Underrepresentation of British South Asian leaders in football

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Aim and Method. Despite growing conversations about diversity, British South Asian individuals remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions within the English football industry, even when they possess high levels of education. This article, based on interviews with 21 professionals in the field, reveals that this isn't due to a lack of interest or ability, but rather to deeply ingrained systemic issues.

Key findings. The study highlights the crucial role of informal networks – 'who you know' often matters more than qualifications. These networks are historically dominated by White men, creating significant barriers for those from underrepresented backgrounds. Simply getting a foot in the door isn't enough; individuals need to be fully accepted and secure in their roles, which is difficult given the high turnover rates in football. The research suggests these networks can unintentionally perpetuate existing power imbalances, sometimes operating in ways that reinforce the status quo.

Participants emphasized the importance of having 'allies' – supportive colleagues who advocate for them – but also noted that relying on these relationships can be problematic, suggesting success isn't solely based on merit. The study also found that current diversity initiatives often fall short, lacking consistent standards and accountability. Furthermore, the broad 'BAME' label that was used to categorize ethnic groups in the English context can mask the specific challenges faced by British South Asians.

The research argues that simply talking about diversity isn't enough. Real change requires actively dismantling the systemic biases within the football industry, rethinking recruitment practices, and investing in genuine equality, diversity, and inclusion expertise. Moving beyond awareness and focusing on structural change is essential to create a truly inclusive environment where British South Asian leaders can thrive.

Limitations. The sample size of 21 interviewed participants may not fully represent the experiences of all British South Asian professionals in football. However, the in-depth interviews and careful analysis provide valuable insights into the complex challenges they face.