



PART THREE: RACE

# Diversity in transport needs to accelerate

Representation of ethnic minorities in the sector is described as 'woefully low' by train drivers' union, reports **Laura Laker**

**P**icture someone working in transport and you are likely to mentally summon up an image of a white, middle-aged male; and, although a lack of diversity isn't unique to transport, it is an issue that needs solving – and urgently.

While the situation is improving, it's not changing fast enough, and the killing of George Floyd by US police in Minneapolis rightly woke the world up to racial disparity once more.

The good news is, there are things the industry can do to improve diversity, while also providing a better service to its customers.

Access to public transport, divided along racial lines, has a long thread in the civil rights movement [1]. For more than a century the mere act of boarding a train or street car was, for African Americans, a political statement.

In 1841, Frederick Douglas refused to leave a train car reserved for white passengers in Lynn, Massachusetts, at a time when African Americans demanding

to be treated equally could be physically expelled from buses, arrested and even imprisoned. Legal action against transport operators met with mixed success, then the following happened:

- There was the mass bus boycotts of the 1950s in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
- In 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man, leading to her arrest.
- The following year in Tallahassee, Florida, African Americans organised their own free mass transit, until transport companies, faced with reduced revenue and political pressure, met their demands.

These protests inspired young West Indian men in the UK, including Roy Hackett, Guy Bailey and Paul Stephenson, to lead the Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963 against the Bristol Omnibus Company for refusing to employ non-white drivers.

At the time, it was not illegal in the UK to discriminate against a person because of their colour. The protests ended the company's "colour bar" and inspired the UK's Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968 [2].

More than half a century later, in some parts of transport, too little has changed.

Aslef is the trade union for train drivers; its 2019 report on diversity in the transport sector describes black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) representation in the industry as "woefully low". In 2012, just 4.5% of Aslef members were BAME employees, rising to 8.3% in 2018 – and Aslef reports some train operating companies (TOCs) and freight operating companies (FOCs) still have no women or BAME employees at all.

Tiffany Lam is an urban sociologist and consultant at Nef, the New Economics Foundation think tank.

She says: "There's a lack of diversity in the built environment sector. Women are only 20% of the transport sector in the UK and there isn't really much research on black and minority ethnic people (BME) working in transport planning."

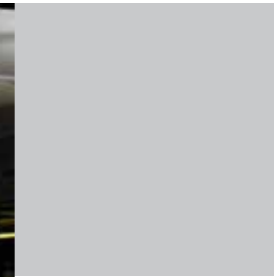
She adds: "Few BME students enter the industry, so there's a problem in terms of getting from education into the sector."

Lam references a 2005 CABE ▶

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Laura Laker is a freelance journalist with 10 years' experience writing on cycling, active travel and, more recently, micromobility for national and specialist titles. She is also working with the University of Westminster's Active Travel Academy – a new mobility think tank.



► (Chartered Association of Building Engineers) report, which found just 35% of BAME students enter the industry – indicating a real problem in the sector. While BME formed 17.6% of transport engineering postgraduates, in transport planning it is just 3.8% – at the time BME formed 7.9% of the UK population.

Mara Makoni works in Intelligent Transport, as well as for the Association for Black and Minority Ethnic Engineers (AFBE-UK), a membership organisation helping improve diversity in engineering, including in getting students into the workplace. She says: "Transport is overwhelmingly white, either when you're talking about policy, or roles within intelligent transport. It's hard to find black leaders, it's hard to visualise career progression, and it's hard to map out your career without that."

Makoni compares issues that are now regularly reported and improved on – and says lessons need to translate to race.

She adds: "We deal with gender and we constantly report and we hold ourselves accountable for it – just like when sustainability became a more prominent issue it was a bit uncomfortable at first, but once we recognise it's important it's almost a no-brainer that everybody reports on it in their CSR."

While some train operators have taken active steps to improve diversity, with East Midlands Trains considered

among the best, including targeting adverts and open days at women and BAME communities, training interview panels on preventing unconscious bias, and anonymising application forms, to aid more diverse recruiting, others are less proactive.

Aslef reports "a significant number of companies felt able to ignore our invitation to provide information and engage with us" on diversity. Of 34 TOCs listed on its website, just 13 filled in Aslef's pro-forma on diversity, and 11 took part in an industry survey.

This despite the moral imperative, and a legal one, in the shape of the Equality Act 2010, which obliges organisations carrying out public functions, including train operating companies, to give serious consideration to advancing equality of opportunity, including positive measures to address under-representation.

Aslef says: "A major step forward would be to see the Government requiring equal-

ity impact assessments, monitoring and reporting to be included in all future invitations to tender for rail franchises," adding "it will require energy and commitment from all parties in the industry to make and consolidate meaningful progress".

AFBE-UK was set up to broaden diversity in engineering, from helping young people and their parents understand what an engineering career would look like, to mentoring and help preparing for interviews.

Makoni says, for many second-generation immigrants, transport engineering isn't a career their parents would recognise as stable and well-paid.

