

Broken Ladders:

The myth of meritocracy for women of colour in the workplace



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Fawcett ▶
Equality. It's about time.

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About Us

The Fawcett Society

The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading membership charity campaigning for gender equality and women's rights at work, at home and in public life. Our vision is a society in which women and girls in all their diversity are equal and truly free to fulfil their potential creating a stronger, happier, better future for us all. We publish compelling research to educate, inform and lead the debate. We bring together politicians, academics, grassroots activists, and wider civil society to develop innovative, practical solutions and we campaign with women and men to make change happen.

The Runnymede Trust

Proudly independent, the Runnymede Trust speak truth to power on race and racism without fear or favour. We are authentic, led by an ethnically diverse team, we draw from our lived experience and that of our wide and inclusive community and partnership networks. From broadening the curriculum to exposing the Windrush scandal, our work is rooted in challenging structural racism and its impact on our communities. Our authoritative research-based interventions equip decision makers, practitioners and citizens with the knowledge and tools to deliver genuine progress towards racial equality in Britain.

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A note on language

In the UK, there are a number of terms used to describe a person's race and ethnicity. The most common terms used to describe all those who are non-white British are 'BME' and 'BAME'. Both terms are widely used in the UK by government, public bodies and the media, when referring to ethnic minority groups. BME stands for Black and Minority Ethnic and BAME stands for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic.

For this report, we have chosen not to use the term 'BAME' or 'BME' as it has its limitations in implying that ethnic minority groups are homogenous. This doesn't allow for further insights into the varied experiences of women in different ethnic minority groups as this report seeks to do. We have chosen to use the phrase 'women of colour' or 'people of colour' when discussing all ethnic minorities. We have chosen to identify the specific heritage of all the women, we feel it is important to provide disaggregated data to be able to better understand how women from different ethnic minority groups experience progression at work. We have interviewed women of Black African heritage, Indian heritage, Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage, East Asian heritage and Black Caribbean heritage to show the specificities of their experiences. This report does not cover all women from all ethnic minority backgrounds however we have sought to represent the views and experiences of the broadest range of minoritised women possible. For further insight into the language we have chosen to use, please refer to our *Pay and Progression Women of Colour Literature Review*.¹

1 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2021) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* [Pay and Progression of Women of Colour \(fawcettsociety.org.uk\)](https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk)

Definitions

Individual racism, institutional racism and systemic racism:

Individual racism: holding racist values (example: 'I would be upset if my child married someone who was Muslim'), racist beliefs (example: 'Black people don't work as hard as white people') or racist behaviours (example: using derogatory language to describe someone's ethnic minority background).

Institutional racism: "the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racial stereotyping."²

Systemic/structural racism: People of colour are alienated from positions of power and resources by legislation and face day to day discrimination by institutions. Structural racism (also known as systemic racism) is the condition where these "laws, institutional practices, customs and guiding ideas combine to harm racially minoritised populations in ways not experienced by white counterparts".³ In the workplace, this registers as modes of discrimination, that can determine who gets hired, trained, promoted, retained, demoted and fired. Thus, racism contributes to the maintenance of an economic system which creates and reproduces racial and ethnic inequality.⁴

Micro-aggressions

Indirect or everyday exchanges which serve to undermine and denigrate a marginalised group. This can include a statement, action or other incident. In the workplace, this might manifest itself as a 'joke' about someone's ethnic minority background.

Code-switching

Code-switching involves "adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behaviour, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities."⁵ A person of colour might switch the way in which they speak, express themselves in meetings and interact with colleagues in order to appear more palatable in the workplace.

- 2 Sir William Macpherson (1999), *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*
- 3 Dr Lingayah, S, (2021) *It takes a system: The systemic nature of racism and pathways to systems change It takes a system FINAL - January 2021.pdf* (rota.org.uk)
- 4 Dr Ashe, D. S, Dr Borkowska M & Professor Nazroo J (2019), *Racism Ruins Lives* <http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/code/research/projects/racism-at-work/tuc-full-report.pdf> (p32)
- 5 McCluney C, Robotham K, Lee S, Smith R, Durkee M (2019), *The Costs of Code-Switching* <https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-costs-of-codeswitching>

Heritage

Throughout this report, we have referred to women of colour of x “heritage”. We have been careful not to reduce a woman’s ethnic minority background to be the sole definer of their identity, recognising the different factors contribute to someone’s sense of identity.

Ethnicity pay gap

The ethnicity pay gap is the difference in the average hourly pay rates for people of colour in comparison to their white colleagues. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reports on the ethnicity pay gap every year. In doing so, it calculates the “difference between the median hourly earnings of white or white British employees (the reference group) and of other ethnic minority groups, as a proportion of average hourly earnings of the reference group.”⁶

6 House of Lords Library (2021), *Mandatory Ethnicity Pay Gap Reporting* <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/mandatory-ethnicity-pay-gap-reporting/#:~:text=The%20Office%20for%20National%20Statistics,earnings%20of%20the%20reference%20group>

Executive summary

“I don't think the system is set up for us to survive in it”

Maya, a woman of Black African heritage (senior leader)

Where there are institutions, there are challenges

Broken Ladders is the first report of its kind to focus explicitly on the experiences and perspectives of women of colour in the workplace – their voices on the challenges they face are now being heard.

Right now, in workplaces across the UK, women of colour are missing in positions of power. In top roles, such as Supreme Court Justices, Metro Mayors and FTSE 100 CEOs and in boardrooms and leadership teams across the UK, there is an unacceptable lack of women of colour⁷. But it's not just a lack of representation, there are significant pay and progression gaps for women of colour, who continue to earn less than white employees.

This must change.

Broken Ladders provides an in-depth exploration of the challenges facing women of colour from entry to employment to senior leadership. It shows that the cumulative negative impact on women of colour at work is common across all sectors and in all types of organisations. The challenges of structural racism, including micro-aggressions, embedded bias and lack of representation exist in all institutions – it does not happen because of a few aberrant individuals; it is rooted in organisational cultures and structures.

For women of colour, the workplace is a site of constant negotiation between their identities and their ability to progress.

Our key findings show:

- **75% of women of colour reported having experienced one or more forms of racism at work** – from “banter” about ethnicity or culture, surprise at their ability to speak English, micro-aggressions such as repeated mispronunciation of their name or outright racial slurs.
- **61% of women of colour (compared to 44% of white women) had performed the ‘mental gymnastics’ of changing something about themselves** – they had changed their language, topics of conversation, hairstyle, their name or what they eat at work a great deal’ or ‘quite a

⁷ Marren C, Bazeley A (2022), Sex and Power [Women's representation in positions of power \(fawcettsociety.org.uk\)](https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk)

bit' – to 'fit in' within the workplace.

- **Women of colour are more likely than white women to report a manager having blocked their progression at work (28% compared with 19%)** – as well as experiencing 'sticky floors' and 'concrete ceilings'. And self-employed women of colour are often expected to lower their fees or work for free.

Our Broken Ladders report shows that businesses are losing out too. Direct losses such as absence related to mental health have become well understood, but more subtly, organisations are losing intangible commitment that helps employees contribute and businesses to go the extra mile, and the ability to promote the best talent:

- **45%** women of colour experiencing racism at work said it had affected their ability or desire to stay in their role 'a great deal' or 'quite a bit'.
- **64%** women of colour feel it is important to be promoted – but, they are significantly more likely than white women to report being passed over for promotion, despite frequent good feedback (42% versus 27%).
- **43%** women of colour said being refused promotion led to loss of motivation.

This report makes recommendations to institutions on what needs to change to make workplaces work for women of colour. Most of the recommendations have come from the women we engaged with, based on our survey of over 3,000 women we engaged with through our survey, events, focus groups and depth interviews.

The recommendations outlined in this report will not yield immediate reductions in pay and progression gaps for women of colour but will create sustainable culture change that addresses the root causes of systemic issues. Due to the embedded nature of structural racism, long-term culture change is needed across society and in sectors such as healthcare, education, criminal justice and housing. For the purpose of this report, we have focused on changes within the employment sector. We hope that employers and sector leaders will implement our recommendations with the aim of closing pay and progression gaps for women of colour. Not only will this contribute to a more even playing field, but it will benefit employers and workplaces as they improve their ability to retain skilled staff.

Getting a foot in the door:

Many women of colour find themselves being asked to lower their ambitions starting from school. They also do not have access to financial and social resources, such as the right kind of careers advice, to start their working lives. This is compounded by making different career choices due to limited financial support. They want more and better quality informal career advice, and support on how to look for jobs.

The process of 'mental gymnastics' starts early in their working lives – women of colour describe it as a 'constant guessing game' involving code switching and changing aspects of themselves to 'fit in' with wider expectations about class, background and ethnicity.

- **Risking a harmful environment:** Women of colour were significantly more likely than white women to search for information about the organisation's ethnic diversity (18% vs 7%), gender balance (14% vs 10%), ethnicity pay gap data (11% vs 6%), policies (22% vs 11%), and to have read employee reviews online (38% vs 26%).
- **Pay transparency:** 70% of the women and 75% of women of colour we surveyed, advocated for all organisations to include salaries on job adverts to improve pay transparency. The results of the survey showed that this was the recommendation women of colour were most supportive of.

Once women of colour are successful in securing an interview, they face more 'mental gymnastics' to weave their way through a hiring process where they are indirectly and directly discriminated against. Every step of the way, they are assessing how they are going to feel working there and asking themselves if they are risking entering a harmful, racist environment.

Hard road to progression:

Throughout their career, women of colour face challenges and barriers that lock them out of progression. From barrier bosses to a lack of access to training that is rationed by employers to an over reliance on informal networks for progression - the potential of women of colour is being stifled.

Women in our survey wanted clear and unbiased promotion processes and career paths - so that everyone is aware of what they need to do to progress.

- **Locked out of progression:** Women of colour were significantly more likely than white women to report being passed over for promotion, despite frequent good feedback (42% versus 27%).
- **Progression matters:** Women of colour were more likely to agree that it is important to them that they are promoted over time (64% versus 49% for white women). Yet the lack of transparent and fair recruitment processes into senior roles is notable.
- **Barrier bosses:** Women of colour are more likely than white women to report a manager having blocked their progression at work (28%, compared with 19%). This was most common for women of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian heritage.

The other invisible workload

For most women of colour, the workplace is a site of constant negotiation between their identities and their ability to progress. The message most women of colour receive throughout is one of exclusion and othering – the idea that they do not belong in these spaces. This is reinforced through overt means such as direct racism and discrimination, and through subtle cues that force women of colour to change who they are to assimilate.

- **Prevalence of racism:** 75% of women of colour reported having experienced one or more forms of racism at work.

- **Everyday mental gymnastics:** 61% of women of colour, compared to 44% of white women, change something about themselves 'a great deal' or 'quite a bit' to 'fit in' in the workplace - their language, topics of conversation, hairstyle, their name or what they eat at work.
- **'The right kind of minority':** Women of colour are being told how calm, professional or well-spoken they are in comparison to others within their ethnicity.

These everyday adaptations that women of colour make directly challenge the notion of 'bring your whole self to work' that many employers claim they want.

I'm in leadership and my face still doesn't fit!

The illusion of meritocracy in the workplace and the narrative of 'merit' obscures the power and influence of invisible and informal networks at work, of which women of colour are often excluded.

- **A less acceptable leader:** Being a woman of colour was significantly associated with being seen as a less acceptable leader; with women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage most likely to report being told they do not have the right leadership qualities (36%).
- **A mistaken leader:** Women of colour in senior roles reported attending conferences and being mistaken as hospitality service staff or taking part in meetings and being addressed as the secretary.
- **Restricted expertise:** An additional problem is the issue of 'leadership fit' where women of colour's expertise and skills are restricted to what is seen as in line with their racialised and gendered identity, rather than a broader recognition of their leadership qualities.

The ability to earn more and progress further had vastly improved for those now self-employed, but they still face bias in accessing funding and receiving quality business support.

The cumulative impact on mental health

Most women of colour talked about the significant impact of their experiences of racism and discrimination at work on their mental health and well-being. Women of colour suffered from an erosion of confidence due to a lack of recognition at work causing self doubt and poor mental health.

- **Impact of racism:** On average, over three quarters of women of colour (76%) in our survey reported that experiences of racism in the workplace have an impact on their mental health, wellbeing, confidence at work, and feelings about work job satisfaction, progression opportunities, and ability or desire to stay in a role.
- **Loss of talent:** 45% of women of colour said it affected their ability to do their job or desire to stay in their role.
- **Well-being implications:** 39% of women of colour reported that a lack

of progression had affected their well-being, compared to 28% of white women; whilst being refused promotion led to loss of motivation for 43% of women of colour.

For many the move to self-employment was to protect mental health and well-being; gain flexibility needed to balance work and family life; and to escape 'career blocking' or continuous workplace bias and discrimination. Self-employed women of colour shared regular occurrences of being asked to lower their fees and/or being expected to work for free. Ultimately, many women of colour end up leaving their sector or jobs altogether, resulting in loss of talent from their industries and organisations.

Our Recommendations: The challenge to employers and institutions

The women of colour who took part in our research come from various sectors and have worked in UK organisations of all shapes and sizes. We spoke to women working in big businesses, small charities, and in the public sector such as the civil service, local authorities, the NHS, and in education. Women of colour spoke to us about their experiences with other institutions too, some of which exist to support them – universities and schools, trade unions, funders, and business incubators. The findings are common across all these sectors and the challenges of racism, micro-aggressions, embedded bias and lack of representation, exist in all institutions.

Businesses and public bodies are losing out too. They are losing talent and damaging their sustainability through sickness and absence and weakening their ability to manage people well and in turn, failing to create diverse, effective succession. We support the Race at Work Charter created by Business in the Community, who note that action by employers could boost the UK economy and lead to increased productivity and returns in the workplace.⁸

Through hearing the experiences of women of colour in workplaces and self-employment, we have been able to craft recommendations that highlight the root causes of the barriers that exist. Our recommendations speak to government, employers, third-sector bodies, financial institutions and funders in terms of specific actions they can and should take to respond to the issues we have uncovered. It is essential that all institutions reflect on how racism manifests for them both as employers, service providers and as corporate citizens. The recommendations for employers in this report are not just for profit-making businesses but for all organisations, including those that exist to tackle inequalities and serve the public. Charities, trade unions and funding bodies are some of those institutions that came up in our research as organisations who are falling short of the values they speak to and must do more to gain the trust of women of colour and aid in their career progression.

8 Business in the Community (2021), *Race* <https://www.bitc.org.uk/race/>

Employers

To address the cumulative negative impact on women of colour and structural nature of the barriers that hold them back, organisations need an effective, evidence based Anti-Racism Action Plan. While we acknowledge that this will be a journey, the research we have conducted identifies the following set of strong starting points for your Action Plan.

Minimise bias in recruitment

1. Make job advertisements more inclusive:

- Include salaries on all job advertisements and don't ask salary history questions at any point in the recruitment or negotiation process.
- Include reasonable flexible working options in all job advertisements and support staff to adopt flexible working practices – including options for part time work, flexible hours, working from home, compressed hours and job sharing.
- Provide transparent job descriptions with less rigid requirements which explicitly recognise the value of transferable experience and skills through alternative workplace settings.

