# Confronting Discrimination and Structural Inequalities: Professional Nigerian Women's Experiences of Negotiating the UK Labour Market

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# Confronting Discrimination and Structural Inequalities: Professional Nigerian Women's Experiences of Negotiating the UK Labour Market

By Joy Ogbemudia[1]

**Abstract**

The line between hypervisibility and invisibility appears to be blurred for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women in the workplace due to their race and gendered status (Lander and Santoro 2017). The intersection of race and gender exposes many BAME women to discrimination, structural inequalities, and the dynamics of tokenism, which can be a cause of intense job dissatisfaction (Stroshine and Brandl 2011).

It is often the case that discussions on the economic integration of immigrants focus mainly on how the socio-economic dynamics of the host country can limit them to certain labour market sectors. While this is a key area that must be discussed, "the interaction between the internal cultural and social differences and the wider structural and ideological processes of the country of residence" must also be interrogated (Anthias 1992: viii). Such deep exploration contributes to the examination of migrant women's experiences of the intersection of gender, identity, and social mobility within the labour market and their personal lives. In this paper, based on individual accounts and drawing on intersectionality as an analytical framework (Crenshaw 1989; Bowleg 2012; Collins and Bilge 2020), I examine the multiple and complex interlocking structural inequalities suffered by immigrant women. This paper also presents how personal narratives can illuminate often hidden complexities in the workplace and labour market at large.

Based on three main themes, deskilling and downward mobility, settling for BBC[2] jobs, and confronting discrimination in skilled employment, I examine the different ways migrant women engage with their stories about negotiating the labour market, which lay bare some of the limits and gaps between policies and practices in the post-industrial labour market. I present how the different ways they engage with narratives of their experiences in the workplace is very telling of the far-reaching impact their experiences have on their self-identity and well-being. As a feminist researcher, and one whose life is also marked by migration experiences, I go beyond examining the process of deskilling to exploring how participants make sense of their experiences, the impact on their lives, and their present sense of identity.

*Keywords*: Race, Gender, Intersectionality, Discrimination, Migration, Professional women, U.K., Migrant women, Downward mobility, Nigerian migrants, Nigerian women, U.K. migration, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME), Native ethnography.

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[2] BBC, according to one of my participants, is an acronym for British Bottom Cleaner! This is a funny but derogatory term used to qualify care work.

**Introduction**

This paper is a part of my doctoral thesis, a broader research on the immigration and adaptation narratives of professional Nigerian women in the UK. Providing a background to explore migrant women's accounts of exclusions and social vulnerabilities in the labour market, this paper unpacks some of the gender-sensitive issues which contribute to restricting women to lower positions in the labour market (Boyd and Grieco 2003). Drawing on the concept of intersectionality, I explore my participants' accounts of their connection between work and self-identity, unpacking the complex connection between race, class, and gender, and how these shape (Black) women's experiences in the UK labour market.

Many of my participants' narratives were marked by the level of disillusionment and disappointment they experienced at the realisation of the huge gap between their expectations and the realities of the UK labour market. Not only did they describe the professional setbacks they suffered as unexpected, but their different constructions of their present identities are also largely coloured by expressions of pain and regret. Their stories are particularly intense as many of them highlight a disjunction between their hope and their present realities.

**Literature Review**

Judging from the large number of Nigerians in the UK, it is disturbing to discover that not much is known about them in scholarly literature, apart from seeing them as Africans and part of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) population in the UK. In Europe generally, as some scholars have noted, the few studies that focus on Nigerian immigrants often tend to be stereotypically crime related (see Carling 2006; Glickman 2005; Obasaju 2014; Alakija 2016) Carling (2005:2) presents a brief overview of the situation:

> "Although academic researchers and the media have devoted substantial attention to Nigerian trafficking, prostitution, and organized crime, little is known about the vast majority of Nigerians in Europe who are not involved in these activities. Given the size of the Nigerian population in several European countries, it is a strikingly under-researched minority".

The case of Nigerian women who are involved in trafficking, smuggling and prostitution are represented in research (Okojie et al 2003; Prina 2003; Carling 2005; Carling 2006; De Hass 2006; Shelley 2014; Women's Link Worldwide 2015); but little is known about other Nigerian women who are not involved in such activities. This underlines the need to focus specifically on professional Nigerian women who came to the UK as independent migrants or dependants of primary migrants under highly skilled and/or student migrant programmes.

It is important to note that skilled migration from Nigeria is mainly through the various Highly Skilled Migrant programme which is point based. Although the programme supposedly grants equal status to the primary migrants and their dependants, in practice, women are clearly disproportionately affected (Kofman et al 2005). Although the criteria that qualify immigrants as "highly skilled" may differ from one country to another, Chaloff and Lemaitre (2009) in their response to the question "how skilled is highly skilled?", explained that in most Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, there is an overlapping requirement of education, occupation and wage level, used to determine the eligibility of candidates. These three criteria are the most important part of the points-based system through which immigrants

enter the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Denmark (Chaloff and Lemaitre 2009). Many Nigerian women gained legal entry and right to settlement in the UK through the points-based system which qualified them to legally migrate to the UK as highly skilled migrants.

Irrespective of Nigerian women's migration status however, they are faced with the discriminatory concepts embedded in migration policies, public discourse, social attitudes towards immigrants, the undervaluation of immigrant educational qualification/work experiences, and the intersection of race, class and gender. These complexities generally lead to deskilling and subsequently a loss of self-worth and social identity. Such experiences have been described as visibly minority women being "triply disadvantaged" (IOM 2012): facing challenges generally encountered by immigrants, dealing with the social, political and economic issues that women from the host society are combating, and facing challenges related to ethnicity. While these forces subject many BAME women to jobs in the "bottom" of the labour market, a few are able to gain access to highly skilled professional jobs, but they usually encounter a ceiling made of concrete and not mere glass (Davidson 1997:18). This comes in varying forms of struggles and discrimination, one of which is a conspicuous pay gap among skilled workers.