While many people could picture themselves as lawyer, she says, most won't know an engineer, let alone a transport engineer. She adds there is a lack of action to tackle the disproportionately high BAME representation in junior positions, who are not progressing into higher-paid roles – a problem that also leaves a vacuum of representation at the top of companies. Some companies have tackled this by actively encouraging staff to apply for more senior roles, while offering retraining.

"Companies aren't as inclusive as they think they are," says Makoni. "If leaders aren't willing to be transparent and get data on this, it shows they aren't willing to address it – which is why everybody argues representation is very important."

In July 2019, the Strategic Apprenticeship Taskforce (STAT), a voluntary transport industry body with responsibility for meeting targets for sector diversity, and promoting transport as a career, among other things, says it had increased BAME representation to 22% of intake to careers, up from 14% two years earlier. "It has been clear for a long time that the transport sector does not have as diverse a workforce as needed," the report notes.

"A more diverse workforce, and a workforce that is more representative of those using transport services will also support wider efforts towards more inclusive travel."

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**Tiffany Lam, New Economics Foundation**



than any other ethnic group – and the shortest proportion of trips for leisure.

Meanwhile, white people travelled far further per year than people from other ethnic backgrounds, on average 6,875 miles, making 981 trips, and travelling further for leisure.

As Susan Claris, a transport planner from Arup, noted: "You can get data on why people are travelling and who's travelling – but as to who's not travelling, that's far harder to get hold of."

"For so long we focused on inclusion being step-free. Inclusion meant physical access, and now there's a far broader understanding of the different aspects of inclusion."

"For so long it was a physical problem you need to overcome, it's design and engineering, but really it's very far from that, it's behaviours and perceptions."

We do know barriers to travel include unequal perceptions, and experiences, of risk. A report by Transport for London (TfL), released under Freedom of Information request by Mayorwatch in 2014, revealed black and ethnic minority Londoners were more likely to fear crime on the bus or train (and while getting to public transport) than their white counterparts – with 30% of black Londoners expressing this fear, compared with 19% of white Londoners.

TfL says while crime fell by 30% on the network in the preceding years, with fewer than nine crimes for every million journeys, perceptions of crime did not fall evenly, dropping 27% for white respondents since 2008, and 24% for BAME Londoners.

This fear is founded in reality, with more BAME Londoners (37%) saying they have experienced a worrying incident using

**8.3%**

**of Aslef members had BAME ethnicity two years ago**

public transport in the capital in the past three months, higher than the average (32%). According to figures obtained by the *Independent*, nationally over the five years to 2018 race hate crimes jumped from 1,453 to 2,566, with spikes in reports after major events, including the Brexit vote.

The British Transport Police says "clearly we have a key role in maintaining safety so people can use the network without fear", pointing to its #westandtogether campaign, and 61016 text number to help people report hate crimes.

Cost is a further barrier to travel, according to TfL [3]. BAME Londoners are more likely to be younger (33% are aged 24 and under), and less likely to be working full-time than white Londoners. As a result, ethnic minority Londoners tend to use buses more often (26% of ethnic minority Londoners used buses daily compared with 16% white), where crime is higher than on the rest of the transport network.

In terms of representation, TfL fares better as an employer than many parts of the industry, with 26.4% of employees BAME (40% of Londoners are BAME), but just 13.8% of senior managers. TfL reports on its ethnicity pay gap, a median 9.3% lower for BAME employees, with the greatest discrepancy at the upper tier of the pay scale.

Makoni says transparency of this sort is key in providing accountability to ►



► ethnicity statistics, which, alone, won't change the status quo – but it must be ongoing, and tied to improvement targets.

"We want representation, but we want accountability; you aren't going to get women on board if you have white men making decisions, if people are making decisions for other groups they will never be included," she says.

"My feeling is that sometimes it's not enough to open the door and let people in, you have got to change the culture first.

"You aren't going to solve anything by sending people on an hour-long course on unconscious bias. Changing a culture takes a significant amount of effort."

AFBE-UK launched an action plan, calling on companies and individuals to improve representation of BME people within the industry. Called ACCESS.A, the plan "asks every company to Accept facts about racial disparity, Educate itself and its staff, create a Strategy and Safe places, and finally, but not less important, to be Accountable".

As well as having BAME people making decisions that affect communities, listening to people is key.

Tamika Butler is Toole Design's director of Equity and Inclusion, in California. In a blog post following George Floyd's death, she wrote: "Whenever I think of transportation and the people I know and respect in this field, we care about mobility and freedom – helping people get to the things, places, and people they want to get to with dignity and as their full selves. That means that transportation, like every industry, must use this time to 'look at old problems in new ways'."

This means being 'willing to assess the problem honestly, deeply, and thoughtfully – even when it reveals things in ourselves and in our society that make us profoundly uncomfortable'.

She says this is not happening yet. Her advice: "Start by listening to women of colour. We're often the most impacted, but also the most ignored. We might do things differently than you're used to, but different isn't always wrong."