2. Reduce bias and be more transparent in hiring processes:

- Remove names from CVs during shortlisting so that hiring managers cannot use them to assume the ethnicity of candidates.
- Ensure that interview panels represent the organisation's actual diversity, and do not give a false appearance of being inclusive which does not reflect the workplace experience.
- Hiring managers (or sector bodies, to support smaller organisations) should produce guidance or information sessions to accompany recruitment processes to explain what is required from applicants, especially when using methods such as assessment centres and more complex recruitment practices.

3. Recruitment organisations should improve transparency by creating safe online spaces on their websites for women of colour to capture and share their experience of organisations, as done by Glassdoor.

Minimise bias in progression

4. Set structures that ensure line managers deliver equitable and fair progression and promotion outcomes for employees. This should include:

- Support and training for managers in how to conduct appraisals so that they are supportive and developmental.
- Broaden appraisal systems to have 360-degree input and feedback so that evaluation outcomes are not reliant on one individual.
- Link line managers' performance targets to organisational performance

targets on diversity and inclusion including for retention, fair allocation of development opportunities, and progression of women of colour.

5. **Provide ongoing support to leaders to improve their own ability to talk about race**, and to actively listen to feedback from women of colour as part of their personal development metrics. Recognise and implement this as not a one-time action, but an ongoing commitment.

Support women of colour to progress: mentoring, training and development

6. **Conduct an annual learning and development audit by gender and ethnicity to track:**
 - How training budgets are spent
 - Who is being given access to prestige level training or development
 - Progression journey for employees after accessing training or development opportunities.
7. **Make progression routes explicit and well-known**, not based on word of mouth and informal networks.
8. **Ensure that women of colour have equitable access to both mentorship and sponsorship opportunities to enable them to progress into leadership roles:**
 - Provide opportunities for women of colour to receive peer to peer mentorship and sponsorship from other women of colour from external bodies such as unions, sector bodies, membership organisations etc.
9. **Provide a reciprocal mentorship programme built into senior leaders' annual KPIs:**
 - Provide training for senior leaders on how to do this effectively.
 - Compensate women of colour for this additional work e.g., additional annual leave, additional compensation, recognition towards professional development etc.
10. **Undertake regular 'stay interviews'** (an alternative to 'exit interviews'), giving women of colour safe spaces and opportunities to feedback on their career experiences. These can also be an opportunity for leaders to improve their own ability to talk about race and listen to feedback from women of colour (as above).

Address racism in your organisation's culture and monitor it

11. **Produce an ethnicity and gender pay gap report, and use it to develop your Anti-Racism Action Plan for improvement, based in the specific challenges you face as an organisation:**
 - Where you have enough data not to identify individuals, break your data down to ethnicity groups (e.g., Black African, Chinese and East

Asian etc. – be more specific if you can), to gain a clear picture of actions needed for different women of colour in your organisation.

- Publish progression data broken down by ethnicity for staff at all levels making it readily accessible for job applicants as well as employees.

12. Use data about your organisation to develop your Anti-Racism Action Plan with SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely) targets and accountability built in. As well as monitoring your ethnicity pay gaps, this should include:

- Setting SMART targets to improve the proportion of women of colour in the organisation at all levels from entry to senior leadership.
- Carrying out an equal pay audit based on gender and ethnicity every three years to rectify any unlawful pay practices that are affecting women of colour.
- A record of the number of complaints of racial harassment and bullying including outcomes of the complaints.
- Gathering and analysing data on disciplinary procedures to identify any differences by ethnicity, e.g., do women of colour rarely have their grievances upheld, but more often have grievances upheld against them.
- Larger organisations should track progression routes:
 - Track promotion outcomes of mentorship and sponsorship initiatives by gender and race to better understand where the gaps are and develop plans to minimise those gaps.
 - For those who are not women of colour and have been promoted recently, determine the actual routes leading to progression, e.g., was it more often by informal routes such as recommendation or being given a high-profile project than by formal hiring processes?
 - Track by gender and race how work that leads to promotions is allocated.
 - Track the learning and success for line managers and employees taking part in reciprocal mentorship.
 - Report these at senior leadership/management meetings as part of the regular analysis and updating of your action plan.

13. Sign up to the Business in the Community (BITC) [Race at Work Charter](#)

14. Appoint an executive sponsor for race:

- Leaders should connect to employees and convene significant conversations in the workplace for active listening – BITC's [Race at Work: Black Voices](#) recommendations show how.

15. Leaders should value the skills women of colour bring to leadership, and foster a culture whereby they can bring their differences, expanding the definition of leadership rather than making women of colour conform to stereotypical ideas:

- Experts on leadership emphasise the need to connect with employees or stakeholders, to learn from difference; and adapt creatively to manage adversity. The women in our report demonstrate these skills as they respond to challenges in the workplace - organisations who welcome and embrace their talents will benefit.

16. Have clear and transparent processes for reporting racism, with multiple reporting routes, including options outside of line management structures; and make sure employees are aware of them:

- This could include a phone line, a webform or app, an independent third-party, an internal champion or HR specialist.
- Treat employees who make a report with respect and empathy.
- Encourage employees to report any experiences of racism.
- Take action as a result of reports and communicate this to make clear your new stance.

17. Introduce meaningful and intersectional anti-racism training (see below in 18 on complex individual experiences), supported by systems and structures to minimise bias; with outcomes linked to organisational performance targets on diversity and inclusion and monitor its impact:

- Ensure that all interviewers and hiring managers have anti-racist training to minimise bias in their decision-making processes.
- Noting the limitations of unconscious bias and other forms of anti-oppression training on their own, ensure that any training is part of the wider organisational action plan, and accompanied by clear actions and accountability for those participating.

18. Recognise the major role that line management plays in shaping the experiences of women of colour as individuals. The specific negative impacts vary and need to be actioned at the local level:

- Consider the data in our report for the different groups of women (Black African, Black Caribbean, Chinese and East Asian, Indian, Mixed or other Ethnicities, Pakistani or Bangladeshi), and further, how somebody's multiple characteristics and identities - such as their gender, race, sexual orientation, religion and disability - interact to create a unique and complex experience of disadvantage or inequality.
- Ensure training and support enables all supervisors and managers to understand and use this perspective.
- Business in the Community's [Practical Guide for Managers](#) outlines ways to build authentic relationships, support mental health and enable everyone to perform at their best.

19. Recognise and reward women of colour and other minoritised groups if they are asked to engage in work to support anti-racism. This could take the form of a reduction in other work, additional days of leave, additional payment or recognising this as part of their personal development goals.

20. Have a plan for reducing the cumulative impact of micro-aggressions and working in unwelcoming spaces, to support the mental health and well-being of women of colour. [Mental Health First Aid England](#) has provided guidance for employers on how best to support people of colour in the workplace to reduce disproportionate incidences of poor workplace mental health experiences.

21. Sector bodies e.g., Federation of Small Businesses and British Chambers of Commerce should support and provide guidance on tackling racism for smaller organisations.

Government

1. **Mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting for employers with 50+ employees, with requirement for employers to publish action plans to tackle those pay gaps:**
 - Including intersectional pay gaps by gender and ethnicity.
 - Include mandatory publishing of data on progression within the workplace by gender as well as ethnicity, and disparities in pay and diversity of senior leadership.
 - Publish the pay gap between women of colour overall and white British men; as well as the pay gaps for specific groups of women by ethnic minority (where the policy on disclosure permits) using a suitable threshold per organisation in order not to disclose individuals' personal data.
 - Publish both mean and median data.
 - Government should set out guidance on how to produce an evidence-led, consultative, time-bound and resourced action plan.

2. **Legislate to improve pay transparency and reduce bias:**
 - Introduce an enforceable legal right for women to know what their male colleagues earn if they suspect that they may be experiencing pay discrimination.
 - Review current voluntary pilot pay transparency scheme with a view to making it mandatory. Legislate to ban salary history questions and require employers to include salary bands within job advertisements.
 - Legislate to require employers to include any viable flexible work options in job advertisements, and to assess whether a flexible work request can be reasonably accommodated before rejecting it.

3. **Set up a government-backed, business-led initiative to focus employer efforts to tackle the ethnicity and gender pay gap and drive forward progress:**
 - Similarly, to the Women's Business Council, this should be led by women of colour (although not necessarily exclusively staffed by them).
 - Taking note of the structural challenges and bias that women of colour face and the extra burden of taking on this work, participants should be offered reimbursement for their time (as described for Employers).

4. **Investigate how experiences of institutional, structural and interpersonal racism impact on both the mental health and career outcomes of women of colour.**

5. **Fund local helplines to provide emotional support to people experiencing racial harassment at work** (as Racial Equality Councils used to do more widely – and a supplement to the legal advice line of Equality Advisory Support Service EASS).

6. **Equality Advisory Support Service (EASS) legal advice helpline should have funding increased to allow for specialist support to be offered on**

race discrimination, and to make their service in this area much more well-known:

- Make clearer on their website and in other communications that micro-aggressions and the cumulative impact of bias in the workplace do constitute grounds for a claim of workplace discrimination, which they will support and guide people through raising.
- 7. Increase funding for the Equalities and Human Rights Commission to prioritise using investigation powers against employers with high incidences of discrimination of women of colour tribunal decisions against them.**
 - 8. Embed a firm commitment to furthering equality in the workplace in the new Public Procurement Regulations:**
 - Publicly support organisations that implement inclusive procurement strategies.
 - Prioritise suppliers that demonstrate a commitment to workplace equality.
 - 9. Create an information and enforcement campaign to end unpaid internships as these are illegal (as identified by the Taylor Review).**

Unions

- 1. Building on the work of the TUC anti-racism task force and recommendations of the 2019 TUC report [Racism Ruins Lives](#), unions should develop and implement Anti-Racism Action Plans for themselves, covering all areas of their work including organising, collective bargaining, public policy and their activities as employers.**
- 2. Unions to be more active in this space and provide support to members of colour:**
 - Negotiate with employers to introduce our recommendations, including:
 - Bargain with employers to provide opportunities for women of colour to receive peer support or mentoring from other women of colour.
 - Negotiate with employers to provide a programme of support and mental health support for victims of racial harassment and bullying in the workplace.
 - Train union reps to better identify and challenge individual and institutional racism in the workplace:
 - Ensure workplace reps understand the organisational and intersecting structural barriers that impact women of colour that impact women of colour and prevent them from reaching their full potential - particularly those linked to gender, ethnicity and class.
 - Support workplace reps through training, campaigning and organising to challenge these organisational and structural barriers through collective bargaining and action in workplaces.

Universities

1. **Universities should create and implement Anti-Racism Action Plans:**
 - Utilise the Universities UK's report: [Tackling racial harassment in higher education](#).
2. **Universities should review their careers service approach, to reduce the gap in career support experienced by women of colour:**
 - Ensure support is available on writing CVs and how to unpick a job description and spot the key points.

Recommendations to support self-employed women of colour

1. **Financial institutions, charitable grant funders and investors should implement Anti-Racism Action Plans for themselves which should prioritise:**
 - gathering data broken down by ethnicity of funding portfolio
 - active engagement with women of colour
 - targeted funding for women of colour
 - reviewing their business start-up funding processes so that people of colour do not have to excessively retell their hardships in order to qualify.
2. **Business start-up services e.g., Business Growth Hub, Smallbusiness.co.uk to provide more mentors that are people of colour at different stages in their entrepreneurial journey. This will allow self-employed women of colour to gain practical advice that caters to their specific business needs.**

Introduction and Context

Women make up just 8% of FTSE 100 CEOs and there are no women of colour in these roles.⁹ Women of colour are almost completely missing from senior roles and leadership positions across workplaces. With intersecting structural barriers and discrimination faced at every point of the career pipeline, from school to university to employment, it's clear that this impacts outcomes for women of colour in the workplace.

Broken Ladders provides an in-depth exploration of the challenges facing women of colour from entry to employment to senior leadership. Using evidence from focus groups and interviews with over 50 participants consisting of women of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, Black African, Arab and Black Caribbean heritage, as well as consultation events talking to more than 60 women of colour and a detailed quantitative survey of over 3,000 women of colour, we clearly outline where inequalities exist in the workplace and their impact. Our approach to the research, our methodology and its limitations are described in the Appendix.

This report offers a unique contribution: going beyond the tendency to homogenise different ethnic minority groups, we are committed to disaggregating the responses that we have received from women of colour wherever possible. We show how different experiences of pay and progression affect different ethnic minority groups, alongside the influence of intersecting factors of age, class, disability and sexuality. Furthermore, we aim to show how these experiences have a ripple effect that impacts job stability, income potential, and mental health. Broken Ladders also offers insights into how these experiences cause some women of colour to leave employment and start their own businesses.

We have included case studies and extended career biographies, that allow our interview participants' experiences to be shared in ways that allow an understanding of the cumulative experience that racialised and gendered discrimination can have on an individual woman. We decided to write these as anonymised accounts, retaining the voices of women of colour and presenting them as individual case studies, but relaying them in a style that would capture a whole lifetime's experience in a short accessible format.

Finally, this report presents solutions on what is needed from educators, employers, financial funders, the third sector and government to effectively tackle this life cycle of barriers that women of colour face regarding pay and progression. It is imperative not only to unlock the potential of women of colour but because doing so could add an extra £24 billion to the UK economy. Many of the recommendations in this report come directly from women of colour who have credible insights into what is required to help them progress. We have captured recommendations from women from different ethnic minority backgrounds in a way that highlights the different types of experiences that they face.

9 Marren C, Bazeley A (2022), Sex and Power [Women's representation in positions of power \(fawcettsociety.org.uk\)](https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk)

Structural Racism in the Workplace

This report delves deep into the impact of structural racism on women of colour in the workplace. Structural racism (also known as systemic racism) is the condition where “society’s laws institutional practices, customs and guiding ideas combine to harm racially minoritised populations in ways not experienced by white counterparts”.¹⁰ These not only include the overt and more obvious racist incidents but also the subtle and hidden micro-aggressions and implicit biases that influence conversations and decision making around hiring employees and choosing who has access to training and promotion opportunities. Often, women of colour who experience unfair treatment do not report incidents to their employer for fear of speaking up and the potential for negative consequences and so continue to suffer in silence. Meanwhile their confidence, self-esteem and overall mental health can decline.

The resurgence of the global Black Lives Matter movement has made organisations assess how their internal processes contribute to structural racism in the workplace and highlighted the necessity of being held to account when it comes to making change happen.

The Intersection of Race and Class

Viewing racism in isolation would fail to provide a holistic understanding of a women of colour’s experience in the workplace. To fully understand their experiences, recognition and an appreciation of other intersecting factors needs to be considered – in particular, class and the privileges it beholds or denies.

Intersectionality is about learning and understanding how multiple characteristics and social status combined can add to the additional adverse effects of discrimination. It’s also about not putting the onus on women of colour in these intersectional groups to do all the work and educate others – it is about organisations taking appropriate responsibility. This report covers the importance of intersectionality as well as recommendations for organisations to take an intersectional approach when addressing progression issues for women of colour.

The Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gap

By law, UK companies with 250 or more employees are required to publish their gender pay gap data every year. The gender pay gap is the percentage difference between the average hourly earnings for men and women within a workplace or sector. Fawcett figures, from the ONS for the mean, full-time, hourly gender pay gap in the UK for 2021 is 11.9%, an increase from 10.6% in 2020.¹¹

As much research has shown, the gender pay gap is an outcome of a myriad

10 Dr Lingayah, S, (2021) It takes a system: *The systemic nature of racism and pathways to systems change* It takes a system FINAL - January 2021.pdf (rota.org.uk) <https://www.equallyours.org.uk/rota-report-it-takes-a-system-the-systemic-nature-of-racism-and-pathways-to-systems-change/>

11 Office for National Statistics, Gender pay gap in the UK (2020) [Gender pay gap in the UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peopleinwork/earningsandproductivity/genderpaygap/articles/genderpaygapintheuk/2020)

of factors including systemic workplace bias against women, particularly those with primary caregiving responsibilities for young children or elderly relatives. As a consequence, more women are more likely to work in part-time or lower-paid and lower-skilled roles. This culmination of factors can widen the gap in experience compared to male counterparts in similar roles, leading to women earning less and gaining less opportunities to progress to more senior positions. Many of the women we spoke to as part of this research had experienced this ripple effect. The experience of migrant women and women in low paid roles is not covered in this report, but their experiences of discrimination and lack of opportunities for progression has been documented by The Runnymede Trust in blogs and reports.¹²

The Office for National Statistics' 2019 annual review revealed that 'most of the minority ethnic groups analysed continue to earn less than white British employees in 2019'. Currently ethnicity pay gap reporting is not mandatory in the UK but within the last two years there have been petitions to government by business and individual campaigns to include this in legislation. In March 2022 the government announced that ethnicity pay gap reporting will initially be a voluntary exercise for employers. For employers that choose to collect and analyse ethnicity pay gap data, this will enable them to see the impact of the progression issues that people of colour face and take meaningful actions to address this.

The Impact of COVID-19

The last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions has exacerbated the issues that women of colour face in the workplace and has had a continuing impact on them. The hardest-hit industries of the pandemic were the low-paying sectors including retail and hospitality, with roles much more likely to be filled by women than men. Likewise, crucial keyworker roles in hospitals and care homes are also more likely to be carried out by women and women of colour in particular.¹³ The restrictions and lockdowns have meant that women have taken a disproportionate and unequal share of responsibility for childcare and home-schooling. As a result, they were more likely to work fewer hours than men, need to take time off or have to leave their jobs altogether .

12 Bashir, A (2018) *Under the Radar: ethnic minority women in the labour market* <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/under-the-radar-ethnic-minority-women-in-the-labour-market>

13 The IFS Deaton Review (2020) *Are some ethnic groups more vulnerable to COVID-19 than others?* <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/chapter/are-some-ethnic-groups-more-vulnerable-to-covid-19-than-others/>

1

Getting a foot in the door: barriers to accessing employment



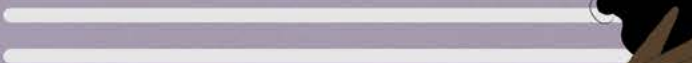
Thank you for your application – Unfortunately...



Your application has been unsuccessful this time...



We wish you all the best in your job hunt!



Thank you for your application – Unfortunately...



It can be a lonely road to enter employment and navigate workplace hiring practices. Many women of colour find themselves at a disadvantage due to being asked to lower their ambitions, not having access to the right kind of advice or to social and financial resources. They also face the extra effort of 'mental gymnastics' – figuring out what will and will not work against them in the application process.

Key findings:

- 62% of women of colour advocated for names to be removed from CVs – so hiring managers cannot assume the ethnicity of candidates in shortlisting – and 54% of all women agreed with this fairer practice.
- 52% of women of colour reported experiencing one or more discriminatory practices in recruitment.
- Women of colour were significantly more likely than white women to search for information about the organisation's ethnic diversity (18% vs 7%), gender balance (14% vs 10%), ethnicity pay gap data (11% vs 6%), policies (22% vs 11%), and to have read employee reviews online (38% vs 26%).

Once they are successful in securing an interview, they then face more 'mental gymnastics' to weave their way through a hiring process where they are indirectly and directly discriminated against. At every step of the process, women of colour assess how they are going to feel working at an organisation - and ask themselves if they are risking entering a harmful, racist environment.

The right kind of advice:

Our survey showed that women of colour were more likely to have received at least one type of careers support or advice (73%) than white women (63%). This difference was driven by formal, rather than informal careers support – such as support from official careers services or events at school, university, work, independent organisations, or online, rather than from family, friends, or personal contacts. However, our qualitative research shows that this support is clearly not translating into promotion and progression outcomes for women of colour (see also the next chapter 'The Hard Road to Progression'), and this suggests that the quality of careers advice for women of colour is low.

Many women of colour stated that they want to see universities better publicise their careers service and help students understand how to utilise it. Prioritising this will encourage more women of colour, to use the career

service, which is especially important for working-class women of colour and mature students who do not have access to informal networks of support. The lack of faith in university careers services reflects broader issues in relation to racism in universities, particularly given that 1 in 4 students experience racial harassment.¹⁴ As highlighted by Universities UK, an advocacy organisation for universities, tackling disparities in access to careers support should be done as part of a commitment to tackling racism through a whole-institution response.

For women of Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage and women of Black African heritage in particular, the absence of good quality careers advice was seen as a significant barrier to employment. As a result, women of colour who we interviewed stated that they struggled more than their peers with job applications and preparation for 'life after university'.

Janine, a woman of Black African heritage (senior leader), describes how at every stage of her education, she was given advice that always diminished her career hopes. She recalls how from school to university she was actively advised to lower her ambitions.

“Well, it’s basically that at every stage of my career, I’ve been encouraged to take a lesser path than the one I wanted to take and that I thought was the right one for me.”

Women of Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage who went to school in deprived areas, similarly, told us about being given poor careers advice that diminished their ambitions.

For Fahmida, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage (early career), bad advice set her back years in her career. She approached her university careers service telling them that she wanted to be a barrister, after completing her graduation and masters.

Fahmida was told: *“Oh, it’s such a long route for a foreigner like you, I think you would need to do this and you would need to collect these documents from your home country, and it was such a long and painful process that I decided not to pursue it.”*

Years later she realised, *“that it was such a straightforward procedure and now I am, after four or five years, now I am doing that on my own.”* The inadequate careers advice that she was given left her years behind, she urged advice

14 Equality and Human Rights Commission, Tackling racial harassment: Universities challenged <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged.pdf>

services to, *“think about the consequences of these random conversations on people like us.”*

Our literature review highlighted the disparities in access to informal networks who could help ethnic minority groups progress in the workplace.¹⁵ It included evidence that white and middle-class women are more likely to have access to specific types of social and financial resources to support them throughout the hiring process.¹⁶ In the absence of these types of guidance, such as industry contacts from family and friends, good careers advice is imperative for women of colour, in particular our analysis suggests for women of Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage. Without it, they are often left in the dark about their choices and how to navigate the application processes.

Shut out: informal versus formal networks

Women of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African heritage spoke about the difficulties of not having an informal network of family and friends to support and guide them when applying for jobs. They felt that having someone to speak to about the *“small things”* during the application process would have saved them time and extra mental effort. Without those networks it was *“almost like you psychologically rule yourself out because you don’t know anyone that looks like you there.”*

Many of the women of Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage we spoke to were the first in their family to go to university and as a result did not have readily available knowledge about applying for graduate-level jobs. Fahmida, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage (early career) said that as the first person in her family to have gone to university, she didn’t know *“where to look or... what was the best to... write cover letters or CVs.”*

For Simin, a woman of Pakistani heritage (early career), graduating university left her *“lost for that entire first year”* because she did not know *“where to look.”* Instead, she relied on leadership programmes that support people from 18 to 25 years old with information on how to look for jobs and to network.

Our survey found little difference between women of colour and white women in the chances of receiving informal careers support. That is, informal careers support or advice from family or friends, contacts made through family or friends, school or university teachers, or networking or work contacts. One potential explanation for this is that the survey does not distinguish whether the support was from individuals who had been through a similar system themselves and would have the tools to support a university or job application. This is supported by our interviews with women of colour, like Fahmida, who was the first in her family to go to university and therefore could not seek their advice on writing CVs and cover letters. The survey indicates that women of colour and white women have supportive family, friends and acquaintances in equal measure, but was limited in its capacity to draw out whether this support could facilitate access to, say, contacts with the power to open up job opportunities or make hiring decisions.

15 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2021) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* Pay and Progression of Women of Colour <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/the-pay-and-progression-of-women-of-colour-literature-review>

16 *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A Literature Review* <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c1300375-f221-4a88-8c66-edf3c30bd2c7> page 43

Financial resources: “our life circumstances are so different”

When entering employment, women of Black African heritage spoke about the difficulties that they faced because of a lack of financial resources from their families. As a result, they were not able to take on low-paid entry jobs in London, which would later provide them with the skills for further progression. The Runnymede Trust’s Colour of Money report highlights the glaring racial disparities in the accumulation of wealth affecting people of colour.¹⁷ Black African, Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi households have 10 times less wealth than white British people, and people of colour generally have much lower levels of savings and assets.¹⁸

70%

of the women we surveyed, and

75%

of women of colour advocated for all organisations to

include salaries on job adverts

to improve pay transparency.

70% of the women we surveyed, and 75% of women of colour advocated for all organisations to include salaries on job adverts to improve pay transparency.

It was the top solution women of colour supported in our survey and was also equally well supported by both Conservative (73%) and Labour Party supporters (75%), of all ethnicities. Many of the women of colour we spoke to in our focus groups felt that they were paid less than their white counterparts when they were hired. Upfront salary transparency helps women of colour to make more informed career choices, which is of particular importance for those without financial support from informal networks.

Natasha, a woman of Black African heritage (early career), was offered a low-paid journalism job in London after she graduated. But she quickly realised that, unlike her friends whose parents could subsidise their rent, she could not afford to take it: *“I really felt the difference. Our life circumstances are so different because I don’t have those rich parents who can finance my life while I try to find my feet in the industry. The lack of safety to actually pursue my dream was a barrier at the start of trying to enter the workforce...I felt like a failure.”*

These extra financial barriers to entering work have a significant impact on mental health. Natasha was *“really embarrassed to have moved back home”* after university and was *“really deeply unhappy”* as a result. For Shannah, a woman of Black African heritage (early career), the stress of having to live on her cousin’s sofa for two months whilst searching for an internship in London made her *“exhausted”* and affected her performance when she began her work.

For women of Black Caribbean heritage, having someone to advocate on their behalf was invaluable on entering employment, especially in the absence of other informal networks of support. For Michelle, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (early career), having someone who recognised the barriers she was going to face as a Black woman in the workplace was invaluable: *“I have people around me who recognised the barriers that I was gonna face. And so really helped me and supported me into, like, pushing me forward.”*

17 Khan, O (2020) *The Colour of Money* <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/the-colour-of-money>

18 Khan, O (2020) *The Colour of Money* <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/the-colour-of-money>

“There’s always something missing”: the emphasis on unpaid labour for women of colour:

Our literature review highlighted that ethnic minority graduates were much less likely to obtain employment six months after graduation in comparison to white graduates.¹⁹ This resonated with the women of colour who we interviewed, who struggled to prove the validity of their past experience to potential employers and felt that “there was always something missing” in getting their first job.

Gulshan, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage (mid-career), had to rely on lots of unpaid volunteering experience to get her first job interview: *“I had to volunteer to so many different places before I got—I was finally able to sit in a real interview for a fulltime job.”*

This was similar to Corinne, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (early career) who talked about being in a vicious cycle and *‘constantly gambling through volunteering and waiting for someone to take a chance on you... waiting for that one person that might be willing’*. And, as identified by the Taylor Review, unpaid internships are exploitative and damage social mobility, and should be stamped out.²⁰

Women of colour were acutely aware of how their identity and race impacted their transition from unpaid labour to paid employment. Fahmida, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage (mid-career), noted that her white colleagues generally did not need to do unpaid work to graduate into employment: *“People find it really odd when I tell them that I had to volunteer to so many different places before I got ...a real interview for a fulltime job. And I don’t think that’s the case with many of my colleagues who are white women, it was a very smooth transition for them.”*

Simin, a woman of Pakistani heritage (early career), expressed a similar sentiment. In her first job she met someone who: *“got the job because her mum knows the MD of the organisation. She was white, living at home, living a pretty life, completely the opposite to me. It was two different paths to get to the same place. I had to get a Masters before I could even consider getting anywhere into this and she came from nowhere.”*

Women across Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Black African and Black Caribbean heritage groups all described having to do substantial free work for lengthy periods of time before securing a paid job. Their experience and skills were often not considered to be sufficient without supplementing it with unpaid labour and their perception was that this was not the case for many of their white counterparts. Women who we interviewed shared examples of their white counterparts not needing to take on unpaid work to gain interviews or jobs. This led to unnecessary feelings of ‘imposter syndrome’ when they did finally secure a paid job, feeling ‘lucky’ to enter formal employment at last.

19 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2021) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c1300375-f221-4a88-8c66-edf3c30bd2c7> page 11

20 Good Work, The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (2017) *Good work: the Taylor review of modern working practices* (publishing.service.gov.uk) July 2017

The 'mental gymnastics' of the application process:

Women of colour face an additional mental workload when applying for a job. One woman we interviewed referred to applying for jobs as a process of 'mental gymnastics', in which she worried about what information to disclose and had to consider what would and would not work against her in the application process. Women of Black Caribbean heritage spoke about their anxiety about whether to include their ethnicity on their job application. For example, Hayley a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (early career), found disclosing her ethnicity made her question whether she'd be *"more likely to get the interview because I'm saying that I'm a woman of colour? What is going to happen? Like, what is the reason you've... put that on?"*

Our survey also revealed that women of colour were significantly more likely to have changed their name on a job application (6% vs 3%) than white women, with women of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi heritage being most likely to do so (8-9%). Alongside this, 54% of women who we interviewed advocated for names to be removed from CVs during shortlisting for recruitment, and 62% of women of colour. Removing names at application stage has been shown to lead to ethnic minority people getting an increased number of interview invites. Evidence included in our literature review show that ethnic minority people had to send 60% more job applications to receive as many call backs as white British people.²¹

Natasha, a woman of Black African heritage (early career), spoke about how she eventually considered changing her name on applications as she only got one interview after searching for a job for six months. In the end, she concluded that hers is *"a very distinctive name but I was not going to change. People are going to know who I am when I turn up."*

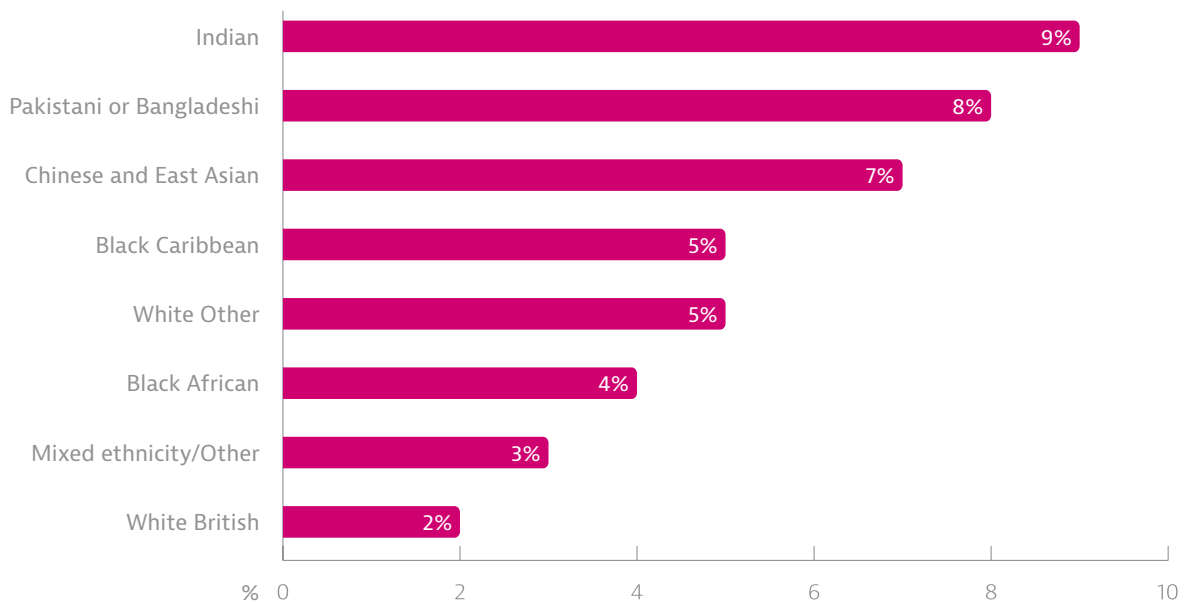


Figure 1: % Women who had changed their name on a job application, by ethnicity. | N = 3176. Figures displayed are weighted.

