



10 steps behind... but still in the lead

In conversation with
Pinky Lilani OBE



Alison Halsey

Pinky Lilani OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire), is a chef, businesswoman, author, consultant and entrepreneur who has done more than most to promote the causes of gender and racial diversity. She is the founder of the Asian Women of Achievement Awards, the Women of the Future Awards and a range of networking and community initiatives. She recently spoke with **Alison Halsey**, a judge of the Women of the Future Awards 2006–2007, about her work.

Alison Halsey What drove you to become so involved in the field of gender and racial equality and to set up your various award schemes?

Pinky Lilani Unlike many people, I never had a strong vision of what I wanted to do. I came to Britain 30 years ago from India, recently married, and discovered I had to learn to cook and run a household. I didn't really think of pursuing a career – in India, Muslim women are not really encouraged to become educated and embark on a career because it makes them less attractive marriage partners. But after a while I began teaching people about Indian cookery, and then branched out into voluntary work in the Asian community. Asian culture tends to be very male-dominated, certainly in its public face. People used to ask me if I walked two steps behind my husband. In fact, I used to say that I walked ten steps behind, and then he didn't know what I was getting up to! Anyway, over time I discovered that there were all these impressive Asian women doing amazing things in business and the community, and getting no recognition for it. And as William James said, "The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated". So in 1998 I had the idea of creating the Asian Women of Achievement Award.

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AH I guess the time was right for it. Diversity was becoming a significant issue on the corporate agenda...

PL Yes, that's right. I was lucky enough to get some good sponsors, Cherie Blair (wife of former British Prime Minister) agreed to become a patron, and I was determined to find strong stories showing what Asian women were achieving and could achieve. We found an amazing range of success, from Asian women rappers to stand-up comedienne, opera singers and Meena Pathak, the co-founder of Patak's Foods. And you know what struck me? So many of these people said "Oh, I'm not worth this attention, nobody's interested". They had low self-esteem. But now lots of our winners have gone on to achieve even greater things.

AH And it has also become a great networking tool, you're not only getting people to believe in themselves, but also making the wider community aware of them?

PL Yes, the Queen recently gave a lunch for 200 women in business, and 14 of the guests were our award winners! You see a lot of it is about providing role models for other women, raising their aspirations. Asian women particularly, can be too self-deprecating. If we are to achieve much greater representation and visibility of women and minorities in the corporate world – which I firmly believe we must – we have to work on a range of different ways to overcome what holds them back.

Right: Pinky Lilani OBE, with British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown.

Far right: Pinky in her kitchen.

Opposite page: "Pinky Lilani OBE (Entrepreneur & Speaker)", Alison Instone '21 21st Century Women' ©2008. Reproduced with permission.



AH Do you think actual discrimination against women and minorities still exists in business?

PL Oh yes. A lot of it is subtle, and possibly not even conscious. But business people, especially at the senior levels, have a tendency to clone themselves. If they're all white men around a board table, and a vacancy arises, they'll tend to appoint someone who looks like themselves. Even if a woman makes it onto a board or into a top team, she can feel uncomfortable: people have said to me, "I felt I didn't belong there". And although a company may have a positive commitment to diversity, it's often superficial. People may say, "Oh yes, we have an Asian woman, or a Muslim, in our top team". But how well do they really know them? Do they socialize out of work? Do they visit each others' homes? If not, it's superficial. The benefits to be gained from genuine diversity of culture, background, experience and attitudes, especially in a globalized world can truly make a difference to business. I'm afraid a lot more still needs to be done, but its rewards are truly worth it.

AH Can I ask you about the vexed issue of quotas? It's a controversial subject, but do you think there should be specific targets for representation of women and minorities?

PL I do. Unfortunately, I don't think things will change significantly, fast enough, without it. It would make leaders look harder to find women who are as capable as men and deserve the recognition and the chance to fulfil themselves. We know they're there. Our awards have proved that. They simply need encouraging, mentoring. I know there is a danger of favoring weaker candidates just to fill a quota, and I wouldn't go as far as that, as far as positive discrimination. But I think you do have to have targets. Women tend not to push themselves forward, so leaders have to take personal responsibility and make a genuine effort to find them. And then of course, organizations have to make sure that the infrastructure is right to allow women to succeed, for example by paying proper attention to work-life balance.

AH Do you think more training is needed to bridge cultural differences in the workplace?

PL Yes, I'm convinced that proper training initiatives can raise awareness and help people to understand and respect and value cultural differences. But I think we need to be more creative in the ways we do this. For example, actually taking people to experience other countries and cultures can be incredibly powerful. People say that they are interested and willing to learn more, but they don't often do much about it. They tend to be very conservative, focusing on their small circle of acquaintances. All this does is reinforce the status quo. In fact, there's much greater benefit to be gained from exploring the outer limits of one's business and personal network, what the sociologist Mark Granovetter calls "the strength of weak ties". That's how you learn and develop and change. Companies aren't doing that.



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AH But that needs investment over the long term.

PL And companies are too focused on the short term and the bottom line, especially in the financial services sector. Whereas in fact, it's building relationships which matters, and which pays off in the long term. That's what the *Women of the Future Awards* focus on, recognizing those women who may not have made it all the way yet, but have great potential. These are young entrepreneurs and businesswomen; forming networks and relationships with them now will pay off years in the future. We're lucky in that our sponsors recognize the need for long-term thinking and long-term nurturing in this area. It's the same inside a large organization. The long-term potential is two or three or four layers down. Women and people from ethnic minorities, especially, need champions. If you spot the people with real promise now, and encourage and mentor them, they'll never forget it.

AH Relationship development is especially important in financial services of course. Do you have any particular messages about diversity for big players in the financial services sector?

PL It has to come from the top, and it has to be genuine. There's still too much lip service paid to diversity. They have to be more creative, and find different ways of tackling the problem. And everyone has to be accountable. That's why, to go back for a second, I believe in targets. What gets measured gets done. For instance, Norway now has legislation requiring that 40 percent of company board members have to be women. Coming up to the deadline of December 2007, there was a massive rush to appoint women. So it worked. However, the proportion of women in executive management positions on boards in Norway, still remains much lower than the target, at 15 percent.

AH But surely women can't simply rely on taking advantage of quotas and targets?

PL Absolutely not. Minorities need to push for recognition too. As the saying goes, "The only thing you get without asking is an infectious disease!" So we have to make it easier for them to raise their profile, with initiatives like women's networks, which can be very powerful.

AH Are you encouraged by the progress that's being made?

PL I am. Attitudes have changed, and are still changing. It's much better, even though there's a lot of discrimination at all levels. My own experience has been very encouraging. But we need to keep pushing.

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