Inclusion in UK Retail: Where are We Now and What Comes Next?* <https://brc.org.uk/media/677267/diversity-and-inclusion-in-uk-retail-in-depth-research-and-analysis-from-brc-the-mbs-group-and-pwc-2021-002.pdf>.
- McCall, Leslie. 2005. "The Complexity of Intersectionality." *Signs* 30(3): 1771–1800. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426800>.
- McGregor-Smith. 2017. *Race in the Workplace*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/594336/race-in-workplace-mcgregor-smith-review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/594336/race-in-workplace-mcgregor-smith-review.pdf).
- Nickson, Dennis, Chris Warhurst, Johanna Commander, Scott A. Hurrell, and Anne M. Cullen. 2012. "Soft Skills and Employability: Evidence from UK Retail." *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 33(1): 65–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X11427589>.
- Nickson, Dennis, Chris Warhurst, and Eli Dutton. 2005. "The Importance of Attitude and Appearance in the Service Encounter in Retail and Hospitality." *Managing Service Quality: International Journal* 15(2): 195–208. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09604520510585370>.
- Office for National Statistics (ONS). 2021. *Annual Population Survey - Regional - Jul 2020-Jun 2021 - Employment by Occupation*. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/datasets/aps168>.
- Ogbonna, Emmanuel, and Lloyd C. Harris. 2001. "The Performance Implications of the Work-Oriented Cognitions of Shop-floor Workers: A Study of British Retailing." *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 12(6): 1005–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713769683>.
- Opara, Victoria, Ruth Sealy, and Michelle K. Ryan. 2020. "The Workplace Experiences of BAME Professional Women: Understanding Experiences at the Intersection." *Gender, Work and Organization* 27(6): 1192–1213. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12456>.
- Özbilgin, Mustafa F., and Ahu Tatli. 2011. "Mapping Out the Field of Equality and Diversity: Rise of Individualism and Voluntarism." *Human Relations* 64(9): 1229–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711413620>.

- Pettinger, Lynne. 2005. "Gendered Work Meets Gendered Goods: Selling and Service in Clothing Retail." *Gender, Work and Organization* 12(5): 460–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2005.00284.x>.
- Quach, Sara, Charles Jebarajakirthy, and Park Thaichon. 2017. "Aesthetic Labor and Visible Diversity: The Role in Retailing Service Encounters." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 38: 34–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2017.05.004>.
- Rafferty, Anthony. 2012. "Ethnic Penalties in Graduate Level Over-education, Unemployment and Wages: Evidence from Britain." *Work, Employment & Society* 26(6): 987–1006. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017012458021>.
- Rhodes, Chris, and Philip Brien. 2018. *The Retail Industry: Statistics and Policy Briefing Paper*. House of Commons Library (HOCL): Number 06186. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06186/SN06186.pdf>.
- Shin, Shung J., Tae-Yeol Kim, Jeong-Yeon Lee, and Lin Bian. 2012. "Cognitive Team Diversity and Individual Team Member Creativity: A Cross-Level Interaction." *Academy of Management Journal* 55(1): 197–212. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2010.0270>.
- Stets, Jan E, and Richard T. Serpe. 2013. "Identity Theory." In *Handbook of Social Psychology*, edited by DeLamater John, and Amanda Ward, 31–60. Netherlands: Springer.
- Storm, Ingrid, Maria Sobolewska, and Robert Ford. 2017. "Is Ethnic Prejudice Declining in Britain? Change in Social Distance Among Ethnic Minority and Majority Britons." *British Journal of Sociology* 68(3): 410–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12250>.
- Tariq, Memoona, and Jawad Syed. 2018. "An Intersectional Perspective on Muslim Women's Issues and Experiences in Employment." *Gender, Work and Organization* 25: 495–513. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12256>.
- Walters, Kyla. 2016. "Mall Models: How Abercrombie & Fitch Sexualizes its Retail Workers." *Sexualization, Media, & Society* 2(2): 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2374623816643283>.
- Walters, Kyla. 2018. "'They'll Go with the Lighter': Tri-racial Aesthetic Labor in Clothing Retail." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 4(1): 128–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649217710662>.
- Warhurst, Chris, and Dennis Nickson. 2007. "Employee Experience of Aesthetic Labour in Retail and Hospitality." *Work, Employment & Society* 21(1): 103–120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017007073622>.
- Warhurst, Chris, Dennis Nickson, Anne Witz, and Anne M. Cullen. 2000. "Aesthetic Labour in Interactive Service Work: Some Case Study Evidence from the "New" Glasgow." *Service Industries Journal* 20(3): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642060000000029>.
- Warhurst, Chris, Diane Van den Broek, Richard Hall, and Dennis Nickson. 2009. "Lookism: The New Frontier of Employment Discrimination?" *Journal of Industrial Relations* 51(1): 131–136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185608096808>.
- Williams, Christine L., and Catherine Connell. 2010. "'Looking Good and Sounding Right': Aesthetic Labor and Social Inequality in the Retail Industry." *Work and Occupations* 37(3): 349–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888410373744>.
- Winker, Gabriele, and Nina Degele. 2011. "Intersectionality as Multi-Level Analysis: Dealing with Social Inequality." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 18(1): 51–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506810386084>.
- Witz, Anne, Chris Warhurst, and Dennis Nickson. 2003. "The Labour of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Organization." *Organization* 10(1): 33–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508403010001375>.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Dr Juliet Elizabeth Kele** is a Lecturer in Leadership and HRM at Newcastle Business School. She completed a post-doc at Birmingham Business School following her work as a Teaching Fellow in HRM and completion of her PhD at the University of Leeds. Juliet's research interests include gender, ethnicity, social class and how these relate to (in)equalities in work, economies and societies. She is passionate about conducting research on equality, diversity, and inclusion and specifically, using intersectionality to advance our understanding of inequalities and power relations.

**Professor Catherine Cassell** is Dean of Birmingham Business School. Catherine is an internationally renowned researcher in the field of organisational psychology with a particular interest in qualitative research methodologies. She also researches in the area of diversity and organisational change. Her recent projects include a £659k ESRC funded grant looking at diversity and inclusion within a major high street retailer. A keen mentor of others, she has supervised 23 doctoral students to completion.

**Jacqueline Ford** is Professor of Leadership and Organization Studies at Durham University Business School. Her research interests include critical feminist, psychosocial and interdisciplinary approaches that recognize specific gender, wider diversity and ethical dimensions, and ways in which leadership and management research and practice impact on working lives and identities. She has co-authored a monograph on leadership and co-edited a textbook on critical leadership studies and has published in a range of scholarly journals including *British Journal of Management*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Leadership*, *Management Learning*, *Organization*, *Organization Studies*, *Sociology*, *Work Employment and Society*.

**Dr Kathryn Watson** manages research impact and external engagement for Leeds University Business School. She has worked as both a professional and an academic and equality, diversity and inclusion has been a key focus of her work over several years. As a researcher she has been the principal investigator on an ESRC grant 'Raising the Ceiling on Corporate Diversity and Inclusion', a collaboration with a large UK retailer. Subsequently, she has conducted research with a UK police force and is currently an investigator on a collaborative research project with a public sector organization addressing equality, diversity and inclusion in the supply chain.

**How to cite this article:** Kele, Juliet Elizabeth, Catherine Cassell, Jacqueline Ford, and Kathryn Watson. 2022. "Intersectional Identities and Career Progression in Retail: The Experiences of Minority-Ethnic Women." *Gender, Work & Organization* 29(4), 1178–1198. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12830>.