



## Ethnic minority families

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The *Fourth Survey of Ethnic Minorities*, carried out by the Policy Studies Institute in 1994, confirmed that people in Britain from Caribbean and Asian ethnic minority groups often had different kinds of family formation. This follow-on qualitative study by Sharon Beishon, Tariq Modood and Satnam Virdee, based on interviews with 68 ethnic minority families, details the views on family life of three groups - African-Caribbeans; Indians and African Asians; and Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Some interviews were also undertaken with white people in order to be able to make comparisons, where appropriate.

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**f** Pakistani and Bangladeshi respondents preferred multi-generational households. Most of those interviewed felt that married women should not take up paid employment outside the home. African-Caribbeans were likely to have a more individualistic outlook - a majority of interviewees from this group believed that independence and physical and emotional 'space' were necessary for individual maturity.

**f** While arranged marriages were expected to prevail as a custom among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, it was envisaged that in future those getting married will have some say in the choice of spouse. African-Asians and Indians practised a 'negotiated' form of arranged marriage, in which parents and the young people both have a say.

**f** A positive attitude to marriage and to the perceived benefits for children of being raised in this family structure was common to all Asian groups. However, African-Asians and Indians were much more positive than the other Asian groups about women having paid employment outside the home, and people having relationships outside their own ethnic group. The majority of African-Caribbean and white interviewees also held positive views on these issues.

**f** Most of the African-Caribbeans, whether married or not, valued the institution of marriage, but many also believed that the quality of a relationship is more important than having a marriage certificate.

**f** Many of the ethnic minority respondents in this study thought their families were very different to those of the white population (and in some cases this view influenced a negative opinion of mixed relationships). The most cited difference was that white parents were thought to lack a commitment to parenting, with the result that white children were undisciplined and lacking in respect for their parents and elders.

## Introduction

This qualitative study is not designed to replicate quantitative analyses, but rather to probe behind the statistics into the lived experiences, values and attitudes that lead to particular patterns of family life. The interviewees are thus not statistically representative of the whole of particular ethnic groups. However, some general findings emerge of ethnic minority groups with values and norms which are sometimes different from those prevailing among the white population. Although there were differences within each ethnic group, it is possible to sketch a general picture for each:

### Pakistanis and Bangladeshis

In many respects Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were the most traditional in relation to household arrangements. The majority of those interviewed believed in multi-generational households with parents and their adult sons' families, and any unmarried adult children, living together.

The tradition of arranged marriages and the institution of marriage were strongly supported, and interviewees expressed a belief that cohabitation was wrong, illegitimacy shameful and divorce spiritually and morally unacceptable. This group believed in a traditional division of labour within the household; half felt that the woman's job was in the home and others that it was completely unacceptable for married women with children to go out to work.

Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were concerned that their children should be involved in some form of cultural or religious activity and had access to Islamic teaching. While most were against marrying outside their ethnic group, they felt it was acceptable if the prospective partner were Muslim or prepared to become a Muslim.

### Indians and African-Asians

In terms of their attitudes towards marriage and bringing up children within marriage, the Indians and African-Asians interviewed generally had similar views to Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.

This group had more say in the choice of partner within arranged marriages, but were similar in their support of a traditional division of labour within the household. However, there was less consensus among this group on divorce, with half supporting an individual's right to divorce, and there was little opposition to mixed relationships.

In terms of women and children's activities outside the home, Indians and African-Asians were closer to the African-Caribbean view that women should be able to go out to work (although a number of provisos were raised), and the majority of their children did not undertake special cultural activities. Indians and African-Asians expressed greater satisfaction with their children's education than other groups, except whites.

### African-Caribbeans

This group of interviewees did not believe in multi-generational households. Although there was considerable aspiration to be married and many saw it as raising the social status of women, many did believe that cohabitation was a pragmatic 'first step' towards

marriage. A minority felt that there was little difference between cohabitation and marriage. Most felt that divorce was permissible under a range of circumstances and that commitment to children was not necessarily related to commitment between parents.

African-Caribbean interviewees, like Indians and African-Asians, thought it permissible for women to be in paid employment outside the home, with some reservations regarding financial circumstances and the age of the woman's children. Most children did not take part in any distinctive cultural activities (although a third took part in activities related to church or religion) and most interviewees did not object to mixed relationships, though some negatively associated it with social climbing.

