

TEA & CHAT

From Racism to Resilience: Navigating Career Progression in the NHS

5 AUGUST 2026 • KUNAFI & TEA

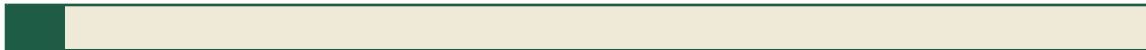


Ethnicity of Participants – 20 Attendees

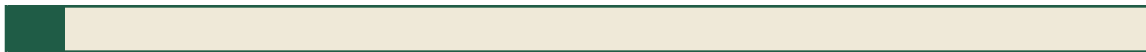
Pakistani 90%



Indian 5%



Middle Eastern 5%



Led by Heena Mahmood

Venue: Kunafa & Tea

Attendance: 20 women

On 5 August 2026, Muslim Women's Council welcomed women to a powerful and thought-provoking Tea & Chat session at Kunafa & Tea, led by author and NHS professional Heena Mahmood. The session, *From Racism to Resilience: Navigating Career Progression in the NHS*, created a safe and open space for women to reflect on their own experiences of racism, discrimination and barriers to progression within the workplace.

The session was attended by 20 women, with 90% identifying as Pakistani, 5% Indian and 5% Middle Eastern. The diversity of experiences in the room created a meaningful conversation about the realities faced by ethnic minority women working within healthcare and wider professional environments.

Facilitator Biography

Heena Mahmood is the author of *Minority Ethnic Voices in Healthcare Professions*. Having initially worked as a physiotherapist in the NHS, Heena later embarked on a career in Digital Project Management. She led the development of the first BAME network within a large NHS organisation of approximately 8,000 people and became an active member of West Yorkshire's award-winning regional race equality network. Alongside her digital and leadership work, Heena continues to practise clinically as a Senior Specialist Physiotherapist and currently manages clinical safety for digital system implementations in healthcare.

Session Overview

Creating a Space to Speak

Heena began by asking the women in the room how many had experienced racism in some form. The discussion highlighted that racism is not always direct or openly expressed. For many people, it can be subtle, indirect and woven into everyday interactions, making it difficult to challenge and, at times, even harder to explain to others.

Heena shared a personal experience from her time working as a physiotherapist. While teaching a younger, white British colleague during a patient assessment, a patient made a comment questioning Heena's belonging because of her appearance and ethnicity. The experience was deeply upsetting and left Heena questioning how much longer she could continue to tolerate such treatment.

Rather than remaining silent, she challenged the comment. It was a moment that reinforced for her the importance of having a voice and recognising that remaining quiet does not necessarily make difficult situations disappear.



Heena spoke honestly about the emotional impact of reporting racism in the workplace. Explaining an experience repeatedly to managers or HR can mean having to relive the incident, while the fear remains that nothing will actually change. Yet she also acknowledged an important reality: no individual can change the whole world. Instead, she encouraged the women to consider what they can change.

“I'm not going to change the whole world, but I'm going to change my world.”

Understanding the Bigger Picture

The conversation explored how racism within the NHS cannot be separated from the wider history of the organisation. The NHS was founded on the principle that healthcare should be accessible to everyone, regardless of wealth or background. However, Heena highlighted the gap that can exist between the principles upon which an organisation is founded and the lived experiences of the people working within it.

The NHS has historically relied heavily on workers from ethnic minority communities, particularly from the Caribbean and South Asia, who came to Britain to help rebuild the country and support the newly established health service. Today, ethnic minority staff make up a significant proportion of the NHS workforce, particularly in frontline roles. However, representation does not always translate into equal access to leadership, management and career progression.

Heena encouraged attendees to think about their own careers and to ask themselves: What is stopping me from getting where I want to be? What can I change? What skills do I need to develop? Who can support me?

The discussion also acknowledged that racism can come from different directions. It may involve colleagues, managers or even patients, and sometimes the wider organisational culture can create barriers that make it more difficult for everyone to succeed equally.