Back in the UK, in Leicester City Council women of colour are at the heart of its use of active travel to tackle transport inequalities. In 2011, an *Understanding Walking and Cycling* report examined barriers to active travel in several English cities, including Leicester's Belgrave neighbourhood, predominantly second-generation South Asian Hindu communities, via interviews and geographical surveys. Researchers found many inhabitants of the neighbourhood didn't want to cycle; they didn't see it as attractive or desirable, and many didn't have access to bikes. This was the starting point for change says Andy Salkeld, the city's cycling officer.

Leicester has invested heavily in main road cycle routes, and has worked with further new communities to improve cycling

and walking rates. As part of a clean air programme, Leicester's Jan Hudson decided to focus solely on women – for whom transport scarcity is a big issue. Many women couldn't ride bikes, so in 2019 she launched a programme of morning sessions in which women would learn how to cycle – before eventually taking them out on rides.

"The first ride we took them on we went to a beautiful Victorian park. You have to go across the inner ring road but there's a new bridge. It took me 10 minutes with some very wobbly riders to take them into the park. There's nothing more satisfying to see the look on these women's faces to see the green space before them. They live in a very architecturally compact environment and most are in apartments."

Hudson believes, by helping women in these communities to cycle, and to orient themselves with the cycling infrastructure, the city is affording them access to education and employment, not only for themselves but their children – in other words, meeting social equity and public health objectives. The city's forthcoming hire bikes will be free to use for these women, and others, as it is rolled out towards autumn.

In Birmingham, similar programmes have helped seed cycling advocates into South Asian communities, including via access to a city bike share scheme. Birmingham Councillor Waseem Zaffar

26%

of ethnic minority Londoners use buses daily compared with 16% white

says access to active transport is not about being anti-car, but about tackling health inequalities in such communities.

The evidence backs this up. According to the Deloitte Mobility Index 2019, those on low incomes, who are more likely to be BAME, "are more likely to be exposed to the negative impacts of transport provision: they are more likely to be killed or seriously injured on the roads, suffer the harmful effects of air pollution, and be the victims of street crime".

People in lower income households are also less likely to cycle, despite the cost benefits – due to safety concerns, primarily – while a lack of storage space and air pollution, more prevalent in deprived areas, can make cycling and walking less appealing. Although evidence suggests the physical benefits of active travel outweigh the risks in all but the most polluted environments, perceptions may be contrary to this.

The Deloitte report also notes "despite improvements in pedestrian safety, there is a persistent safety gap related to ethnicity and levels of deprivation".

Cycling also has an image problem that needs to be overcome: half of Londoners said cycling in London is not for "people like them", and TfL renamed "Cycle Superhighways" to "Cycleways" in a bid to change the impression cycling is a high-speed competitive sport.

Sometimes, the issue is how people feel they are being perceived. Susan Claris and colleagues interviewed people for a new Inclusive Cycling report, and Claris recalls one man they interviewed, as saying when he is walking with his children he is seen as a father; otherwise, he's viewed as a tall black man and people will cross the street to avoid him. This attitude is reflected in police disproportionately stopping young black men cycling, walking and driving.



This isn't the time to be congratulating ourselves, people shouldn't feel that they are being unfairly treated. We are learning, but, unfortunately, transport has a long way to go  
Mara Makoni, AFBE-UK

SOURCES

- [1] [tinyurl.com/rwbhu8p](https://tinyurl.com/rwbhu8p)
- [2] [tinyurl.com/yczxp8a7](https://tinyurl.com/yczxp8a7)
- [3] [tinyurl.com/ycsfjody](https://tinyurl.com/ycsfjody)

Claris says: "I think the really hard thing, particularly with discrimination, is imagining what that must be like, if people aren't going to be out walking because they fear other people's perceptions or reactions to them".

Claris draws parallels with a UCL report on mental health and transport. "The single biggest [barrier] was other passengers' attitudes and behaviours and I was astonished and depressed by that – you would think it would be lack of staff at stations, or cost of travel; I think to try to understand that if you aren't in one of those under-

represented groups, is quite hard."

Lam says: "I think a paradigm shift within the transport industry would be really impactful in terms of shifting away from the engineering and technological ideology into a more nuanced way of

people being able to connect to each other."

This approach is more similar to the Healthy Streets movement, led by TfL and other major global cities, with a focus on experiences of a streetscape, and safety, rather than prioritising maximum traffic throughflow.

Makoni says in terms of employers, transparency must be at the heart of improvements, such as companies reporting on diversity data, and feeding back in the case of unsuccessful BAME applicants following job interviews, to avoid assumptions, as she says, that "the white guy got it, when there could have been a legitimate reason" for someone else getting the job, and not simply the applicant's ethnicity.

Makoni adds that safe spaces must be genuine safe spaces, and BAME networks within a company can be a sign people don't feel safe having certain conversations in the general workplace.

"It has improved; the question is whether we have improved fast enough," Makoni says. "The impact of not being diverse has on society has been felt for so long – for longer than should be allowed. It's not to say there hasn't been progress, but we can't allow it to keep going, we need to work faster. Improvements won't happen unless those that make those decisions recognise those they are making decisions for.

"It's about making sure those that are affected by decisions are asked about it. This isn't the time to be congratulating ourselves, people shouldn't feel that they are being unfairly treated. We are learning, but unfortunately transport has a long way to go." ST



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