21 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2021) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c1300375-f221-4a88-8c66-edf3c30bd2c7>, page 40

The additional mental workload whilst searching and applying for jobs of wondering whether or not an employer will be inclusive was reflected by the survey. Women of colour were significantly more likely than white women to seek out inclusivity information about a potential employer during a job search, including details about the organisation's ethnic and gender diversity and policies. The results of these background checks will naturally have an impact on their decision on whether to apply for that job or not. Our interviews revealed that self-employed women also undertake these additional checks to help them decide if they want to work with a client or not.

Women of Black African and Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage advocated for information sessions held by organisations during the application process to provide further details on the skills and experience required for job roles. Simin, a woman of Pakistani heritage (early career), told us about how helpful she found an information session run by an organisation that she was applying to work for in the absence of informal networks giving her support with the transition to the workplace.

Rigid and uncompromising job descriptions

Some women who we spoke to, especially those of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage, reflected on the difficulties of rigid job descriptions which failed to accommodate different skill sets. They did not apply to jobs where they felt they lacked skills outlined in the job description. Only years later did they realise that this was a missed opportunity. Many felt that they missed out on opportunities as a result.

Simin, a woman of Pakistani heritage (early career), said that for most of her life she thought, "if you see a job description, you're like, oh, I can't apply to that because I don't have those skills, but actually you can apply to anything." As highlighted in our literature review, women of colour who have flexible working needs, including caring responsibilities, can be left behind as a result of rigid job descriptions that do not support staff flexible working practices.²²

The 'mental gymnastics' at interview:

Women of colour across different groups described how they agonised about how to present themselves at interview, having to do 'mental gymnastics' to figure out what information to share with potential employers.

Women of Black African, Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage spoke about how throughout a job interview, they constantly questioned whether they had the right "etiquette". Anisah, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage, described how she felt that she didn't know "*the rules of how to act,*" including "*things that you should do and shouldn't do and the questions they need to ask.*" Women who we interviewed referred to the difficulties of using "corporate language" in the workplace, and shared how they struggled to ensure that they were using the correct terms.

Fahmida, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage (early career) spoke about how

²² Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2021) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c1300375-f221-4a88-8c66-edf3c30bd2c7> page 60

the lack of guidance and support from an informal network of friends and family with links to employers left her unsure about the process of an interview. She felt as a result she was, *“missing out on opportunities because the employers...think that, oh no, she wasn't really good or she didn't really care or she wasn't dressed appropriately or her body language was not friendly or she was too friendly, things like that, they then cost you your whole career I would think.”* These experiences speak to the huge importance of having access to social and financial resources for women of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage, who repeatedly mentioned negative experiences when entering employment despite having a wealth of skills and qualifications.

Women of Indian heritage spoke about how the way that they present at interview is *“far from your real self,”* always feeling pressure to put forward a more *“palatable version of yourself.”* Whilst women of Indian heritage felt prepared to navigate this, women of Black African, Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage felt less able to do so.

Some women, particularly of Black Caribbean heritage, spoke about how these pressures were alleviated by the move to online working during the Covid-19 pandemic – sometimes without cameras. Hayley *“felt like there's less bias”* during an online interview with the video function switched off, which made her *“a lot more comfortable.”* As a result, the interview felt more *“authentic”* to her. In our survey, 67% of women of colour and 59% of white women supported employers offering online job interviews, to make it easier for those with flexible working needs or personal commitments.

Diversity of the interview panel:

Diversity of a panel at interview must reflect the true diversity of the organisation, and not be tokenistic. Women of colour value authenticity about workplace diversity and want to make informed choices about the places they decide to work at. Organisations should not resort to *“wheeling out their only brown person”* for interviews as a way to look more diverse than they really are.

In our survey, **73% of women of colour agreed that it is important that the diversity of the interview panel reflects that of the workplace.** Getting this right makes a real difference.

Women of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage who we interviewed, felt uncomfortable when faced with a majority-white panel. As a result, many found themselves worrying about whether they would be accepted in the workplace if they were to be offered the job.

Fahmida, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage (early career), questioned whether an organisation would hire her with an all-white panel: *“It makes it really uncomfortable, instead of focusing on the interview and instead of focusing on the questions and how to better present yourself, I am then struggling with questions like do I still want to go ahead, do I want to give it my 100%, do I have to go through this process.”*

This again highlights the ‘mental gymnastics’ that women of colour do at the interview stage, and the pressure they face in figuring out whether the organisation is inclusive of people of colour. Anjali, a woman of Indian heritage (early career), was interviewed for a law firm where half of the panel

73%
of women of colour
agreed that it is
important that the
**diversity
of the
interview
panel
reflects
that
of the
workplace**

were people of colour, but in reality, the firm was significantly less diverse. As a result, during the interview she had *“to calculate, assume, infer and make extrapolations about these things, in ways that (my) white peers might not need to. You have to consider all of this because there is a consequential nature to the decision you’re making.”*

The Hiring Process: “how I’m going to feel working here, having to constantly explain myself”

Racially discriminatory practices are rampant during hiring processes, with 52% of women of colour having experienced one or more of the four practices we asked about in our survey.

These were:

- Employers requiring UK qualifications or English as a first language.
- Being made to feel uncomfortable in relation to ethnicity during a job interview.
- Being given a form asking for ethnicity information (not as part of equality or diversity monitoring).

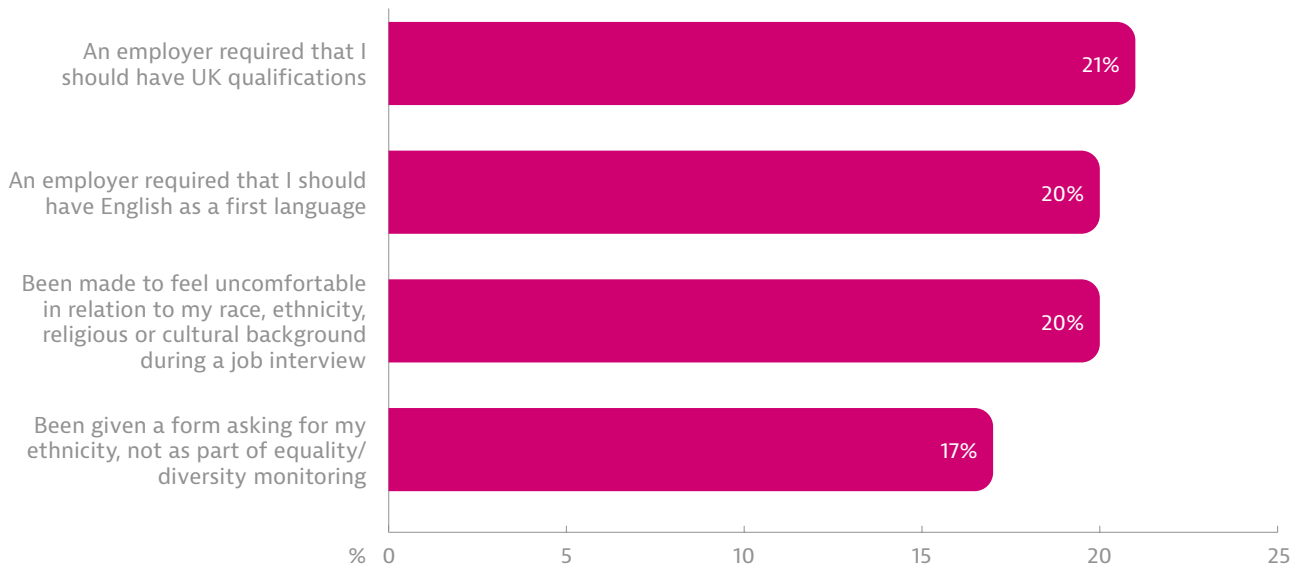


Figure 2: % Women of colour reporting having experienced recruitment discrimination. | Unweighted N = 1994, weighted N = 279. Figures displayed are weighted.

Women of colour described the racism they faced from interview panels. Tasnim, a woman of Indian heritage (early career), was asked during an interview why she wanted to be a lawyer in the UK, and not in India, despite being born and raised in the UK:

“I look Indian, I have an Indian name and stuff, but I’m born and raised in the UK. So, I don’t know, like it wasn’t ever a question to me to go then move to India and become a lawyer in India. And they just didn’t understand that. They were like, ‘But why don’t you go practice there?’ And I was like, ‘Well, I was educated here, I live here.’”

These discriminatory questions left Tasnim without any confidence that she

would be able to work at the law firm where she was being interviewed. Despite receiving a job offer at the firm, she declined on the basis of this incident. She said she found herself asking *"how I'm going to feel working here, having to constantly explain myself."* Negative experiences at interview inadvertently deny women of colour of opportunities as they do not want to be in harmful, racist environments.

"I look Indian, I have an Indian name and stuff, but I'm born and raised in the UK. So, I don't know, like it wasn't ever a question to me to go then move to India and become a lawyer in India. And they just didn't understand that. They were like, 'But why don't you go practice there?' And I was like, 'Well, I was educated here, I live here.'"

Recommendations:

Employer recommendations:

Make job advertisements more transparent and thus more inclusive

- Include salaries on all job advertisements and don't ask salary history questions at any point in the recruitment or negotiation process.
- Include reasonable flexible working options in all job advertisements and support staff to adopt flexible working practices - including part time, flexible hours, working from home, compressed hours and job sharing.
- Provide transparent job descriptions with less rigid requirements which explicitly recognise the value of transferable experience and skills.

Reduce bias and be more transparent in hiring processes

- Remove names from CVs during shortlisting so that hiring managers cannot use them to assume the ethnicity of candidates.
- Ensure that interview panels represent the organisation's actual diversity, and do not give an appearance of being inclusive which does not reflect the workplace experience.
- Hiring managers (or sector bodies, to support smaller organisations) should produce guidance or information sessions to accompany recruitment processes to explain what is required from applicants, especially when using methods such as assessment centres and more complex recruitment practices.

Recruitment organisations should improve transparency by creating safe online spaces on their websites for women of colour to capture and share their experience of organisations, as done by Glassdoor.

Government recommendations:

Legislate to improve pay transparency and reduce bias:

- Introduce an enforceable legal right for women to know what their male colleagues earn if they suspect that they may be experiencing pay discrimination.
- Review current voluntary pilot pay transparency scheme with a view to making it mandatory. Legislate to ban salary history questions and require employers to include salary bands within job advertisements.
- Legislate to require employers to include any viable flexible work options in job advertisements, and to assess whether a flexible work request can be reasonably accommodated before rejecting it.

Create an information and enforcement campaign to end unpaid internships as these are illegal (as identified by the Taylor Review)

University recommendations:

Universities should create and implement Anti-racism Action Plans

- Utilise the Universities UK's report [Tackling racial harassment in higher education](#).

Universities should review their careers service approach, to better close the gap in career support experienced by women of colour

- Ensure support is available on writing CVs, unpicking a job description and spotting the key points.

2 **The hard road of progression**



This chapter will outline the key areas that emerged as obstacles for progression, including rationing of training and development by ethnicity, the discrimination embedded in informal networks, and the role of 'barrier bosses'. Once women of colour have entered the workplace, they continue to encounter several different challenges that inhibit and block their progression.

Key findings:

- 42% of women of colour report being passed over for promotion, despite frequent good feedback.
- 28% of women of colour report a manager having blocked their progression at work.
- 64% of women of colour agree that it is important to them that they are promoted over time.

Rationing training and development opportunities by ethnicity

Our findings revealed that, across sectors and regions critical opportunities for development were more often offered to white colleagues whilst women of colour had to identify, source, and request permission to undertake appropriate training for themselves.

Cleo, a woman of Black African heritage (senior leader): *"I think it's definitely more a case of having to almost fight your own corner rather than always having people fighting it for you. ...I probably had to find my own path a little bit more and kind of almost use my own voice to kind of get additional opportunities, I think, you know, working off my own merit wasn't necessarily enough..."*

Many women of colour described coming to the realisation that the notion of the workplace being a meritocracy was fiction and that often white colleagues would be given opportunities and encouragement that was not extended to them.

Even when they were able to access training, many women of colour found that it was very difficult to progress that learning back in the workplace as organisations seemed disinterested in their development. Maliha, a Bangladeshi heritage woman (senior leader): *"I asked for and almost demanded, to be sent on a leadership development course... Now, I didn't get support from my manager, I sort of insisted on it. They allowed me to go but there was no other support for me back in the workplace after having done that... absolutely no opportunity to get supported in the workplace, to take that further."*

The lack of access to leadership training and development and support for women to develop and practise those skills in their workplace settings was a common experience for women of colour across all sectors. Furthermore, where women of colour did receive training, this was generally restricted to lower-status provision with more prestigious courses distributed unequally. Safiyah, a woman of Pakistani heritage (senior leader):

“So, these members of the team, both were given that opportunity to do PRINCE2 (a project management course). It wasn’t done in a fair square way. It wasn’t sent out in an e-mail saying, ‘Okay, this is something that you will all benefit from at your level as managers. So, if you are interested, let us know.’ They were actually selected to do the PRINCE2.”

This kind of rationing of training opportunities meant that women of colour were blocked from specific posts which in turn would hamper their progression opportunities. This supports the concept of the ‘concrete ceiling’ referred to in *Different Women, Different Places*²³, where women of colour experience not just a glass ceiling – but a ‘concrete ceiling’ in terms of being denied training opportunities to support progression into more senior roles. This also fed into what wider research calls the ‘10 years later syndrome’²⁴ where the rationing of training and development opportunities inevitably slowed down the progression trajectory of women of colour. This relates back to earlier testimonies where poor careers advice also acted as a brake on women’s career development and progression.

Informal progression processes

Many women of colour referred to informal processes inside and outside work that hampered their progression. This links back to the early career women who reported performing ‘mental gymnastics’ to fit in and making themselves ‘palatable’ to the culture of the organisation. Critically, women of colour in both early career stage and senior levels identified these networks as highly gendered and racialised relationships which often excluded them and generally operated to their disadvantage.

Gabrielle, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (senior career) spoke to us about the ‘pub outings’ that exclude those who don’t like or go to the pubs and the impact this has:

“A lot of what happens at these pub chats, whatever, these white men, young men, they go there, and they spend time with other people that look like them, or it may be that they’ve got white females - who are also part of the barriers... it’s what links these people have to each other that we have no knowledge of... even if we’re very good at our roles and even if we stay strong every day and we have the courage to get up and go to work, we don’t know the links, how many variations of those barriers there are that we have no knowledge of until we [find] out afterwards?”