According to Wickware (2019), BAME workers in the UK face an annual pay gap of £3.2bn. For example, there is a significant pay gap between White and BAME hospital doctors (Rimmer 2016; BMJ 2019) and this is also the case with pharmacists (Praities and Kam 2018). Such gaps reflect the subtle structural discrimination that exist in the skilled labour market. More challenging however, in the experiences of Black women, are issues with micro aggression in the workplace, facing discriminatory behaviours and feelings of exclusion, which have adverse effects on their self-identity and well-being (Cousins 2019). According to Sian (2017), the subtle racial and discriminatory acts Black women are exposed to in the workplace are manifestations of microaggressions—sometimes invisible, unidentifiable, and less recognisable acts of racism. They are also, "the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue 2010:5).

**Research Methodology**

Drawing from feminist approaches to qualitative research (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Doucet and Mauther 2006), I carried out in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interview sessions with 32 professional Nigerian women living in the UK. 15 of the women interviewed were recruited from my immediate social network. They were Nigerian women who attended the same local church as me and some of my contemporaries from Nigeria who migrated to the UK around the same time. All other women interviewed were recruited through snowballing (Streeton et al 2004). I recruited 36 women from different towns and cities in the UK, but 32 of them were eventually interviewed. I engaged in broad verbatim transcription of participants stories, adopting the naturalised form of transcribing (Oliver et al 2005). This technique supports the transcribing of all words, both verbal and non-verbal; gestures, silences and emotions are captured as much as possible. I employed pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and to strengthen participants' confidentiality. Also, the names of the present towns and cities they live in are not mentioned.

Despite recording all the interview sessions and taking notes to record settings and non-verbal cues, I was deliberate about creating an atmosphere where my participants enjoyed the liberty to take me through their stories by themselves. I sought to build a symbiotic relationship where there was mutual support and comfort with asking and answering questions as we jointly explore and produce knowledge. It was part of my decision to embrace the feminist approach to doing research.

**Embracing a Feminist Approach to Qualitative Research**

There is no doubt that there are ongoing debates concerning what constitutes feminist methodology or whether there exists anything like it (Harding1987; Fonow and Cook 2005; Doucet and Mauthner 2006; Kleinman 2007). What cannot be disputed however, is the existence of feminist approaches to doing research which emerged out of a strong desire for feminist research to be carried out not just on women, but for women and with women (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Doucet and Mauthner 2006). This knowledge helped me to view my participants as co-creators of knowledge (Mwangi 2002). I was also able to appreciate them as collaborators, equipped with their lived experiences and engaged in forming and shaping data, contributing to the whole process until knowledge is produced. Although Finlay (2002) challenges the egalitarian rhetoric between the researcher and the participants as a disguise for the unequal display of power in the relationship, the awareness of my power as the researcher does not in any way reduce my appreciation of the collaborative position of my participants. I carried out this research with a desire for my voice and the voices of my participants to be heard, but I am aware that the representation of women's voices is a complex process and care must be taken not to oversimplify it (Ribbens and Edwards 1997). I therefore do not claim to be absolute in my representation of participants' voices, but while appreciating the difficulty and complexity that exists between participants' experiences, their voices, and their narratives, representation is achieved only to the best of my ability. I endeavoured to lay bare the processes, patterns, and routes taken to represent their accounts throughout the research process.

**Summary of the Characteristics of Participants**

**Table 1**: The age of participants, their reason for migration, their level of education and their occupation before and after migration.