From Survival to Resilience

One of the most powerful aspects of the session was Heena's openness about her own journey. She spoke about moments when she believed that leaving a particular department would solve the problem, only to discover that the challenges continued elsewhere.

There were times when she would sit in her car before work, preparing herself mentally for the day ahead and making dua before walking through the doors. She spoke about the importance of faith, but also stressed that trust in Allah does not mean remaining passive.



For Heena, faith and action had to work together. Making dua was accompanied by speaking up, seeking advice, approaching managers and continuing to advocate for herself. She acknowledged that sometimes we may need to “bite our tongue”, but there is a limit to how long a person can remain silent before the silence itself becomes harmful.

Her experience also demonstrated the importance of persistence. The first person she approached did not necessarily provide the support she needed, but she continued seeking help until she found someone who could make a difference.

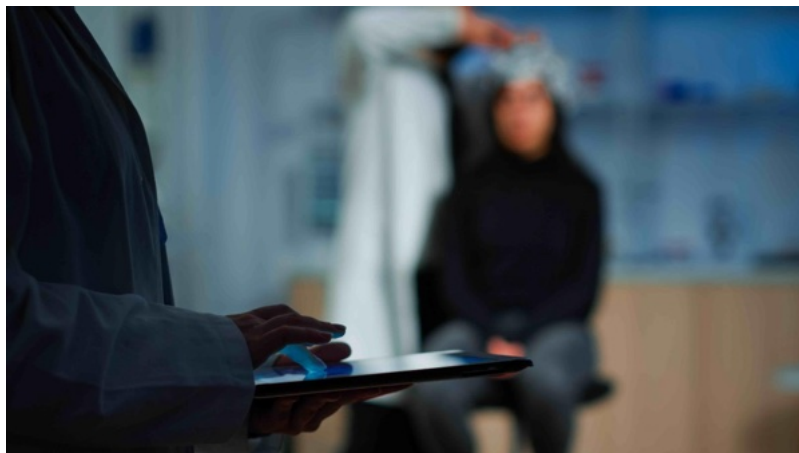
The Power of Community

A key message throughout the session was the importance of having a strong network. Heena explained that a network does not necessarily exist to solve our problems for us. Instead, it can provide encouragement, perspective, knowledge and a reminder that we are not alone.

She encouraged women to build relationships beyond their immediate circles, to speak to people they might not normally approach and to share experiences. It was through conversations with others and recognising how many people were experiencing similar challenges that Heena was inspired to write her book.

The session became highly interactive, with attendees openly discussing their own experiences of racism and discrimination within the workplace. One woman shared that 26 people had left her workplace within just two years, highlighting the impact that poor workplace cultures can have on staff retention and wellbeing.

The women also acknowledged that leaving a difficult workplace is not always an option. Financial responsibilities, family commitments, career progression and the difficulty of finding another suitable role can all make walking away extremely challenging.



Finding Your Path Forward

Rather than suggesting there is one solution to overcoming workplace discrimination, Heena encouraged women to focus on what is within their control. Understanding what you want to achieve is an important first step. Once you can answer the question “What is it that I want to do?”, you can begin to identify the path that will take you there.

The session ended on a message of resilience and determination. Life will inevitably bring challenges, and workplaces are no different. The aim is not necessarily to remove every obstacle, but to develop the confidence, knowledge, relationships and resilience needed to navigate them.

Impact

For the women who attended, the session offered more than a conversation about racism. It provided an opportunity to recognise shared experiences, challenge the feeling of isolation that discrimination can create and consider how faith, self-advocacy, networks and practical action can help women move forward.

From Racism to Resilience was ultimately a reminder that while we may not be able to change every system or every person, we can find our voice, build our networks, take action and continue working towards the future we want.

**Report created by the Tea & Chat participants
supported by the MWC Team**

