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## **Diversity management: Samina's experiences in Retail Co. \***

Samina had been working in Retail Co. for almost 8 years. She rose through the organizational ranks and has recently been appointed store manager for the company's newest store. Today was a rare occasion on which she actually had some time to take a quick lunch break so was picking at her sandwich and sipping her coffee. She was in a reflective mood.

She remembered arriving on her first day at work as a shop floor-level assistant aged 24. She had planned to work at Retail Co. over that summer as she had just completed her university degree. She had wanted to apply for a 'proper job' after the summer. But her plans changed when she was selected early on by her line manager, Mark, as 'someone with a lot of potential', as he put it. He had supported her in getting a position on the organization's fast-track management scheme a year after she had been recruited. Samina always fondly remembered Mark, who took her under his wing and showed her the ropes. He had retired 2 years ago, and they had spoken only occasionally since then. She missed their chats and the support that Mark had always provided. He was great for bouncing ideas off, and he 'always had her back', as he used to say. Samina was proud of her achievements and for succeeding in reaching her own career goals. With the help of Mark and some of the other managers, she had developed a clear career plan, and she had clearly stated her ambition of becoming a store manager before she reached 34. Colleagues often joked that she was a well-oiled machine, always efficient, very organized and very focused. This sometimes created conflict with some of her workmates, who had not adopted the same management style. At times, she found that upsetting, but it had no effect on her drive to succeed.

Her family, especially her mother, often told her how proud they were of her work achievements. Samina was the daughter of a Pakistani family who had migrated to the north of England in the 1970s. There were always high expectations of Samina and her two brothers to do well professionally. In the last couple of years, however, her parents had started hinting that maybe she had been focusing 'too much' on her career, at the expense of other areas. Samina knew his really meant having a husband and children!

Samina was aware that, at the moment, she was focusing solely on her career, but she felt she did not have a choice. As a new store manager, her days were very demanding and made up of long hours in the store. She felt the pressure to succeed and prove her critics

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\* Professor Nicolina Kamenou (Heriot-Watt University) and Professor Jawad Syed (Lahore University of Management Sciences) wrote this mini case study as a basis for class discussion rather than to serve as an endorsement, source of primary data, or illustration of effective or ineffective management. All names and some peripheral facts have been disguised to protect confidentiality. It has been adapted from: Kamenou, N., & Syed, J. (2012). Diversity management. In Kramar, R. & Syed, J. (eds.), *Human resource management in a global context: A critical approach*, pp.75-97. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

wrong. Although she had a good working relationship with most of the staff and managers, she was very aware of some resentment, especially from some older white managers, who had assumed they would be made this store's manager once it opened.

The focus of Retail Co. on equality and diversity issues over the last few years had been great and, in Samina's opinion, much needed. There were very few ethnic minority staff in any management positions, but they were especially sparse at senior management levels. The Chief Executive had clearly communicated her commitment to equality in all areas such as gender, ethnicity, disability and age. She had focused on the benefits that diversity could bring to the organization and the need for the stores to represent local communities. As part of these diversity initiatives, stores were given 'aspirational targets' to reach within 2 years, including a higher representation of ethnic minority male and female staff at management levels. Samina knew she had all the right credentials for a store manager's post as she had gained the required management experience in her time at Retail Co.

Increasingly, however, she was feeling like an outsider. Discussions would suddenly halt once she entered the staff canteen; staff would be whispering after she had passed them in the corridor. Indeed, some comments were loud enough for her to hear. 'She is so young; what does she know about managing a whole store?' The most recent comment she had heard the day before was from a Bakery manager, Tom, who had worked for Retail Co. for 20 years: 'Everyone knows she was placed in that position to reach ethnic targets. Actually, it's one tick for race and one tick for gender. It's not right. Why can't they just promote people on merit?'

Samina knew that Tom was very resentful of the organization's diversity initiatives as he perceived these as positive discrimination, despite clear communication from senior managers that they could not lawfully positively discriminate in favour of any group. Thankfully, she was aware that not everyone shared his views and that some staff at least were in support of the initiatives and her promotion. But the negative comments still dominated in her mind.

Anna, a shop floor level assistant in her 50s, had come to see her the day before and congratulated her on her promotion. Samina felt touched by this as most staff did not openly wish her well, which she saw that as another sign of resentment or assumptions of tokenism. Her good mood quickly vanished though as Anna went on to say: 'I think it's a great achievement Samina, don't get me wrong ... But I think you are now at an age that you should be focusing on marriage and having kids; you're not that young anymore!' Samina felt she could never win. She was worn down by people's expectations, especially her family's views of what it meant to be a single woman in her 30s, focusing on her career. Despite all her achievements in the workplace, she was often made to feel less of a woman ... that is, when she was not made to feel like a token promoted to make up Retail Co.'s aspirational targets.

Samina's lunch break was now over and she still had a long day ahead of her. She emptied her tray and started walking back to her office, reluctantly passing three of her colleagues chatting in the corridor. The last thing she needed was more 'well-meaning' comments.

### Questions:

1. Identify and discuss key issues facing Samina in relation to her work and recent promotion?

2. What challenges is Samina facing in balancing her work and personal life demands? Could these challenges be influenced by different factors (for example, race, religion, gender or age)?
3. Do you think Samina's experiences may be different from those of white women or ethnic minority men in her organization? Why or why not?
4. Samina was reflecting on her early experiences in Retail Co and on having a mentor. How important is mentoring in one's career? What issues could people from minority groups face in selecting a mentor?