| NAME | AGE | MARITAL STATUS | NUM OF CHDRN | STATE OF ORIGIN | REASON FOR MGRTN | HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION | OCCU BEFORE MIGRATION | OCCU IN THE UK |
|------|-----|---------------|-------------|-----------------|------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|----------------|
| Cynthia | 39 | Married | 2 | Western Nigeria | Family Migration | Masters (MSc) | Quality Insurance Manager | Care Assistant |
| Dorcas | 53 | Married | 3+ | Western Nigeria | Independent migrant | Bachelors (BA) | Catering Officer | Library Assistant |
| Christy | 52 | Married | 2 | Western Nigeria | Family Migration | MB.BS | Medical Doctor | Medical Doctor |
| Ruth | 39 | Married | 2 | Southern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BA) | Insurance Officer | Factory worker |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Funmi | 42 | Married | - | Southern Nigeria | Family Migration | Masters (MA) | Head Teacher | Teaching Assistant |
| Nkem | 42 | Married | 1 | Eastern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BA) | High Civil Service Official | Care Assistant |
| Favour | | Married | 3 | Eastern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BSc) | Banker | Unemployed |
| Hannah | 31 | Married | 3 | Eastern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BA) | Teacher | Care Assistant |
| Ade | 34 | Married | 2 | Western Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BA) | Teacher | Unemployed |
| Cindy | 32 | Married | 2 | Eastern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BA) | Teacher | Care Assistant |
| Kate | 37 | Married | 2 | Eastern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BSc) | Banker | Support Worker |
| Obiagheli | 43 | Married | 2 | Eastern Nigeria | Independent migrant | Bachelors (BSc) | Nurse | Care Assistant |
| Precious | 36 | Married | 2 | Southern Nigeria | Family Migration | School of Nursing (RGN) | Nurse | Nurse |
| Betty | 39 | Married | 2 | Southern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BSc) | Pharmacist | Pharmacist |
| Charity | 41 | Married | 2 | Western Nigeria | Family Migration | Masters (MSc) | Accountant | Accountant |
| Clara | 35 | Married | 3+ | Western Nigeria | Family Migration | Masters (MSc) | Investment Banker | NHS Business Partner |
| Sharon | 33 | Married | 2 | Eastern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BSc) | Marketing Officer | Care Assistant |
| Simbi | 42 | Married | 2 | Northern Nigeria | Family migration | Police Training Institute | Police Officer | Cleaner |
| Alima | 35 | Married | 2 | Western Nigeria | Family Migration | 2X Masters (MSc) | LGA Admin Officer | Care Assistant |
| Omo | 43 | Married | 3 | Southern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BSc) | Teacher | Cleaner |
| Blessing | 38 | Married | 3 | Southern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BSc) | Banker | Risk Mgt Officer |
| Victoria | 42 | Married | 2 | Southern Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BA) | Centre Service admin | Centre Service Consultant |
| Tolu | 42 | Married | 3 | Western Nigeria | Family Migration | Bachelors (BSc) | Business Tycoon | Support Worker |
| Ejiro | 49 | Divorced | 1 | Southern Nigeria | Family Migration | Masters (MA) | Pub. Rel. Officer | Unemployed |
| Osas | 43 | Married | 3+ | Southern Nigeria | Family Migration | Masters (MSc) | Medical Doctor | Unemployed |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Deborah | 48 | Married | - | Eastern Nigeria | Family Migration | School of Nursing (RGN) | Nurse | Care Assistant |
| Tinuke | 52 | Widow | 2 | Western Nigeria | Independent migrant | School of Nursing (RGN) | Nurse | Nurse |
| Sarah | 37 | Married | 3 | Eastern Nigeria | Family Migration | 2x Bachelors (BSc) | Health and Safety Officer | Care Assistant |
| Efosa | 48 | Married | 2 | Southern Nigeria | Independent migrant | MB.BS | Medical Doctor | Medical Doctor |
| Funke | 54 | Married | 2 | Western Nigeria | Independent migrant | MB.BS | Medical Doctor | Unemployed |
| Grace | | Married | 3+ | Western Nigeria | Independent migrant | Masters (MSc) | Accountant | Unemployed |
| Pelumi | 34 | Divorced | 1 | Western Nigeria | Family Migration | Masters (MSc) | Lecturer/ Aviation mngr | Cleaner/Care Assistant |

Table 1 indicates that all participants were fully employed in the Nigerian labour market before migrating to the UK. Five of them were teachers, four of them were medical doctors, four nurses and six bankers. Others include a pharmacist, administrators, highly placed civil service officials, an Insurance officer, and a police officer. Comparing this with their present employment status in the UK, only nine of them can be referred to as professional career women. Six of them are unemployed while seventeen of them are stuck in menial jobs such as care work and cleaning. I use the word "stuck" because most of them admitted to doing such jobs, not because they wanted to, but because they had no other choice.

To analyse my data, I pay attention not only to what participants say, but also to how they engage in making meaning of their experiences. To carry out such in-depth analysis, I settled on the combination of thematic and narrative analysis. Although each is distinct, they are complementary analytical methods (Shukla et al 2014). The combination of thematic and narrative analysis helped me "to take account of the effect of particular narratives within the interview conversation, as well as the societal contexts within which they gain currency" (ibid, 22).

**Analytical Process: Building Themes and Analysing Data**

As a feminist researcher, directed by my focus, which is exploring my participants' narratives of confronting discrimination and structural inequalities in the UK labour market and at work, I started off by first familiarising myself with my data. After this, I read through it again, but this time using a pencil to underline aspects which give answers to my main focus and/or provide a new but related insight to a broader overview of my research. I also use NVivo, a computer-based software, a type of the Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) but only at the initial stage to organise my data. Main data analysis was carried out manually, starting with the initial scrutiny of data which is often referred to as the initial stage of identifying themes (Bryman 2012:576). I started off by creating categories, putting together related and contrasting narratives based on the different themes. The building of these themes started during the interview sessions which were later developed into more structured key themes.

To engage with my participants' stories, I analysed both the content of their stories "big stories" and the stories they tell in passing "small stories". Big stories are the contents of participants' autobiographical accounts while small stories are the under-represented narrative data

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from words said in passing in everyday communication (Georgakopoulou 2006; Phoenix 2008). This approach gave me insight into how the "told" and the "telling" of stories can aid the examination of lived experiences. Furthermore, intersectionality is employed to analyse and fully make sense of participants' narratives of experiencing multiple structural inequalities.

Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), who coined the term "intersectionality", recommends intersectionality as a framework that can adequately reflect the interaction between race and gender. The framework is considered a "handy catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it" (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006:187). I therefore invoke this framework to analyse some of my participants' narratives, reflecting how the intersection between race, gender, and class affect their work experiences. Three main themes which were formed from participants' narratives and discussed in this paper include:

- They took my heels off me: experiences of deskilling and downward mobility
- Settling for BBC jobs: *Na me be dis?*[3]
- Is this a game or what? Confronting discrimination in skilled employment.