As a woman with caring responsibilities during certain periods of her career, Gabrielle felt that she was unable to access the informal networks that operated outside of working hours. When she faced redundancy, she came

23 [Different Women Different Places | Journey](#)

24 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2021) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c1300375-f221-4a88-8c66-edf3c30bd2c7> page 58

to realise the power of what she calls the 'white boys club'. She found out that her role was being scrapped and a new role created in its place - to be staffed by an internal, white male colleague. When appealing the decision, she realised that the three white men on the panel judging her case, were also 'drinking buddies' with the colleague who was in line to get her job. She concluded that being outside of the informal networks at work clearly worked to her disadvantage.

Like others, Gabrielle concurs with sentiments expressed by other women of colour that there is an illusion of meritocracy in the workplace and that the narrative of 'merit' obscures the power and influence of invisible and informal networks at work. Gabrielle also noted that as a member of a large female majority trade union, there was more opportunity for her union to advocate on these issues and to reach out to members, who otherwise felt isolated and alone in their experiences. She felt this was especially the case during the pandemic: *"I think one of the things the unions need to do better is find out what it's actually like in 2022, about what it's like to be a female of colour working in the NHS or local government..."*

On a less visible level, women of colour reported how 'affinity bias' which describes the practice of feeling more sympathetic to those who are 'self-similar'²⁵ seeped into regular, everyday workplace interactions. Women of colour observed how informal practices of care, that is, everyday acts of welfare and routine well-being were directed to younger male colleagues. From this there was an assumed trajectory of progression and senior colleagues acted as informal advocates, guiding and supporting them through a clear path for progression.

Janine, a woman of Black African Heritage (senior leader) identified the unequal distribution of the practices of care that can either nourish a career – as described in the older/younger male relationship she described – or which in their absence can both undermine confidence and emotional well-being. Likewise, other women in senior positions, reported that despite being qualified and experienced for roles and vacancies, they were inexplicably passed over for promotion by less qualified and less experienced white colleagues through systems that did not even allow them to compete for a post:

25 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2020) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* Pay and Progression of Women of Colour <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c1300375-f221-4a88-8c66-edf3c30bd2c7> page 42

“For so many years, people would get promotions kind of based on...they say based on merit but merit according to who? So, one person decides that “Oh, this person is great. So, we’re going to give them a promotion.” And it’s never really been clear in terms of, well, what does...why has that person been given information versus that person?... It makes it difficult for people to be able to explain why person A has progressed and person B hasn’t...”

Cleo, a woman of Black African heritage (senior leader)

This also links to a later point in the section below whereby women of colour reported that they often felt they were unfairly judged or excessively scrutinised and criticised for work behaviours, and that their colleagues were not held to the same standard.

The frustration is that when trying to move up into senior roles there was often no open and competitive process for recruitment. This highlights the problem with informal processes at work where there is no clear ladder of progression, which in turn can hide practices that discriminate against women of colour and make it difficult to appeal against those outcomes. Preeti, a woman of Indian heritage (mid-career) described her experiences and the way that unfair recruitment and promotion decisions were glossed over to give false impressions of equality:

“On the one hand, they say want to develop internal talent. And that’s pretty much when they’ve got a preferred candidate. And then when they recruit externally, they’re saying they want to bring in fresh talent.... it’s that lack of transparency and willingness to actually develop someone from the inside unless they like you or you look like they’re more, or they’re friends with you.”

These experiences are also reflected in the survey findings.

Figure 3 highlights that women of colour were significantly more likely than white women to report being passed over for promotion, despite frequent good feedback (42% women of colour versus 27% white women).

Women from Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Black African heritages were the most likely to report this. At the same time, women of colour were more likely to agree that it is important to them that they are promoted over time (64% versus 49% for white women).

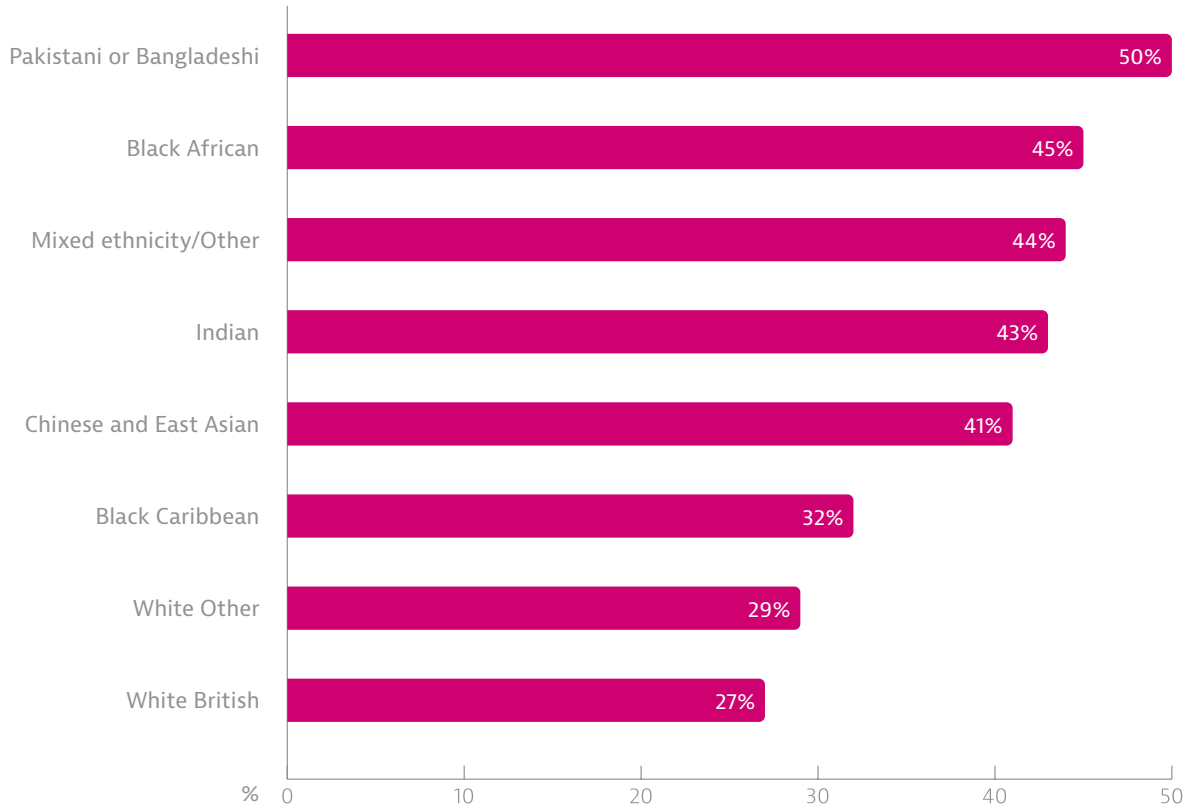


Figure 3: 'I have been passed over for promotion at my workplace despite receiving frequent good feedback', % women who agreed, by ethnicity. | Unweighted N = 2501, weighted N = 2428. Figures displayed are weighted.

42%

Women of colour were significantly more likely than white women to report being passed over for promotion, despite frequent good feedback (42% women of colour versus 27% white women).

As indicated in Figure 4, less than half (47%) of women of colour felt clear on how promotion decisions were made at their workplace, with women of Chinese and East Asian heritage, and women identifying as of Mixed Ethnicities most likely to feel unclear on this in their workplaces.

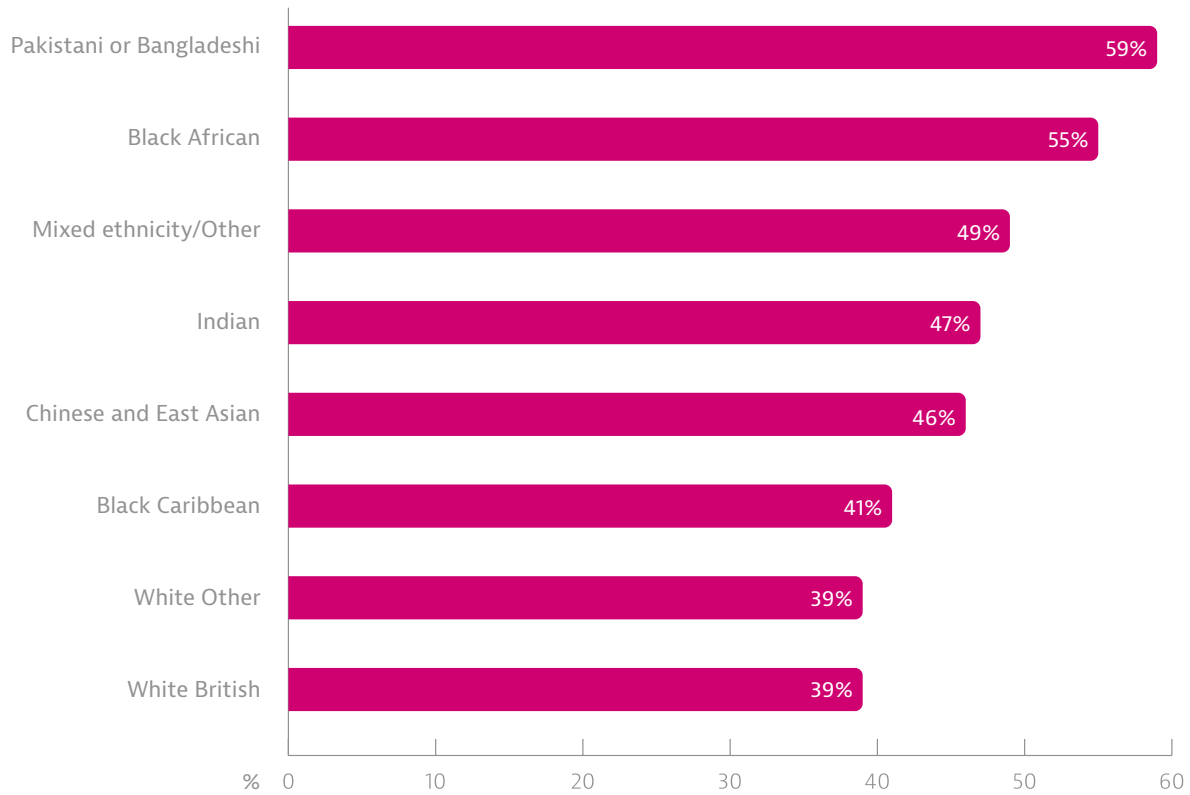


Figure 4: 'I am clear on how promotion decisions are made at my workplace', % women who agreed, by ethnicity. | Unweighted N = 2501, weighted N = 2428. Figures displayed are weighted.

The evidence here indicates that the operation of informal promotion processes and soft networks can obscure and obstruct the progression of women of colour in the workplace. And our survey shows that change in this area would be supported widely - 70% of women wanted clear and unbiased promotion processes and career paths, so that everyone can know what they need to do to progress. This was one of the two most supported recommendations in our survey, supported by 70% of all women, and 74% of women of colour; white women supported this to the same level, and both Conservative (72%) and Labour voters (78%) were strongly in favour of this recommendation.

Janine

My name's Janine, I live in London. I've actually just started a new job this week. Ironically, it's taken me decades to get this job. You see it's the job that I wanted when I first left university. I told my university tutor, I wanted to pursue a career in academia and he told me bluntly, that this was a bad idea. He said that academia was not a place for 'people like me'.

After university I worked in a publications department for a third sector organisation. I started off as an assistant sub-editor and worked hard. Eventually I was seconded for an editorial post. I thrived in the role – but when it came up as a permanent post, and I expressed my interest, I was 'advised' by my white female colleagues, that this post wasn't suitable for me, and that I shouldn't apply. I remember feeling shocked, but I went for it and got it. But it made me realise that they saw me as a Black woman who didn't really deserve to progress into a senior role.

After a few years in this role, I went to work at a large media and communications company. Over two decades later I was basically second in charge of a particular department. I worked under the general manager there for five years, and when that person retired, I expected to apply for the role. Why not? I was fully qualified, and I had the experience. Guess what happened? Someone else from another part of the organisation was just given the role. There was no advert for the role, no recruitment process, so there was no way for me to apply for the role, and there was no way that I could appeal their decision. To say I was disappointed would be a massive understatement. I worked with him for the last five years, but it was totally demoralising. I was doing the work and he was taking the credit. It's hard to watch as your work and contributions are appropriated, by in this case – a white, male manager.

Looking back now I realise that my face never seemed to fit. I was always the person that could be relied on to step-up or step-in, to do the extra work, to prepare other people for the big meetings – but never be invited into those spaces on equal terms. With the Black Lives Matters stuff – there has been lots of conversation and reflection at work, and honestly, it is only now that I can even have this conversation with you. I've always tried to be positive – to get on with things – but that fundamental lack of confidence that I've always carried is rooted in my experiences in education and work.

I am a Black woman, I don't straighten my hair, I speak with a London accent. It has never been a question of my competence – but fundamentally to do with how I look and the perceptions that people have of me. We think that people get their jobs because of merit – people believe that even though it is so obviously not true.

Now, over twenty years later I have moved into the job that my university tutor all those decades ago, had dissuaded me from. I carry all that baggage with me though; the anxiety and mistrust that comes from being underestimated and blocked is not easy to surrender. But at least I'm happy in my role now.

'Barrier bosses':

A common theme across all research groups and individuals was the experience of a line manager who acted either directly or indirectly to block progression of women of colour. Women talked about 'barrier bosses' – line managers who limited and controlled their ability to progress either by depriving them of recognition, putting up barriers for opportunities and training, or by discouraging and even actively blocking progression.

A similar finding has been highlighted in previous research by The Fawcett Society²⁶ where data collected suggested that there was a small but powerful middle layer of management, mainly men, who were resistant to equality of opportunity between the sexes. This hurdle in the form of the 'barrier boss' was supported by the survey data (Figure 5) which indicated that women of colour were statistically significantly more likely than white women to report a manager having blocked their progression at work (28%, compared with 19%). This was most common for women of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian heritage.