### Multi-generational households

Most Pakistanis and Bangladeshis felt that multi-generational households were an ideal solution for living, which fostered deep and meaningful relationships:

*"With an elder person around children learn something more of the values of your culture, respect...If they go into an old people's home, no love there, nothing, just material comforts, no more than that."*

Younger Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were generally as much in favour of living in an extended family, though a few felt it was better to have parents living locally rather than with the household, for reasons of privacy and autonomy.

Indian and African-Asian parents believed that married children should set up home on their own but felt that they should remain nearby to look after their parents. In this, their views were much closer to the African-Caribbeans. But, like other Asians, they expected unmarried children, regardless of their age, to live with their parents.

The overwhelming majority of African-Caribbean respondents felt that breaking ties with home and parents was a positive way of building life and emotional skills. Living in the same locality rather than together was regarded as ideal.

### Marriage

A positive attitude to marriage and to bringing up children within marriage was shared by Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, and Indians and African-Asians. The interviews also suggested that even if statistically most African-Caribbean adults are not married, more than actually do get married aspire to marriage and do not regard other forms of relationships as being as meaningful as marriage. One African-Caribbean respondent said:

*"I believe in the institution of marriage. If I'm good enough for you to live with, I'm good enough for you to marry."*

### Arranged marriages

Most Pakistanis and Bangladeshis had some form of arranged marriage. While no one who had had such an arrangement expressed any objections to them, some wished they had been older before they had got

married. Respondents who were married had had no say in the process of selecting a spouse, but said they would be prepared to give their children a say, when the time came.

Most of the married Indians and African-Asians in the study had also had an arranged marriage, but had had some input into the selection process. Most of those not yet married believed that although they were likely to have an arranged marriage, they would have more say in the choice of partner:

*"Today [an arranged marriage] means getting introduced to people through your parents and other family and then having your own personal choice to make a decision...it's not a forced decision."*

Some parents believed that their children were unlikely to have an arranged marriage.

### Cohabitation

South Asians perceived cohabitation as a loose arrangement in which men were very likely to abandon women and children. They considered illegitimacy shameful, and believed that both parents and children suffered as a result.

Many African-Caribbeans who were currently single wanted to be married, but viewed cohabitation as a pragmatic 'first step' towards marriage:

*"Ultimately, I'd like to be married but...It's like I'd have to live with him a little while before I start the marriage business."*

This view was generally echoed by the whites interviewed. Some African-Caribbeans and a few whites believed that cohabitation was more likely to lead to relationship breakdown.

### Children before marriage?

For most African-Caribbeans, making a commitment to children was not necessarily related to commitment between parents.

*"What is marriage? It's just a piece of paper isn't it? It just legitimates everything...That's all it does and if the marriage is shit, then what's the point?"*

This view was not shared by South Asians. African-Caribbeans and South Asians agreed, however, that marriage provided more stability for children and parents, as well as additional emotional benefits for children including positive role models and an inner sense of confidence.

### Divorce

In this small-scale study, almost all Pakistanis and Bangladeshis felt that married couples should not divorce.

There was less consensus amongst the Indians and African-Asians interviewed. Those who felt that divorce was unacceptable emphasised the adverse effects on children. About half the Indians and African-Asians supported individuals' right to divorce. Like those against divorce, these respondents supported their arguments by referring to the detrimental effects on children (which they felt was

contributed to by conflict between parents).

A few African-Caribbeans felt that divorce was only permissible under extreme circumstances, such as physical cruelty. Most African-Caribbeans and whites in this study felt that divorce was permissible under a whole range of circumstances, for example where the couple were unhappy together and unable to get on.

### The domestic division of labour

In many households amongst all ethnic groups domestic labour was unevenly divided, with women taking the larger share of household tasks. There was little suggestion that men were actively sharing domestic labour, regardless of whether either or both parties were working outside the home. As one Indian man said:

*"I have never been expected to do anything in the kitchen. Maintenance is my responsibility. She wouldn't like me to cook."*

It was only among the few white households that were interviewed that the wives and mothers appeared to be doing less domestic labour than their ethnic minority counterparts. This was partly because white men were more willing to share housework, and in white homes paid help was more likely to be used.