**Analysis and Discussion**
*They Took My Heels Off Me: Experiences of Deskilling and Downward Mobility*
Ruth, (a graduate of economics and an insurance officer before migration), like most of my participants, told a story of downward mobility and the multiple dilemmas she faced in her bid to further her career in the UK. Creating a synergy between time and self (Mead 1934), she retrospectively organises fragmented experiences in the past into a storyline establishing a sense of order and coherence, linking the past to the present:

> Ruth: …it's not what I'm doing now that's my greatest pain; it's where I'm coming from. The struggles, the sacrifice, the pain and the hustling to become somebody. See, it's not easy to explain, but I know what I'm talking about. In the eyes of my people, coming abroad has already made me somebody. Do you know what I do? Whenever they're visiting (relatives and friends from Nigeria), I dress up like an office worker, just like they used to know me. I put my factory uniform and boots in my car to change when I get to work. See … I'm not pretending is just that, which mouth will I use to tell them that I'm a labourer in the UK? It used to be a thing of joy to be corporately dressed to go to work in Nigeria … ha-ha; I say most of my clothes and accessories were ordered from UK […] but, well, coming here, they took my heels off me; I wear boots now (laughs silently). Ehn … especially my mother will cry for me […].  I suffered; I suffered, it wasn't easy; I mean, I already told you the condition under which we went to school those days. But I went through that stage of my life with hope for the future. Yes; I was hopeful coming here but is this it? I mean, my hope's been crushed; this isn't it at all […].
>
> Joy- but with your certificates and your years of experience, what did you do to further your career here or did you just settle for this job?

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[3] "Na me be dis" is a colloquial way of saying, "Is this me?"

Ruth- No, no, no. Not at all. In fact, when I arrived, and people told me about issues with jobs, I did not believe; I thought that was bullshit, pardon my French. After all, I told myself, I am not an illegal immigrant; I did not gate-crash, and I have my certificates handy. So, what are they talking about? I went to UK Naric to verify my certificates, I went from pillar to post, I took different short courses, all na lie[4]. They will tell you just do this course, then you can apply for this and that job, for where? I went to Citizens Advice, went to job centre, …. pssss; all na banzer[5]! The more I attended interviews or got rejection mails, the more I watched myself go down until I ... I don't even know. I was just like that (shrugging her shoulders) … left with shattered dreams. When I realised I was just piling up certificates with no job, I told myself that to lie down resigned to fate is madness, so, that was how I did a bit of care (care work) don't ask me about my experience; I absolutely hated it, so, I applied to this warehouse …

Ruth's account, among other things, suggests a great desire to "become somebody". Hattam and Smyth (2003) explain the term "becoming somebody" as an evocative phrase used to reflect a desire for recognition, a fight for economic independence, and the construction of a sociocultural identity. Also, Ruth's words, "it's not easy to explain, but I know what I'm talking about", reflects the inadequacy of words to always create an image of the meaning we give to life experiences. One thing she was able to communicate however, was her strong wish to be "somebody".

In her desire to adequately present credible reasons for her aspirations, Ruth explained how she expected her institutionalised cultural capital to be converted to economic capital (Bourdieu 1986), which was also the expectation of her family members. She said, "In the eyes of my people, coming abroad has already made me somebody". She seems to be saying she was aware of the high expectations from her family even when it may not have been verbally communicated. I believe it is a reasonable expectation, that with her educational qualifications, and since she had attained a particular height in her career in Nigeria, she would do better in a Western country, where knowledge and experience supposedly count. However, contrary to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, there is no guarantee that immigrants institutionalised cultural capital will be recognised in their destination countries (Riano et al 2006). Through her narrative, Ruth presents in a dramatic way, the middle-class professional status to which she belonged in Nigeria and from which she had fallen in the UK.

Ruth's self-narrative very much reflects the "pulling yourself up by the bootstrap" ideology. Through her retrospective account, marked with expressions associated with a working-class childhood, she re-tells the stories of some episodes of hardship during her childhood and school years, explaining how she "pulled herself up by the bootstraps" to become an Insurance Officer. Ending up as a factory worker in the UK can be seen as her bootstrap snapping, which is also the case with Cindy, (a teacher, now care assistant), whose narrative equally fits into the "bootstrap" plot. She recounted the hardships and poverty level she suffered as a child to attain a relatively high status in her career in Nigeria, only to suffer downward mobility in the UK:

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[4] "na lie" means "it's a lie"
[5] Banzer a Hauser is slang used to express a futile mission or nothingness

I feel ..., you see, money is not everything. Yes, back home I was a teacher, earning peanuts, but I was imparting knowledge. I was good at what I was doing; I enjoyed it and that was me. If I am not careful here, very soon, 1+1, I will not know because my brain is sleeping. It's depressing. You know, if you did not go to school and they give you all this shit, you will understand. But after stressing, struggling against all odds to gain university education and you come here and they treat you like dundy[6], it's reverse gear now. The place you struggle to free yourself from by going to school, they push you right back into it. What do you do?

Cindy accords some authenticity to her self-identity by her statement "… that was me". She presents a self that was driven by and found fulfilment in imparting knowledge as a teacher, a self who is highly motivated by "self-actualisation" (Maslow 1943). She contrasts her self-motivated intellectual self with her present self in her statement, "My brain is sleeping. It is depressing". Her statement reflects the construction of her downwardly mobile self, who, like Ruth, could be said to have her bootstrap snapped.