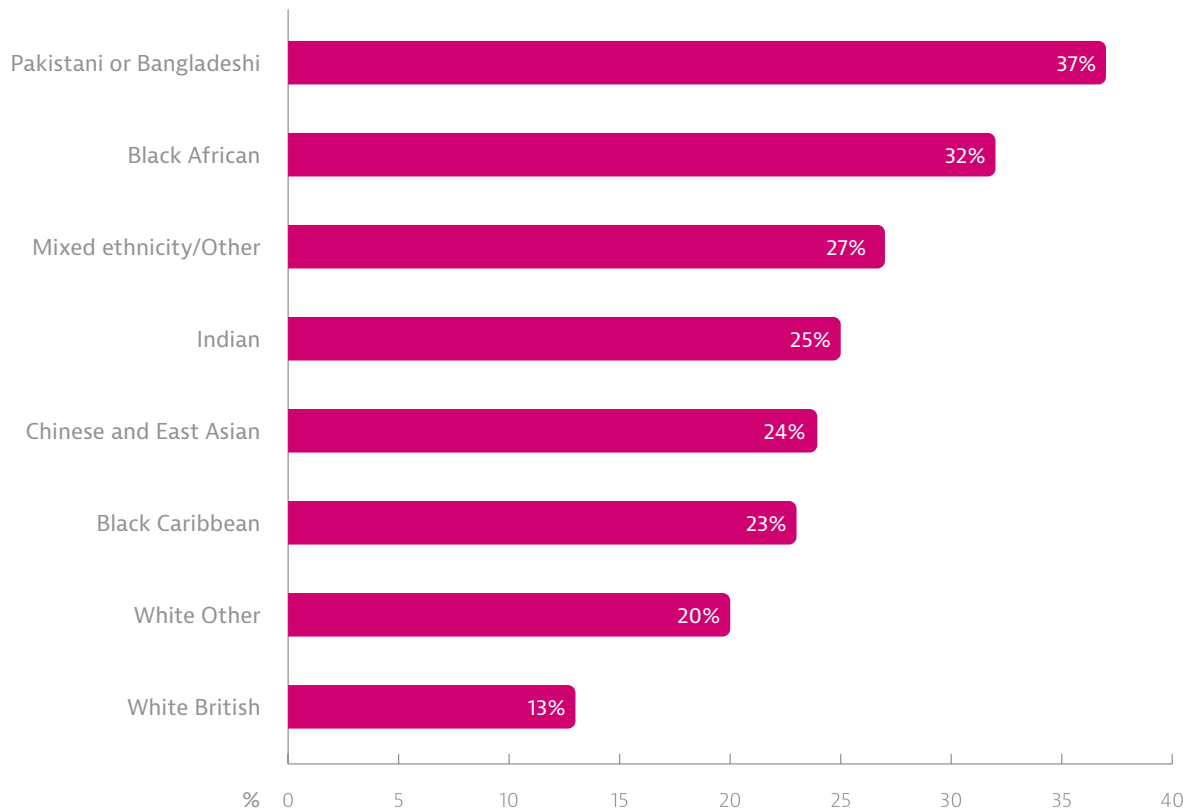


Figure 5: 'My manager has blocked my progression at work', % women who agreed, by ethnicity. | Unweighted N = 2501, weighted N = 2428. Figures displayed are weighted.

26 Olchawski J (2016) *Sex Equality State of the Nation* <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=a9a69875-749a-4482-9a8b-5bffaaf3ee7>

28%

Women of colour were statistically significantly more likely than white women to report a manager having blocked their progression at work (28%, compared with 19%). This was most common for women of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian heritage.

Many women of colour related to shared experience of managers who allowed them to take on extra work and develop skills through additional labour outside of their job description, but who failed to award credit or to support further progression when opportunities came up. For women of Indian and Chinese heritage, there was a view that they were not management material and encouraged to be satisfied with just being the 'foot-soldier'; they felt labelled as the 'hardworking Asian' who was never deemed 'ready' for further promotion.

"He actually said to me, 'you know, you don't need to move to the next level. Some people are very happy where they are. You don't have to move. You don't need to move. Because it's fine. You're ticking along. Your team is doing great! Kind of, pat on the head type of thing. It's not necessary for everybody to move up."

Rani, a woman of Indian heritage (mid-career)

She recalled having to apply three times before achieving the promotion that other white male and female colleagues achieved, under this same manager's guidance – but who all had distinctly less experience than her.

Shereen, a woman of Indian heritage (mid-career) talked about her white female bosses as *'very challenging'* and that when she would not behave according to the 'timid Asian woman' stereotype and made requests for training opportunities she felt she was entitled to, she was immediately labelled as *'aggressive'*. This labelling was also a common theme for Black African heritage and Black Caribbean heritage women, who found themselves constantly having to manage their manager's impressions of them and to moderate their tone and body language because of experiences where they had been labelled as aggressive.

Gloria, a woman of Black African heritage (mid-career), told us: *“As a Black woman, you have to kind of water yourself down so much so that you’re not seen as a threatening force.”* This idea of women making themselves smaller as a coping mechanism against accusations of being intimidating and constantly ‘treading the line’ to demonstrate ambition and leadership – but without appearing overly aggressive was described as ‘exhausting’. This was problematic generally – but more so for women of colour in direct relationships with line managers who were the gatekeepers to training and development opportunities, access to leadership spaces and the arbiters of their overall performance judgement.

Maliha, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage (senior leader), *“...I had white male managers who...and it’s been said openly by other people who probably felt very threatened by one...not only was I a female, but I seemed to be a very articulate, very bright female and ...they all felt very threatened so therefore they were constantly looking for fault, constantly looking to undermine me, constantly not recognising my skills or abilities, and giving the credit to others, those sorts of things ...”*

This idea of being seen as a ‘threat’ was a consistent thread of experience for women of colour; Maliha reports that her confidence and ambition was not credited and instead worked against her to the extent that she was subjected to excessive scrutiny by her line manager.

Maliha’s experience demonstrates one part of a woman of colour’s career journey based on a phenomenon known as ‘Pet to Threat’. This term was coined in 2013, by Dr Kecia Thomas²⁷ as a phenomenon that adversely affects the career journey of Black women. Dr Thomas found that early in their careers, women of colour would initially gain support from their managers and mentors who were happy to train them. But as these women became more competent and confident in their roles, their mentors’ attitudes often changed. Support would be withdrawn and a cycle of micro-aggressions and subtle negative behaviours designed to hold women back would become the norm.

The survey data and Figure 6 reveals similar experiences where women of colour were significantly more likely than white women to report being criticised for behaviours that other colleagues get away with, at work (40% of women of colour, compared with 27% of white women agreed with this). This was most common for women of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Black African heritage.

27 Thomas, K.M., Johnson-Bailey, J., Phelps, R.E., Tran, N.M. and Johnson, L., 2013. Women of color at midcareer: Going from pet to threat. In *The psychological health of women of color: Intersections, challenges, and opportunities* (pp. 275-286). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

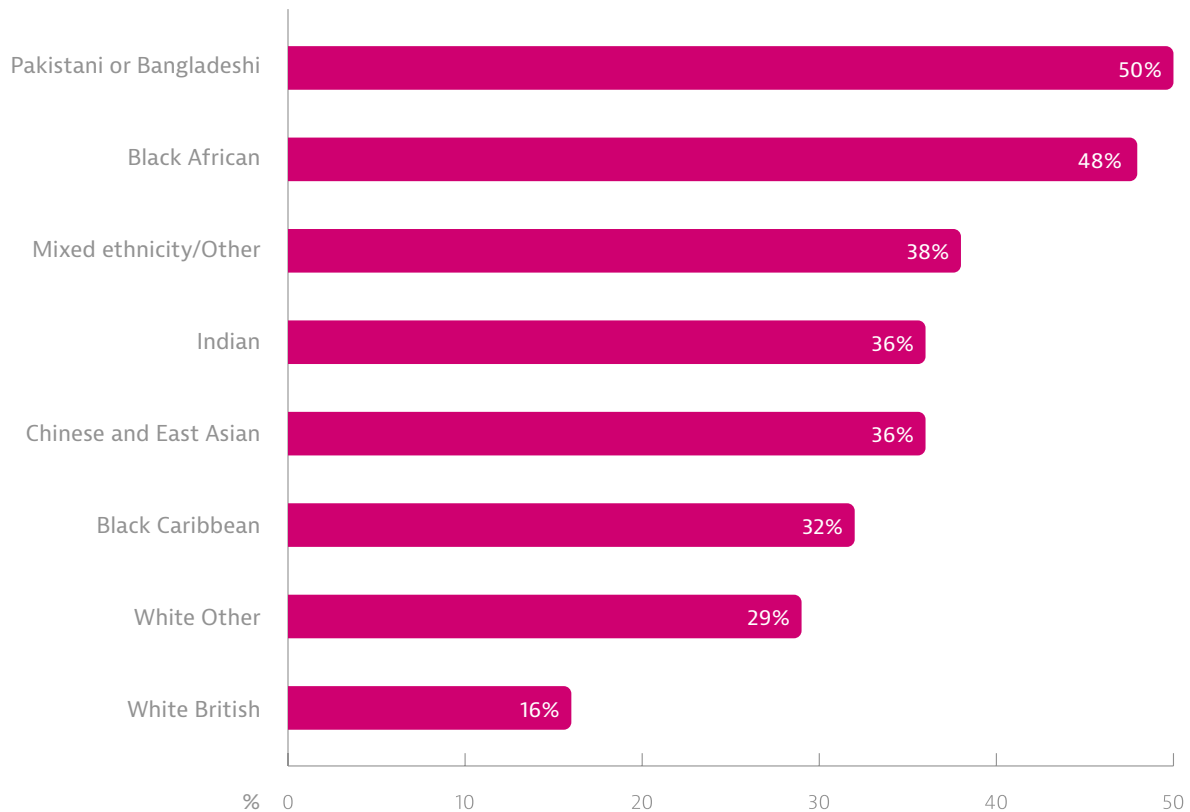


Figure 6: 'I have been criticised for behaviours other colleagues get away with', % women who agreed, by ethnicity. | Unweighted N = 2501, weighted N = 2428. Figures displayed are weighted.

This data confirms a common experience to women of colour from the focus groups and interviews who felt that in many cases, their managers would micro-manage them in a way that undermined their ability to perform their role. Women of colour also highlighted that their manager created barriers to further progression when they failed to communicate upcoming opportunities for promotion or neglected to offer training and development opportunities for potential promotions:

Safiyah, a woman of Pakistani heritage (senior leader):

"There was no active encouragement to apply for the roles. There seem to be... you know when you hear rumours in the team that there seem to be people lined up already for those opportunities? And ironically, they all always used to be British, white British people that were lined up for the role. So, you automatically move back off. So, every time something happened, that an opportunity came along, 'Okay, I have got the experience, got the qualifications. I want to apply for this.' But there was no active encouragement from the management to apply."

Safiyah, like other women of colour reported being more qualified and having more experience than her manager and often being used as a sounding board for advice and guidance. Yet when it came to applying for roles and promotion opportunities there was no encouragement from her manager to apply and those roles would inexplicably be taken up by white British people who seemed to be prepared for those positions.

The role of the 'barrier boss' was also highlighted in relation to appraisal

systems. Where performance management processes were effectively controlled by a single line manager, women of colour found themselves unable to bypass the 'barrier boss' or overcome the hurdles that they posed to further progression through current appraisal systems:

Maliha, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage:

"There's a lot of work that needs to go into training people both managers and staff members in order to have fair and equitable appraisals. Yeah, and if you look at the other side of appraisals is capability but quite often there's a disproportionate proportion of staff of colour who have negative capability or lower appraisal marks."

Cleo, a woman of Black African heritage (senior leader) agrees that the lack of training for line managers on how to do appraisals effectively has an impact:

"So, often they focus on the personality rather than specific performance and behaviours .. I definitely think ... that people need to know how to do an appraisal and to give the appraisee the tools to be able to do something with the information that they're given from it." The experiences here highlight how critical the role of middle managers can be in the way that opportunities for progression and development are distributed and how the inequalities around this middle belt can squeeze out women of colour as they try to progress through hierarchical organisations.

Mentorship

Many women of colour described being glued to 'sticky floors' unable to progress because they lacked experience and guidance due to limited mentoring opportunities. Though the survey data indicated that women of colour regularly accessed mentoring programmes, the qualitative data suggests that the quality and effectiveness of mentoring for women of colour was limited. The effectiveness of mentoring is called into question; whilst mentoring was one possible strategy forward, women of colour also identified this as one of the most used and least successful of traditional equality, diversity and inclusion approaches. Especially when it was offered without appropriate planning, monitoring and evaluation. Many women of colour reported mentoring experiences that had added little value to their progression. Shereen, a woman of Indian heritage (mid-career), stated that, she had been offered multiple mentoring opportunities, but these were based on *'people who want to get something on their CV'* and that they never transpired into *'valuable conversations'*. Even where there were accounts of positive relationships, many women noted that being given individualised career mentoring failed to address the wider systemic issues that blocked their progress within an organisation. However, many women of colour were eager to see mentoring opportunities continue – but wanted a much better system of planning, monitoring and evaluation of them.

Women of colour told us that they supported not only better mentorship programmes but also reciprocal mentoring. Reciprocal mentoring differs from traditional mentoring in that the pairs are formed of equal partners and the process of learning is mutual. Unlike traditional mentoring, the approach seeks to focus on systemic change as well as to benefit the individual. Recognising the labour that both partners invest in a reciprocal mentoring relationship would enable women of colour to be recognised and credited for their contribution. This would also break the cycle where the burden for moving an organisation and leadership forwards in terms of equity and

diversity issues, relied on the unacknowledged work performed by those most harmed by those systems.

Recommendations:

Employers:

Set structures that ensure line managers deliver equitable and fair progression and promotion outcomes for employees.

This should include:

- Provide support and training for managers in how to conduct appraisals so that they are supportive and developmental
- Broaden appraisal systems to have 360-degree input and feedback so that evaluation outcomes are not reliant on one individual
- Link line managers' performance targets to organisational performance targets on diversity and inclusion including for retention, fair allocation of development opportunities, and progression of women of colour.

Women of colour wanted equitable and transparent ladders of progression at work, to limit the damage caused by unrestrained biases and informal networks. This was one of the two most supported recommendations in our survey, supported by 74% of the women of colour; white women also supported this to the same level, and both Conservative (72%) and Labour voters (78%) were strongly in favour of this recommendation. By introducing more equitable progression processes, employers would be obliged to map career progression routes and be more accountable for differential progression of employees.

Conduct an annual learning and development audit by gender and ethnicity to track:

- How training budgets are spent
- Who is being given access to prestige level training or development
- Progression journey for employees after accessing training or development opportunities.

Maya, a woman of Black African heritage (senior leader) talks about how training and development opportunities should be viewed as an investment in women if colour and where there is an imbalance, it should be addressed:

"I think that word of investment is really important and I think we still grapple with how to invest in people of colour sometimes at the expense of the investment in our white colleagues... But when something isn't equal, you have to balance it out ...making targeted investments in their growth around sort of particularly around the executive role space and particularly around leadership spaces..."

For women of colour it is clear that both access to and benefit from training needs vast improvement.

Make progression routes explicit and well-known, not based on word of mouth and informal networks.

This should include access to high-profile project work or tasks; and explicit advertising of all senior roles.

Ensure that women of colour have equitable access to both mentorship and sponsorship opportunities to enable them to progress into leadership roles

- Provide opportunities for women of colour to receive peer to peer mentorship and sponsorship from other women of colour from external bodies such as unions, sector bodies and membership organisations.

Provide a reciprocal mentorship programme built into senior leaders' annual KPIs:

- Provide training for senior leaders on how to do this effectively
- Compensate women of colour for this work such as additional annual leave, additional compensation and recognition towards professional development.

Recognise the major role that line management plays in shaping the experiences of women of colour as individuals. The specific negative impacts vary and need to be actioned at the local level:

- Consider the data in our report for the different groups of women (Black African, Black Caribbean, Chinese and East Asian, Indian, Mixed or other Ethnicities, Pakistani or Bangladeshi), and further, how somebody's multiple characteristics and identities - such as their gender, race, sexual orientation, religion and disability - interact to create a unique and complex experience of disadvantage or inequality.
- Ensure training and support enables all supervisors and managers to understand and use this perspective.
- Business in the Community's [Practical guide for managers](#) outlines ways to build authentic relationships, support mental health and enable everyone to perform at their best.

