

NICOLINA KAMENOU-AIGBEKAEN
JAWAD SYED

Diversity management: Samina's career experiences in the UK and the Middle East*

Samina had recently relocated from the UK to Dubai after she was headhunted by a multinational retail organisation to work as a senior Retail Development Manager. Prior to that, she had been working in Retail Co, a large British retail firm in the UK, for almost 12 years. At Retail Co, she rose through the organisational ranks and was promoted quickly to Store Manager in one of the company's stores in the North of England, the youngest ever store manager in the history of the organisation.

As she was having a quick lunch with some of her colleagues in a downtown Dubai cafe, she started reflecting on how different her experiences had been so far in Dubai in comparison to the UK. In a lot of ways, she missed England and her family tremendously, as she was born and raised on the outskirts of Bradford (a second-generation British Pakistani as her family had migrated from Pakistan to England in the 1970s). In other ways, she loved how much more multicultural Dubai was and the fact she felt much more at ease as a South Asian woman in a senior position here than in the UK. She then felt that perhaps that sounded unfair, as if she didn't enjoy her work experiences back in the UK, which wouldn't necessarily be true. She had learnt a lot and had a number of supportive managers and mentors along the way who showed her 'the ropes' and helped her make smart career choices. She did however also face resistance from staff and managers when she was promoted to store manager at a young age, and she always felt that in addition to the age factor, this had a lot to do with her gender and ethnicity.

Although she had a good working relationship with most of the staff and managers at Retail Co, she was very aware of some resentment, especially from some older white managers who had assumed they would be made the store's manager once it opened. The focus of Retail Co on equality and diversity issues at that time 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 – gender, ethnicity, disability, and age. She had focused on the benefits that diversity could bring to the organisation and the need for the stores to represent local communities. As part of these

* Professor Nicolina Kamenou-Aigbekaen (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-Aigbekaen, N., & Syed, J. (2017). Diversity management in a global context. In Syed, J., & Kramar, R. (eds.) *Human Resource Management: A global and critical perspective*, pp.67-86. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

diversity initiatives, stores were given 'aspirational targets' to reach within two years, including a higher representation of ethnic minority male and female staff at management levels. Samina 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. She knew, however, that quite a few staff and managers were not supportive of her promotion, attributing it solely to an organisational focus on increasing diversity at senior levels. She remembered a comment she overheard a few years back, made by Tom, the Bakery manager at Retail Co: '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?'

After a few years as store manager, Samina had achieved a lot and felt she had proven her critics wrong as the store's performance flourished. She felt more comfortable in her position and she became more involved in Diversity fora across the organisation and industry, discussing and debating the need for equal opportunities across the retail sector. At the same time, she was feeling more and more exhausted by the need to constantly 'defend' her talent and that of other minority staff. The opportunity for a position abroad came at the right time as she was ready for a change. The fact that the job she was offered was in Dubai was an added bonus. She had visited Dubai in the past as both her mum and dad had extended family who settled there 30 years ago, and she had always liked its vibe. She found it a very ambitious and entrepreneurial environment and, more importantly, she enjoyed working with other managers and staff from different parts of the world. There were many more senior managers who did not fall under the white western 'norm' of the UK and Samina found that comforting, especially after her own experiences in the UK. She wasn't naive however, and she was acutely aware that she was 'sheltered' as a senior manager in a multinational firm. She often heard stories of discrimination and racism in Dubai and across the Middle East faced by staff at lower levels of organisations across industries. She was very uncomfortable with this situation but felt helpless to address it in any constructive way. She also heard stories of racial hierarchies in Dubai and other Middle Eastern countries, where people of European and Arab origin are generally better treated and offered better jobs and salaries than people from Southeast Asia and South Asia. She knew that in the UK there were clearer processes in place to raise complaints against discriminatory managers and organisations and much more support was embedded in the legal and social system.

As she was finishing her lunch with her new colleagues, she reflected that her experiences in the UK had prepared her for this new and amazing opportunity. At the same time, she reminded herself that there are different forms of discrimination and prejudice, depending on where one lives, works, and the position one is in. She knew that by virtue of her British passport, British qualification, and English-language skills, she was in a position of privilege in a lot of ways and she wouldn't allow herself to forget that.

Questions:

1. What are some of the issues that Samina faced in relation to her work and promotion to Store Manager when she worked in the UK?
2. What are your views on the positive action initiatives that Retail Co had put in place?
3. To what extent could Samina's experiences be different from those of white women or ethnic minority men in Retail Co? Or from other groups in her present position in Dubai?

4. How important do you think the location or region of one's work is in relation to one's career experiences? Are other factors more important?
5. Do you think some industries provide fairer opportunities than others for career development and progression irrespective of one's gender, ethnicity, age, and other diversity strands? Why or why not?
6. Consider the experiences of Samina in her new job in Dubai. Are her experiences more influenced by her passport, socioeconomic status, and organisational position than by her gender, ethnicity, or age? Critically discuss.