Ruth flaunts her middle-class status in Nigeria saying, "It used to be a thing of joy to be corporately dressed to go to work in Nigeria … ha-ha; I say most of my clothes and accessories were ordered from UK …". Her story however culminates in how she constructs her present identity: "They took my heels off me; I wear boots now ...". This is a vivid symbolic description of the impact of the physical comportment expected in professional versus menial jobs. Ruth uses her relationship with her shoes (heels and boots) to create a visual representation of her self-image as an insurance officer and as a factory worker respectively. According to Belk (2003), shoes are the foundation of our sense of self, informing our ideals of beauty, character, and sexiness, and like the magical transformation envisioned in Cinderella, Ruth uses her relationship with her shoes to explain her self-transformative experience, although in her case the transformation from heels to boots is a downward one. Ruth's words, "It used to be a thing of joy to be corporately dressed to go to work in Nigeria", reflects a sense of self-pride, joy, and fulfilment in her job. However, her statement about wearing boots instead of heels signifies a sense of disappointment, demotion, and downward mobility. As Belk (2003) stated, the right pair of shoes can provide a magical transformation of self, while their lack can be devastating. Ruth further talked about her reluctance to disclose her present job to friends and family who come to visit her from Nigeria, explaining, "Do you know what I do? Whenever they're visiting (relatives and friends from Nigeria), I dress up like an office worker, just like they used to know me. […] I put my factory uniform and boots in my car to change when I get to work". According to Hertz (2007), clothing generally is a silent but visual marker of social identity; and uniform in particular is a symbolic and negotiated object which offers visual clues to the wearer's social status and identity. Hertz explained that the symbolic communication of uniform is subject to interpretation; Ruth sees hers as an object of shame and regret. Her narrative expresses how difficult it was for her to come to terms with the reality of the job market, which led to her taking on many short certificate courses before settling for menial jobs. This was the situation with many of my participants, who expected that their status as "highly skilled migrant women", would automatically be converted into access to "highly skilled jobs" in the UK labour market. This explains why Grace considered the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP) a fraud:

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[6] "Dundy" (or dundee united) is a slang for "idiot" in Nigeria. Although there is a debate about its origin, it is believed that the slang stems from Dundee United's disastrous pre-season tour of Nigeria in 1972 (Simpson 2013).

… that is something that is not good about the HSMP. You bring somebody into this place, you do not come empty-handed, yet they see you as a usurper. And they'll be shouting 'immigrants have come to take our jobs'. What kind of dirty job is that? Where is the job? They think we're interested in menial jobs and claiming benefit … (laughs) … see, the average Nigerian professional is too proud to take up those rubbish jobs or queue up to ask for err… handouts kai[7]; God forbid! The trouble I see in all these things is that there are some hidden facts in the employment law in this country full stop! If you stick to the fact that you were a professional back home, you will be hungry before you know it. I went for interview and after two stages, they dropped me. The truth is that they doubt our skills and the default position they give us is that we don't know anything, until proven otherwise; why? HSMP is a fraud; it's a rubbish programme. By the time we came in, they did not tell us that we will have to meet an earning capacity, so they were ready to kick us out. We said no; this is not possible because it was not part of the bargain before we came. I think it was £24,000 earning capacity that was recommended? I was already earning more than that before I came so what was the fuss about? My anger was that there was no place for you in the labour market, yet they expected us to earn £24,000. How many of their children earn that? Mtschew (hissing) I'm glad they have scrapped it [HSMP]; good riddance…

Grace, in her criticism of HSMP, presents the disparity between the appealing package of the highly skilled migrant programme and what it actually delivers. She emphasises the lack of recognition of the human capital with which immigrants enter the labour market, stating, "You do not come empty-handed, yet they see you as a usurper …". The goal to attract only people with huge human capital to the UK is a strategic one; Theresa May, in a written statement to parliament, declared that it was the desire of the UK to only attract and keep the "best and the brightest" among immigrants (Waldron and Sanwar 2015; Portes 2018). The painful reality, however, is that these immigrants are never treated as the "best and brightest"; instead, they are demonised as benefit cheats, welfare scroungers, street beggars, thieves, deviants, and the cause of societal disruption (Reynolds and Erel 2016; Chaloff and Lemaitre 2009). According to Chaloff and Lemaitre, this ignominious perception holds without acknowledging how the government and the "economic power brokers" in Western countries foster immigration to form pools of cheap labour to boost their capitalist-driven economies. Reynolds and Erel (2016: n.p) discussed how the skills of migrant mothers are largely ignored or undervalued, and how they are "primarily blamed for reproducing dysfunctional families and bringing up families with a deficit of cultural lues".

Also, although the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme supposedly grants equal status to the primary migrants and their dependants, in practice, women are clearly disproportionately affected, which could explain part of the reason why Grace concludes that "HSMP is a fraud and rubbish programme". Although the criteria that qualify immigrants as "highly skilled" may differ from one country to another, Chaloff and Lemaitre (2009) in their response to the question "how skilled is highly skilled?", explained that in most OECD countries, there is an overlapping requirement of education, occupation, and wage level used to determine the eligibility of candidates. These three criteria are the most important part of the points-based system through which immigrants enter the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Denmark (Chaloff and Lemaitre 2009). Many of my participants gained legal entry and right to settlement

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[7] "Kai" is an exclamation (like "what").

in the UK through the points-based system which qualified them to legally migrate to the UK as highly skilled migrants[8] (see table 6 for different point allocations):

**Table 2**: Points attributed under different points systems for permanent residence in selected countries [Culled from Chaloff and Lemaitre (2009)]

| Characteristic | UK/HSMP | Australia/GSM | Canada Skilled Worker | New Zealand Skilled Worker |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Language ability | 10 | 15-25 | 0-24 (16+8) | Obligatory |
| Sufficient funds for initial period | 10 | | Obligatory | |
| Age (younger = more points) | 5-20 | 15-30 | 0-10 | 5-30 |
| Qualifications/Academic | 30-50 | 5-25 | 0-25 | 50-55 |
| Skilled Occupation | | 40-60 | | |
| Work experience in occupation | | 5-10 | 0-21 | 10-30 |
| Recent earnings | 5-45 | | | |
| Spouse/partner skills | | 5 | 0-10 | 50 |
| Shortage occupation | | 15-20 | | 20 |
| In-country work experience | 5 | 10 | 0-10 | 5-15 |
| Regional Study | | 5 | | |
| Designated area sponsorship | | 25 | | |
| Job Offer | | | 0-10 | 50-60 |
| State/Territory of settlement | | 10 | | 10 |
| Professional Language skill | | 5 | | |
| **Number required** | **95** | **100 - 120** <br> **Pool - Pass** | **67** | **100 – 140** <br> **Pool – Pass** |

*Source*: Government authorities. Some categories are conflated and others are excluded.