What you can do as a supervisor or manager:

- Reflect on who you recommend for roles, or for development and high-profile task opportunities. If it's usually a white man, next time actively think about a woman of colour you could recommend. If you do recommend a white man, recommend a woman of colour as well.
- Use the managers toolkit for Mental Health and Well-being for Ethnically Diverse Women <https://www.bitc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/bitc-race-toolkit-mentalhealthwell-beingethnicallydiversewomenguidemanagers-jun20.pdf>
- Seek feedback. Effective leaders must be able to understand their own

behaviours and be aware of how others see them – try and figure out your own blind spots by using this report, and by being open-minded in seeking feedback from women of colour colleagues.

- Recognise and reward time spent on feedback for you – this could be as simple as thanking someone in a team meeting; see Employer section for ideas.
- Consider how somebody's multiple characteristics and identities - such as their gender, race, sexual orientation, religion and disability - interact to create a unique and complex experience of disadvantage or inequality. Apply this understanding as you manage and develop your teams.
- Acknowledge others' experiences and the impact that may have on them, for example when an employee raises micro-aggressions.
- Request "no name" applications for new roles from your HR colleagues.

3

The other invisible workload



This chapter outlines the daily experiences of women of colour in the workplace, providing insight into the invisible double life that many women of colour experience in employment. We highlight the commonality of experiences for these women but also differences, with religion, ethnicity and class being key factors in shaping these.

Key findings:

- 75% of women of colour reported having experienced at work one or more forms of racism that we asked about in the survey.
- 61% of women of colour have changed their wording, topics, hairstyle, their name or what they eat at work, compared to only 44% of white women.

Discrimination

Women of colour experience a range of behaviours in the workplace from micro-aggressions to overt discrimination, as identified by our Literature Review.²⁸ Several women of colour throughout the research reported instances of discrimination during recruitment processes, pay discrimination, being denied promotion opportunities and discrimination during the redundancy process. Previous sector-specific research also points to discriminations within grievance and disciplinary processes with people of colour disproportionately more likely to face disciplinary proceedings and to have harsher outcomes from those proceedings.²⁹

The impact of the discrimination is exacerbated by the lack of support in navigating and responding to it. Our consultation events and roundtables highlighted how difficult it is to access advice or support in challenging race discrimination, including from the structures that exist to provide support in the workplace. The role of unions was underlined here, with women wanting union reps to be more proactive in recognising the racist element of workplace issues and more diversity within unions – as has also been recognised by unions, with the TUC outlining a range of recommendations for unions in their 2019 report, 'Racism Ruins Lives'.³⁰

28 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2021) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* Pay and Progression of Women of Colour <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c1300375-f221-4a88-8c66-edf3c30bd2c7>

29 TUC (2020), BME women and work <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/bme-women-and-work>
NHS Workforce Race Equality Standard

30 Dr Stephen D. Ashe, Dr Magda Borkowska & Professor James Nazroo; Racism Ruins Lives An analysis of the 2016-2017 Trade Union Congress Racism at Work Survey [tuc-full-report \(manchester.ac.uk\)](https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/racism-ruins-lives)

Racism and micro-aggressions

75%
women of colour reported having experienced one or more forms of **racism at work**

Our research unearths overwhelming evidence on the racism experienced, with 75% of women of colour reporting having experienced one or more forms of racism at work that we asked about in the survey, as illustrated in Figure 8.

Repeated mispronunciation of names, statements of surprise at abilities (e.g., 'you speak English so well') and 'banter' related to ethnicity, culture, or religion were among the most common experiences, with almost half of the sample reporting them. Furthermore, 27% of women of colour had experienced the use of racial slurs at work and 19% had experienced the banning of religious or cultural wear.

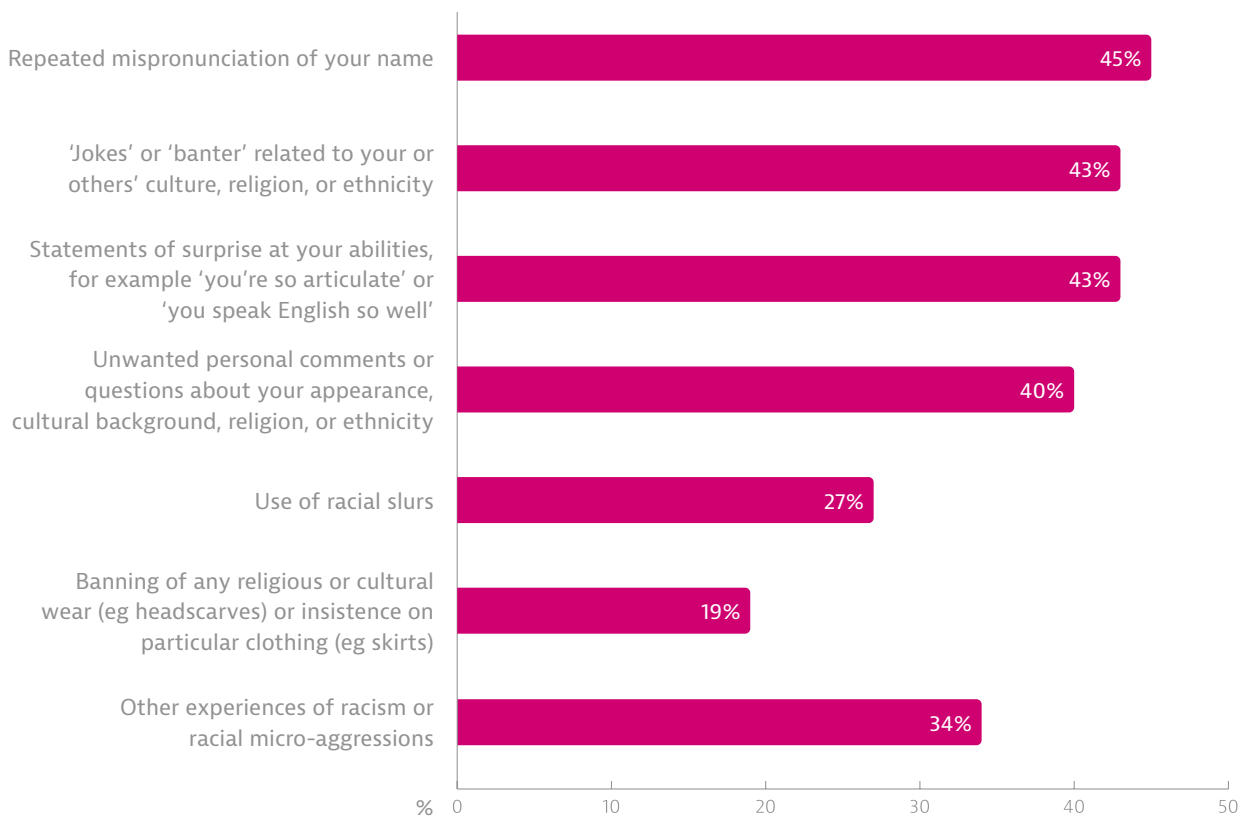


Figure 7: Prevalence of racism experiences for women of colour. | Unweighted N = 1994, weighted N = 279. Figures displayed are weighted.

This is supported by our focus groups, where all participants at all stages of their career and across all sectors, reported experiencing direct racism and micro-aggressions such as racist 'banter' and comments, unfair scrutiny and uncomfortable questions, often of a very personal nature.

Other sections of the report have highlighted how these experiences happen at all career stages, from interview to being a senior manager and even into self-employment.

Gabrielle, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (senior leader), shares her experiences of being mistaken for the minute-taker in meetings:

"...I've turned up for a meeting, and I've walked into the room, a meeting that I was going to chair for example, and somebody is sitting in the chair('s) chair, and I say excuse me I think that's my chair, and they have got a white male, white head who said, "Oh, aren't you here to do the minutes?" I said, "No, my name is Gabrielle." And you can see the shock in their faces, because they've assumed by my name that I'm a white person."

Gabrielle, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (senior leader)

Gabrielle's experience showcases how women of colour continue to face micro-aggressions and assumptions at senior levels based on their ethnicity, religious group and/or class.

Corinne, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (early career) who is also disabled – reflects on this feeling of not belonging, which for her is exacerbated because of her disability. She relays an experience of being mistaken for the cleaner on her first day at a new job and explains: *"... because wherever you go, you're not meant to be there. I think for me as well, I use a wheelchair, so it's sort of just another thing that means wherever I go, people immediately question why you are here."*

An important consequence of this forced adaptation to fit into existing workplace cultures means that women of colour often must 'lose' their identity in order to conform and make progress. In doing so, many participants noted that the organisation loses out on the diversity of leadership and experience that could be brought to those roles.

Maya, a woman of Black African heritage (senior leader) points out that because the: *"people of colour who end up in those positions have to basically bend themselves and assimilate into those systems and structures... we're getting a white structure in a form of a person of colour essentially so if that makes sense? The actual structure is not shifting yet. And I think that's because we're still in a space of representation rather than of sort of an actual inclusion."*

It is important to note that the types of racism and micro-aggressions that women of colour experience differ based on different factors such as their ethnic minority group, class, age, disability and other elements of their identities.

Women of Black African heritage reported that the micro-aggressions they experienced revolved around being labelled as 'aggressive', combined with a sense of being under constant surveillance and scrutiny. Participants spoke about how they couldn't do anything right – for example, becoming close with other Black colleagues was seen as a problem and managers would ask them why they would 'always' sit with Black colleagues. For some women in this group, avoiding social contact became the 'safest' option.

Natasha, a woman of Black African heritage, (early career): *"I think I made a very conscious effort to be like I'm not here to make friends. I'd go do something solitary even when offered 'do you want to go for a walk with us?' I would say 'no thank you!'"*

Similarly, women of Black Caribbean heritage from our early career focus group, experienced racist 'bantering', with colleagues feeling it was acceptable to engage in derogatory or explicitly racist conversations under the guise of 'banter' or 'jokes', once they thought they had reached a level of familiarity or comfort. This was made worse when no one else challenged or picked up on these comments, leaving women of colour second guessing their emotions and feeling unsupported.

The racism and micro-aggressions experienced by women of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage, appeared to be shaped by their religion (or their perceived religious background). For example, Anisah, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage (early career), talks about her experiences with a manager that ultimately led her to quit her job:

"One of the managers, she said to me that she doesn't trust me and that really hurt me because, you know, to say that to someone who's visibly Muslim, I've felt like an outcast my entire life because, you know, with people not trusting me or, you know, they don't have that immediate rapport with me, which I understand. But to have a manager say that to me, the first time she said that to me, I said to her I don't like the fact that you're saying that to me. And then she changed it immediately, she said, okay, I don't find you to be reliable."

In addition, women identifying as religious reported barriers being put up in terms of reasonable measures to practice their religion such as being offered space to pray or being allowed to take time off for Eid. In our focus groups, women of Bangladeshi and Pakistani heritage talked about the impact of those simple adjustments not being made. Gulshan, a woman of Pakistani heritage told us that her employer said:

"Oh, we don't have any space, oh you'll have to find something for yourself." And that's okay, I understand, but what is then your commitment to diversity, how are you showing your commitment to diversity, you're not even giving somebody a space that they need."

The 'mental gymnastics' of trying to fit in

The constant work of trying to seem 'palatable' within the culture of workplaces places additional emotional labour for all women of colour. Many felt pressure to constantly do more, do better, prove themselves and justify their presence in the workplace, no matter their stage of career, ethnicity or religion.

Safiyah, a woman of British Pakistani heritage (senior leader): *"But I have always felt working in the organisation that I had to work twice as hard as my counterparts. Because when I was in that team, I was one Asian person in a team of about 15 white British colleagues. And I always felt that I had to prove myself, I had to work the hardest."*

We asked participants whether they changed aspects of themselves at work, compared to the way they are outside of work. Overall, 61% of women of colour have changed their wording, discussion topics, hairstyle, their name or what they eat at work, compared to only 44% of white women.

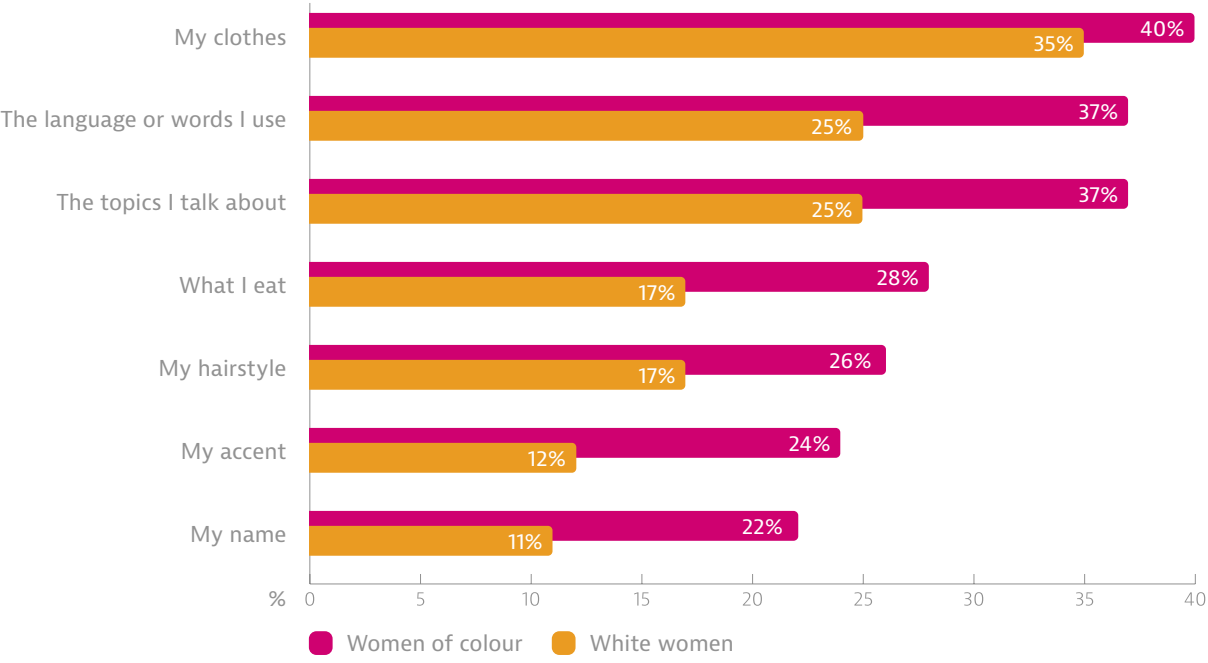


Figure 8: % Women changing aspects of themselves at work 'a great deal' or 'quite a bit', by ethnicity. | Unweighted N = 3176 (1994 women of colour, 1182 white women). Weighted N = 3176 (279 women of colour, 2897 white women). Figures displayed are weighted.

This difference by ethnicity was highly significant, even when taking socioeconomic status and disability into account.

Figure 8 shows the percentage of women of colour and white women who changed each aspect of themselves by 'a great deal' or 'quite a bit'.

Black women of African heritage were most likely to change by 'a great deal' or 'quite a bit' their clothes (54% did so), the language they use (50%), the topics they talk about (46%), their hairstyle (39%), and accent (29%). Indian women were the most likely to change their food choices (34%) and their name (26%). Women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage were also very likely to change their language usage, food choices, hairstyle, and name. The women we spoke to referred to the idea that the 'norm' in the workplace is of white, middle-class men, or sometimes white women, and this is the standard they were expected to assimilate to. Indeed, survey participants with disabilities were also significantly more likely to change aspects of themselves at work, suggesting a white able norm.