### Women and work

Most respondents in all groups, except Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, thought it was permissible for women to be in paid employment outside the home. There were mixed feelings about this, however, as many also felt that the age of a woman's children and the financial circumstances of the family were important factors. The younger the children and the wealthier the family, the less likely were respondents to favour work outside of the home for the mother. Nevertheless, many women in all groups except Pakistanis and Bangladeshis seemed to take work for granted, and felt that it gave women a degree of financial independence and boosted their morale and self-esteem.

Nearly half of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (of which two-thirds of this sample were men) felt that a married woman's job was in the home looking after the family. Some others felt it was completely unacceptable for married women with children to go out to work. Most also felt, however, that it was permissible, rather than wholly acceptable, for single women to work, particularly if they could work in wholly female environments.

### Children

Overall, whites, Indians and African-Asians were the most satisfied with their children's education and African-Caribbeans least satisfied.

Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents were most concerned about their children having access to Islamic teaching. Nearly all ensured that their children undertook some form of cultural or religious activity.

Most Indian, African-Asian and African-Caribbean parents reported that their children did not take part in any distinctive cultural activities. Many African-Caribbean parents nevertheless wished to have Black history taught in schools, believing that it would help

build a positive identity, confidence or self-respect.

A third of African-Caribbean children took part in activities related to the church or religion. Activities included Sunday school, participation in religious playgroups, church after-school clubs or religious studies at home under parental instruction.

### Ethnic and cultural diversity

Most respondents from ethnic minorities, particularly Asians, felt they had little in common with white families. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis emphasised respect for elders and parents, and saw white parents as having little control over their children.

The ethnic minority groups also thought they were very different from each other.

### Attitudes towards mixed relationships

While most Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were against the idea of marrying outside their ethnic group, most felt it was acceptable if the prospective partner were Muslim or were prepared to become a Muslim.

*"Whether Pakistani or Arabian or Jamaican or American, so long as the religion is Muslim [Islam]. If the religion is Muslim then you can go with anybody, there is no obstruction...How can I joyfully get on with him? To marry is you and I to join in matrimony in this world and life after. Now how can two religions be? That is anyhow bad."*

There was little opposition among Indians and African-Asians to mixed relationships, though this was qualified by the recognition that such relationships had cultural difficulties and the children would be subject to racism. On the other hand, there appeared to be more antipathy to mixed relationships with other ethnic groups than with white people.

Most African-Caribbeans did not object to mixed relationships and some were positive about them. A very large minority, however, had negative views. Most of those who disapproved were against relationships with white people, while a smaller number felt uncomfortable about any type of mixed relationship. Those who were against mixed relationships thought that they were bad for children, possibly leading to confusion about identity, and strongly disapproved of those who, they believed, used mixed relationships to 'get on':

*"I don't mind the ones who go into that relationship because they like that person. They're not thinking, she's white, things are gonna happen for me, which a lot of these [people in] mixed relationships do."*

Some, however, felt that culture and colour were less important than love and respect. Others welcomed mixed relationships, feeling that they broke down barriers in society and gave the children of such

relationships a richer heritage than they otherwise would have.

Amongst the white interviewees, more than half had no objection to mixed relationships, or held positive views about them.

### About the study

In-depth interviews in various parts of London were undertaken by revisiting 68 respondents from African-Caribbean; Indian and African-Asian; and Pakistani and Bangladeshi groupings from the Policy Study Institute's *Fourth Survey of Ethnic Minorities* (carried out in 1994). A range of household types from within each grouping was selected, though households statistically particularly associated with a grouping were well represented. There was, however, no attempt to make these samples representative of the populations they were drawn from.

Some white family members were also interviewed in order to offer some comparison with ethnic minority respondents.

### How to get further information

The full report, *Ethnic minority families* by Sharon Beishon, Tariq Modood and Satnam Virdee, is published by the Policy Studies Institute (ISBN 0 85374 746 6, price £13.95). It is available from Grantham Book Services, Isaac Newton Way, Alma Park Industrial Estate, Grantham, Lincs NG31 9SD, Tel: 01476 541080, Fax: 01476 541061 (please add £2.50 p&p).