Obviously, meeting these criteria of the point-based system is used to "lure" or invite "the best and the brightest" to the UK, after which they are left at the mercy of repressive immigration policies, domination, and exclusion in the labour market. Some of the issues with such policies include the continuous changes in the UK immigration rules and requirements, making it confusing, nerve-racking, and sometimes impossible for immigrants to attain citizenship. For instance, Grace referred to the shocking changes to HSMP and immigration rules that was announced on the 7th of November 2006, which affected about 49,000 immigrants (WorkPermit.com 2007). The most difficult of the changes at this time was the increase in earning requirement, without which immigrants could not apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). HSMP was later scrapped but replaced by some other highly skilled points-based systems—Tiers 1 to 5 (workpermit.com n.d). In April 2016, migrants with Tier 2 visa were required to earn £35,000 or more to qualify for Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK (Waldron and Sanwar 2015) and in 2017, under the Immigration Act 2016, a series of changes were made to the requirements of immigrants wanting to switch from other visa types to the Tier 2 working visa (Waldron and Sanwar 2017). These continuous changes disturb, distract, and debar immigrants from focusing on career advancement and, from my participants' accounts, women are more likely to be at the receiving end of this confused state. The men, often viewed as the "independent" migrants, conventionally constructed as the breadwinners and as having a higher earning capacity, are encouraged to invest the family resources into enhancing their own career and focus on earning enough to meet the requirements of immigration rules, while the women either stay at home as

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[8] A few were the primary migrants while others were dependant migrants

housewives, or settle for random menial jobs that allow them enough time to take care of the home. This explanation presents the continuing interaction between two interlocking systems— patriarchy and capitalism—where one feeds into the other to negatively impact women's chances of fully developing their potential in the labour market (Hartman 1976).

*Settling for BBC Jobs: Na Me Be Dis?*

Sarah, a graduate of Geology who worked as a senior Health and Safety Officer before migrating to the UK, talked about the limited available jobs for immigrants at the time she came to the UK:

> … everybody around me were care workers, so I got myself into care work, I started working night. I no believe say I go leave Nigeria come this land come do dis kind job. I looked at myself; na me be dis? Dem say na condition make crayfish bend[9] so, as no choice na, I gat to join the club of BBC. I think say we … do you think I'm joking, that's what it's called around here o, BBC—British Bottom Cleaner! (Laughs) …that's where they believe we belong irrespective of the kpali[10] we hold. When I arrived, I tried and tried on my own, nothing. So, I met some good friends who advised me to go to job centre and told me how to go about it. I made some calls; I was called for interview and that was how I started BBC. What do you think; na so na, when there's nothing else to do, you swallow your pride and face reality…

I had heard of care work described as a type of the "3D-jobs: dangerous, dirty and dull" (Knight 2014) but Sarah, employing some sense of humour in her narrative, describes it as British Bottom Cleaning (BBC). I thought of the various reasons why Sarah (and probably some other people) would choose to conceptualise care work in such a manner. After careful research, I realised that McGregor (2007), who carried out research on Zimbabwean migrants and the UK care industry, also explained how care work is derogatorily described and caricatured as British Bottom Cleaning. Knight (2014) also provides a useful explanation, pointing out that in most destination countries, when the native workforce moves up the division of labour, a shortage of labour is created in the bottom of the labour market, which immigrants are expected to occupy. Therefore, while the term BBC may be a literal symbol of part of the duties expected of a care-worker, it could also be a metaphor for the ranking of care work in the labour market.

The new but derogatory term BBC reflects a very low level of appreciation for care workers in the UK, where it is quickly "becoming known as a 'migrant job' in the low-level feminized service industry" (IOM 2012:43). Unfortunately, the educational attainment and professional experiences of these migrant carers are disregarded in a field that requires little formal education, resulting in a significant waste of their expertise. The deskilling of migrant care workers and lack of due recognition given to care work in general contributes significantly to how carers view themselves. Although McGregor (2007) argued that care work has helped many immigrants to raise funds to support their families and could serve as a stepping stone in the career progression of some sort, the impact of their experiences of deskilling, loss of status, and self-identity are the major issues that shape the construction of my participants' narratives. For instance, Sarah's construction of her self-identity in relation to her social position as a care worker is embedded in her rhetorical question, "na me be dis?", asked in pidgin English and translated "is this me?" Her

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[9] An adage in pidgin English meaning circumstances can alter one's position.
[10] Kpali is a colloquial pidgin English word for certificate.

question connotes a reflexive awareness of self, where she becomes 'other' to herself in order to reflect upon herself (Mead 1934; Coltart 2007). Sarah possibly draws from the success of her past career progress and compares that with her present situation, trying to evaluate her status.

