

'Don't know, don't say, don't get': The UK's 'invisible' ageing ethnic minorities

Since inception in 1998, the Policy Research Institute on Ageing and Ethnicity (PRIAE) has worked tirelessly to counteract the invisibility of black and minority ethnic elders in policy discussions, research, service developments and information systems. In other words counteracting the fact that age relations is 'race blind', while race relations is 'age blind'. An independent charity, PRIAE is the only specialist organisation working on the ageing of black and minority ethnic (BME) groups in the UK and in Europe, aiming to influence policy and encourage good practice.

The European Commission Fifth Framework funded Minority Elderly Care Research Project (MEC), conceived and led by PRIAE, aims to establish the position of elders from some 27 minority ethnic groups in ten countries for the first time. The primary round of empirical data confirms that the UK and Europe are facing a rapid increase as the minorities who arrived in the post-war years age en masse, in the context of historical underdevelopment of care and support to BME elders.

This growing constituency must be factored into ongoing discussions about the future of the state pension system, with many BME elders suffering due to a shorter period of working life in the UK than their white counterparts. Current proposals to improve information through telephone and website services should consider the linguistic and cultural needs of BME elders.

A national conference on pensions held by PRIAE earlier this year, addressed by Rt. Hon Ian McCartney MP, confirmed that there are serious shortfalls in the retirement income of BME elders, although policymakers have yet to conduct comprehensive research and proactively promote anti-poverty measures – something PRIAE has advised since 1999. We are still experiencing, 'the hush-hush system you know – don't say, don't know, don't get'¹.

The commitments to improving health services and awareness among BME communities secured by PRIAE in the National Service Framework for Older People (2001) have not been translated into the reality of clinical practice. While the Institute's health related programmes confirm that GP consultation rates are higher among BME elder communities than the majority population, failures in information, communication and culturally appropriate service provision means that adequate referrals are not being made.

PRIAE Chair,
Lord Herman Ouseley



BME elders and policymakers

The current situation means that BME elder voluntary organisations are acting as 'primary providers' of health and social care, substituting rather than complementing statutory and mainstream providers. However, these bodies have been acting without support and often from an inadequate and unstable funding base, which means that services are often ad hoc and inadequate. Urgent action is therefore needed if recognition that 'older people from black and minority ethnic groups can be particularly disadvantaged and are more likely to suffer discrimination in accessing services' (NSF for Older People) is to be remedied.

PRIAE is also looking forward to working with the TUC on members of BME communities over 50 who may be currently experiencing age discrimination. This is an area that has gathered increasing pertinence in light of forthcoming EU legislation.

At PRIAE policy seminars, BME elders have confirmed 'we have had too much discussion, action is long overdue'². While the Institute has been pleased to note some progress in key areas, such as commitments made in the National Service Framework for Older People (DH), there remains much to do in other areas of central and local government. PRIAE looks forward to working with relevant policymakers to help implement some sound policy declarations about social inclusion that will reach BME elders soon.

PRIAE is currently working on a number of programmes, including income, health and care of BME elders across Europe, quality hospital care, palliative care, health inequalities, information service developments, regional investment of the BME elder voluntary sector, age discrimination, training and consultancy.

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¹ An elder at the PRIAE-CRE Royal Commission on Long Term Care of the Elderly seminar, 1998

² An elder at the PRIAE-CRE Royal Commission on Long Term Care of the Elderly seminar, 1998

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