Much more than the job itself, from my participants' narratives it appears that the challenges of working in the care sector shape how they engage with their stories. According to McGregor (2007), these challenges are created by an existing 'care gap' in Britain which is a combination of demographic, social, and economic changes, and heightened by the privatisation of home care services. McGregor argues that the level of privatisation has worsened conditions of employment, which invariably makes care jobs unattractive. There is therefore severe labour shortage in the care sector, which creates a care gap that is increasingly filled by immigrants; however, the restrictive migration policies coupled with the 'invisibility' of carers' contributions pave the way for exploitation and unfair treatment at work. Funmi, a support worker, commented on her own experience with a service user:

> There is this lady who will not let me serve her food and if she accepts the food, she spills (spits) it out at you and make comments like you "black bugger" […]. It made me feel I was not welcome. I mean, it made me feel like everyone is asking "what are you doing here?" It was challenging because it was bad enough that I was doing a job I did not like but to be discriminated against just breaks me. It feels like double punishment…

Listening to Funmi tell her story almost presents people as racist; but as Essed (1991: viii) argued, "to talk about 'to be or not to be a racist' simplifies the problem". The real issue that needs to be addressed is the structural conflict which results in racist practices to which individuals are merely agents. The increasing awareness of incidents of racial discrimination has led to the passing of several Race Relation Acts (Davidson 1997), which were recently replaced by the Equality Act 2010.[11] Racism however remains a complex system of power (Essed 1991) where the intersection of gender, discrimination, class, and prejudice among other structural factors fuel its course. This is succinctly explained in the excerpt below:

> …it may be concluded that on a macro-societal level, (gendered) racism operates through various mechanisms. Black women are (a) marginalised, (b) culturally problematized, and (c) impeded in social mobility. They encounter paternalism, they are underestimated, their work is ethnicized, and they generally have fewer career opportunities than men and White women, respectively. These mechanisms operate simultaneously and probably stimulate each other (Essed 1991: 35-36).

The underemployment and deskilling of skilled migrant women and the various structural mechanisms in operation negatively impact their overall well-being. These phenomena are described by Liversage (2009) as "brain waste" or "brain abuse". I find these terms very applicable to my participants' situation because of the difficulty they face in transferring their social and cultural capital to the UK labour market. To take up menial jobs and still be confronted with discrimination is explained by my participants as double punishment. It is worth mentioning that the lady in Funmi's story may possibly be an old lady who was accustomed to racist comments like "black bugger" when she was younger (when such expressions were not necessarily

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[11] The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society.

questioned), but now, possibly suffering from dementia, she becomes disinhibited; this however does not make it any less hurtful for those at the receiving end. Funmi gave a glimpse of her emotional state: in her words, "to be discriminated against just breaks me". The failure of immigrant women to find suitable employment has been reported as increasing the risk of mental illnesses such as anxiety, distress, and depression (IOM 2012). It is important to mention, however, that many factors contribute to what qualifies as "suitable employment." For instance, some of my participants, despite enjoying upward mobility in their jobs, spoke about their own challenges.

*Is This a Game or What? Confronting Discrimination in Skilled Employment*
Although the Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) group has seen a gradual rise in employment, they are still more than twice as likely to be unemployed as their White counterparts (TUC 2016). Moreover, more than half of the BAME workforce is stuck in "elementary" low-level menial jobs, with the employment rates for BAME women said to have dropped overall (BITC 2016; GOV.UK 2018). Only nine out of thirty-two of my participants told me that they presently work as professionals in the fields of their expertise. I expected that these participants would be satisfied with working in their professional capacity; Betty, a Pharmacist, however, has this story to tell:

> […] during lunch I found out they wouldn't sit with me, I don't know why, but they just don't. I was always on my own. At some point, I stopped caring about it. Once, there was a band 6 role available which we applied for. The White girl who applied was junior to me. A Black senior pharmacist already warned me that the post would go to the White woman. I thought it was a joke but that was exactly what happened; she got the job. It was a big blow because based on experience, she was meant to be a step lower than me. It happened a second time, then I decided to complain to my manager who was not very assertive; just like I thought, he did not take it up. There is indeed a lot of politics going on. Their social life influences a lot of decisions; but I do not belong to their social circle, so I think that is one of the problems I had with them.

Clara, a Business Finance Partner, tells her own story:

> […] everybody treats you like a nobody… they crush and downplay whatever you feel you're worth. They never see us as good enough. I was told that the only reason I was accepted for my role was because I did extremely well in the test. Even then, my manager made it tough for me; she told me I had an accent and that she could barely hear me. She blocked her mind and would not even listen. I'm like, is this a game or what? Like they want you and they don't want you? … I remember after three years in the industry I had a baby. My baby was 9 months old when one day I was rushing to go home to attend to her, and my manager said the worst statement I have ever heard all my life. He said, "are your children more important than this job?" Honestly, I will never forget that statement. The case was reported but I was only a contract staff, so nothing was done. That was painful. They think they're doing me a favour, but the truth is that I would've been a director by now. That's forgotten plans anyway, I don't care anymore. They treat me as though I don't know what I'm doing. Even being British doesn't change anything …. we are fake British

(laughs). When push comes to shove, they know who the real British is. At the end of the day, your passport may even get you the job but does not determine how you're treated, does it? It's there; it's everywhere. I mean racism; it's everywhere …

Embedded in the accounts of both Betty and Clara are narratives of discrimination, stereotyping, isolation, performance pressures, and limited opportunities for professional advancement. These challenges are described by Kanter (1977; 2008) as consequences of tokenism. Here, tokenism is treated not only as a function of numerical representation, but also of gender, race, and other social factors (Stroshine and Brandl 2011). Although these women enjoy a level of upward mobility, their stories suggest that in many ways they are denied the satisfaction that should accompany such attainment. Instead, they face structural inequalities which are not "independent and unidimensional but rather multiple, interdependent, and mutually constitutive" (Bowleg 2012). Presenting this level of complex challenges faced by Black women as intersectionality, Crenshaw describes the term as a "Topic with many layers", likening it to "peeling an onion" (2017, Pg. 8). This framework is considered adequate to analyse the multiple layers of the challenges faced by BAME women in the workplace.

The gendered and racist ideologies which portray Black women as maids, janitors, and prostitutes (bell hooks 2000) still hold sway over how upwardly mobile Black women are perceived in the workplace. It is convenient to view Black women as uneducated, of low intelligence, and as belonging to the working-class; to attain upward mobility is to risk being perceived in the same light, disturbing the status quo, and being seen as space invaders—bodies out of place (Puwar 2004). This was the case with some of my participants who work in the health sector. Henry (2008) explained that since the middle of the last century, the UK healthcare system has suffered severe labour shortages which has led to the recruitment of many overseas trained nurses, who presently make up nearly half of new entrants into the Nursing and Midwifery profession. However, for many of them, their skills are not fully utilised due to some institutionalized exclusionary practices (IOM 2012). Tinuke, who was a senior nursing officer in Nigeria, told me how she was recruited to work in the UK, explaining some of her experiences as demoralising and demotivating:

[…] they sent our document to NMC (Nursing and Midwifery Council). After signing the document, we did orientation, then training, then they get you a mentor, so they signed me off at 3 months. Gave me my pin number so I was free to practise. Me, practise in the UK? I was happy; my joy knew no bounds. They posted us all around the UK, everywhere, and I was ready; but guess what, they posted us to care homes; not to work as nurses but as carers. That was a shocker!! Many went back home because they could not cope with the disgrace. Many of us were actually already managers in different hospitals in Nigeria but they brought us in, and after the orientation they subjected us to care work and not nursing, making us to do domestic work instead of nursing patients. They said we will have to start with care work instead of nursing. Then when you apply for nursing jobs, they make you feel like a carer applying for a nursing job. It was absolutely demoralising and demotivating for me, after all the whole rigorous process we had to go through …

It is intriguing how Tinuke plotted two contradictory themes—excitement and demotivation—in the same story. She started her story on a positive note, expressing her joy in making it to the UK to practise Nursing; Her story however ends on a sad note, as she explained issues with status degradation leading to her eventual state of demotivation and demoralisation. Engaging with her story in this way illustrates the contradictions between the level of expectation with which many immigrants enter the UK labour market and some of the shocking and harsh realities they meet. Efosa, a Medical Doctor, also related an episode that happened to her at work:

> I walked into the room of this old lady (a patient) to go through her chart, then suddenly she was sick on the floor. I asked if she was ok, but she turned to me and said "you need to change my sheet please"; I smiled and told her I would get the cleaner in charge of her ward to change her sheet but she gave me a stern look and said "oh, are you not one of them then? I thought … never mind." Something in me wanted to scream "never mind what" but I felt the poor old woman was only reiterating the general racial stereotype with which Black women are associated. Can I blame her? I felt very dejected …

Tinuke and Efosa's accounts suggest how the intersection of gender bias, racial discrimination, stereotypes and other institutional discriminatory practices can evoke negative feelings in immigrant women. These feelings, when internalised, often cause intense frustration, stress, and a lack of fulfilment at work. Tinuke stated, "it was absolutely demoralising and demotivating for me, after all the whole rigorous process…" showcasing how much these challenges affected her, especially after going through this rigorous process. The "rigorous process" she mentions most likely entails the complex process she had to go through to be licensed. One significant point raised by Reitz (2001) is how highly professional jobs often belong to the licensed more than the non-licensed occupational fields. And in the case of the licensed sectors (e.g. health professionals, lawyers, accountants, engineers), licenses from some home countries (such as Nigeria) are rejected and immigrants are subjected to rigorous processes of (re)accreditation which may be too expensive or too cumbersome for women to manage in addition to the other requirements of immigration. With much resilience however, some make it back to their professional levels especially in the health sector, but not without facing some or all of the challenges mentioned earlier.

Accounts of my participants' experiences in the UK labour market suggest how the discriminatory concepts embedded in migration policies, public discourse, social attitudes towards immigrants, the undervaluation of immigrant educational qualification/work experiences, and the intersection of race, class, and gender can cause deskilling and subsequently a loss of self-worth and social identity. Such experiences have been described as visibly minority women being "triply disadvantaged" (IOM 2012); they face challenges generally encountered by immigrants, dealing with the social, political, and economic issues that women from the host society are combating while also facing challenges related to ethnicity. While these forces subjected many of my participants to jobs in the "bottom" of the labour market, a few were able to gain access to highly skilled professional jobs, but encountered a ceiling made of concrete and not mere glass (Davidson (1997:18).

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I set out to present my participants' nuanced ways of presenting constructions of their present identities as Black women and migrant workers in the UK. Again, for many of them, their narratives are marked with an unintended return to appreciating their pre-migratory lives as they retrospectively compare it with their present lives. Telling stories of their labour market experiences in the UK was an opportunity for them to construct and reconstruct their understanding of themselves and their present complex identities shaped by experiences of exclusion, racism, sexism, alienation, isolation, and downward mobility. These interlocking forms of marginalization, heightened by unfair policies, inform my participants' construction of who they are and what they have become in the UK.

In addition to identifying the interplay of some oppressing factors affecting professional immigrant women, this paper presents how participants "storied" their experiences and the impact it has on their self-construction. They presented their reflexive selves as they retrospectively reformulated their immediate past stories from the perspective of their present social circumstances. Internalizing the socio-cultural situation in which they find themselves, they draw on themes of shame, loss of identity, pain, despair, and disillusionment to make sense of the impact of the multiple challenges that mark their post-migration experiences.

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