Survey participants were also asked how often they felt comfortable in their workplace culture. Overall, women of colour reported feeling comfortable in the culture at their workplace statistically significantly less often than white women (57% of women of colour, compared to 63% of white women 'always' or 'often' feel comfortable). Black women of Caribbean heritage, and women of East Asian and Chinese heritage were the least likely to report 'often' or 'always' feeling comfortable in their workplace culture, at 43% and 41%, respectively.

However, Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage women were more likely to respond that they always or often feel comfortable in their workplace's culture than white British women. This is contradicted by all our other data sources with women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage very likely to change aspects of themselves to 'fit in', a finding that is strongly supported by our focus groups and interviews. It may be that there are other factors shaping the response to this question such as the type of workplace, the adaptations they make to 'fit in' and this being such a normal part of their working lives that it is not seen as unusual.

Religion played a significant role in the adaptations women made to themselves at work, with Muslim women being significantly more likely to make such changes, compared to both non-religious women, and women of other religions. Women of no religion were the least likely to make changes to their behaviour and presentation at work. For example, 53% of Muslim women changed the clothes they wear at work 'a great deal' or 'quite a bit', compared to 37% of Christian women and 32% of non-religious women.

A statistical model assessed whether this relationship between religion and the personal changes women make at work was still significant when controlling for ethnicity (since women of colour were more likely to be religious in our survey sample). Religion significantly predicted greater changes, when controlling for ethnicity. That is, both being a Muslim and being a woman of colour independently and significantly increased the likelihood that women made personal changes at work.

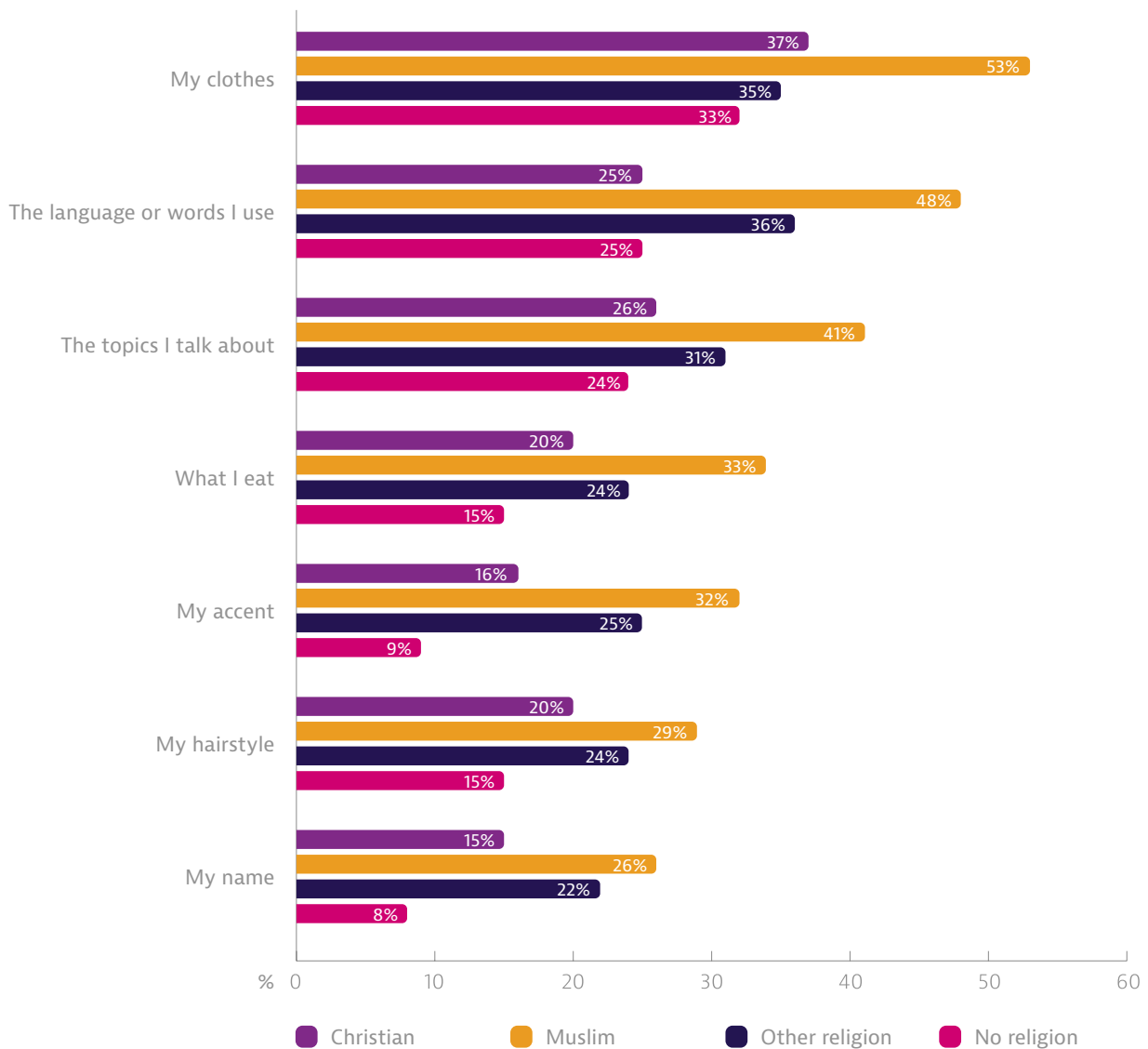


Figure 9: % Women changing aspects of themselves at work 'a great deal' or 'quite a bit', by religion. | N = 3231. Figures displayed are weighted.

These everyday adaptations that women of colour make, directly challenge the notion of 'bring your whole self to work' that many employers claim they want. 'Authentic leadership' - the idea that leaders should be true to themselves and their values - is frequently presented as a modern model of leadership and management that is real and emotionally intelligent. However, the experiences of our participants show that women of colour face everything from explicit racism to micro-aggressions by default when they are authentic and correspondingly, success is not guaranteed even when they assimilate.

We found that women of colour are often stuck between diversity initiatives designed to showcase and celebrate their unique identities, whilst always being conscious of the problems of being 'too different' or 'too challenging'.

Anjali, a woman of Indian heritage (early career) told us: *"You sort of need to get the right level and pitch it perfectly in terms of, you know, being woke enough to like speak eloquently on Black Lives Matters, but not like radical enough to ask outright about their like policy on salary transparency, right?"*

Gloria, a woman of Black African heritage (mid-career) talked about having to moderate herself:

'I think kind of my experience with being in the workplace as a Black woman is there are certain expectations of what a Black woman's personality is. And so, this kind of idea of being, you know, having to make yourself smaller because people can be intimidated by you from the outset.'

Gloria, a woman of Black African heritage (mid-career)

Women of colour in our research described this navigation between who they are, and who it is acceptable for them to be in the workplace, as 'code-switching' or 'developing a different persona'.

This was also referred to in the Literature Review as 'shifting' where women altered their behaviour to avoid fulfilling stereotypes and negative expectations of colleagues and managers.³¹ Women picked up on class being a factor in this exclusion, with workplaces not just having a white bias but also a middle-class bias. There was a shared sense that the work environment is a white and middle-class space. One that assumes a universally shared experience where progression is dependent on the ability to relate to this experience, assimilate and navigate it. As a result, women of colour acknowledged the futility of these attempts to 'fit in'.

Suraiya, a woman of Bangladeshi heritage (mid-career): *"You know, you can play the game...you can play the game right to a certain point but actually there is a point at which you're not coming in."*

31 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2020) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* Pay and Progression of Women of Colour <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c1300375-f221-4a88-8c66-edf3c30bd2c7>

Maliha

I've found that as a Muslim Bangladeshi woman, who has gone on to develop some health issues that qualify me as disabled, I have faced multiple challenges in being seen as a strong and competent leader. I've worked as a senior leader across various local government organisations, and whilst I have met good managers and enjoyed positive working relationships, I would say that I have had to work hard and against the grain of the organisations, to get to where I am now.

I have had managers who were threatened by my competence and abilities. They were overly critical of my work, something I knew my other white colleagues didn't experience. They also appropriated my work and took credit for projects that they had made little contribution to. I know other people in those positions – where they were stuck behind a manager would just leave and find another role – especially in terms of heading out to bigger cities. At the time, I had young children so moving was not an option. I remember once going to HR to seek some advice about progression and talk about my frustrations and actually being told to 'hide how clever I was', as people find that easier to manage and deal with.

This type of careful behaviour, of having to moderate myself to appease other people's sense of comfort was not new to me. As long as you conformed to stereotypes and remained passive and compliant - you were deemed a safe and manageable employee. But if like me, you questioned why you were not given access to training, or why in a restructure, all the Black managers were downgraded, and posts held by white managers protected...well those questions were deemed unwelcome, and I was labelled as 'aggressive'. Assertiveness is rewarded to, let's say a white man, but for me as a Muslim, Bangladeshi woman, it was seen as aggressive.

It was because of this that I hit what I call my 'concrete ceiling' fairly early on. I knew I was perfectly capable of taking my next steps, but the system and the managers within it operated as barriers to my career. That had real consequences for me. I suffered both poor mental and physical health as a result – and it took me a long time to see that my sense of well-being, my levels of anxiety and fatigue, these were all rooted in my difficult work experiences. And yet, there is no choice, because you don't want them to see that they have eroded you and so you mask it, and you carry on.

Having spent a few decades working at a senior level in equality and diversity projects, I don't feel significantly more hopeful now than, when I started, which shows how little has really changed. We have spent a long time talking about the issues, measuring them - and to be fair, in some areas - beginning to address them; but my daughter is now in the early stages of her career, and sadly, what she reports as her struggles, don't sound too dissimilar to mine.

Recommendations:

Employers recommendations:

Produce an ethnicity and gender pay gap report, and use it to develop your Anti-Racism Action Plan for improvement, based in the specific challenges you face as an organisation:

- Where you have enough data not to identify individuals, break this down to ethnicity groups (e.g., Black African, Chinese and East Asian etc. – be more specific if you can), to gain a clear picture of different actions needed for women of colour in your organisation
- Publish ethnicity progression data for staff at all levels making it readily accessible for job applicants as well as employees

71% of women of colour in our survey supported implementing an anti-racism action plan to tackle racism throughout workplace cultures; 62% of white women also supported this.

Use data about your organisation to develop your Anti-Racism Action Plan with SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely) targets and accountability built in. As well as your ethnicity pay gaps, this should include:

- Set SMART targets to improve the proportion of women of colour in the organisation from at all levels of your organisation from entry to senior leadership
- Undertake an equal pay audit based on gender and ethnicity every three years to rectify any unlawful pay practices that are affecting women of colour
- Record number of complaints of racial harassment and bullying including outcomes of the complaints
- Gather and analyse data on disciplinary procedures to identify any differences by ethnicity, e.g., do women of colour rarely have their grievances upheld, but more often have grievances upheld against them
- Track progression routes:
 - Track promotion outcomes of mentorship and sponsorship initiatives by gender and race to better understand where the gaps are and develop plans to minimise those gaps.
 - For those who are not women of colour and have been promoted recently, determine the actual routes leading to progression, e.g., was it more often by informal routes such as recommendation or being given a high-profile project than by formal hiring processes:
 - Track by gender and race how work that leads to promotions is allocated
 - Track reciprocal mentorship learning and success
 - Report these at senior leadership/management meetings as part of the regular analysis and updating of your action plan.

Have clear and transparent processes for reporting racism, with multiple reporting routes, including options outside of line management structures; and make sure employees are aware of them:

- This could include a phone line, a webform or app, an independent third-party, an internal champion or HR specialist.
- Treat employees who make a report with respect and empathy.
- Encourage employees to report any experiences of racism.
- Take action taken as a result of reports and communicate this to make clear your new stance.

Introduce meaningful and intersectional anti-racism training supported by systems and structures to minimise bias; with outcomes linked to organisational performance targets on diversity and inclusion and monitor its impact:

- Ensure that all interviewers and hiring managers have anti-racist training to minimise bias in their decision-making processes.
- Noting the limitations of unconscious bias and other forms of anti-oppression training on their own, ensure that any training links to the wider organisational anti-racism action plan, and is accompanied by clear actions and accountability for those participating.
- Ensure training is ongoing and regular, rather than a one-off exercise.

While training has an important role in education and awareness raising, there is mixed evidence on its effectiveness – especially that of unconscious bias training^{32 33} – in tackling racism on its own. Over reliance on training can stop organisations from taking holistic action, considering it as the answer to ‘solving’ racism rather than one tool in the repertoire. It can also take the focus away from discriminatory systems and organisational cultures to an over-emphasis on individuals. Some of these reservations were also expressed by women of colour in the research who had often seen training delivered as a tick-box exercise rather than a tool for meaningful change. Therefore, we recommend that training is ongoing and regular, delivered as part of a suite of actions, regularly monitored and evaluated, and regularly accessed, rather than a one-off exercise.

Government recommendations:

Mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting for employers with 50+ employees, with requirement for employers to publish action plans to tackle those pay gaps:

- Include intersectional pay gaps by gender and ethnicity.
- Include mandatory publishing of data on progression within the workplace by gender as well as ethnicity and disparities in pay and diversity of senior leadership.

32 UK Government (2020) Unconscious bias and diversity training - what the evidence says https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/944431/20-12-14_UBT_BIT_report.pdf

33 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2021/03/24/is-unconscious-bias-training-still-worthwhile/>

- Publish the pay gap between women of colour overall and white British men; as well as the pay gaps for specific groups of women by ethnic minority (where the policy on disclosure permits) using a suitable threshold per organisation in order not to disclose individuals' personal data.
- Publish both mean and median data.
- Government should set out guidance on how to produce an evidence-led, consultative, time-bound and resourced action plan.

There was broad consensus that some form of mandatory reporting on pay and progression would be helpful and welcome. All participants agreed that some form of regular audit and requirement for publication would push organisations to be more pro-active in evaluating the pay and progression structures of their organisation. The progression data was considered particularly helpful, as women of colour noted how often they experienced 'virtue signalling' in diverse interview panels and data reports that highlighted broad 'diversity numbers' but that omitted how diversity sat in the hierarchy of the organisation.

We would also recommend that the government carry out analysis to set a suitable threshold per organisation in order not to disclose individuals' personal data. Response rates for gender and ethnicity should also be a required element of reporting in order to reflect the accuracy of each employer's data, and to drive improvements by employers in their work to encourage employee reporting rates.

Set up a government-backed, business-led initiative to focus employer efforts to tackle the ethnicity and gender pay gap and drive forward progress:

- Similarly, to the Women's Business Council, this should be led by women of colour (although not necessarily exclusively staffed by them).
- Taking note of the structural challenges and bias that women of colour face and the extra burden of taking on this work, participants should be offered reimbursement for their time (as described for Employers).

Fund local helplines to provide emotional support to people experiencing racial harassment at work (as Racial Equality Councils used to do more widely – and a supplement to the legal advice line of EASS).

Equality Advisory Support Service legal advice helpline should have funding increased to provide more service on race discrimination, and to make their service in this area much more well known:

- Make clearer on their website and in other communications that micro-aggressions and the cumulative impact of bias in the workplace do constitute grounds for a claim of workplace discrimination, which they will support and guide people through raising.

Increase funding for EHRC to prioritise using investigation powers against employers with high incidences of discrimination of women of colour tribunal decisions against them.

Union recommendations:

Building on the work of the TUC anti-racism task force and recommendations of the 2019 TUC report *Racism Ruins lives*, unions should develop and implement Anti-Racism Action Plans for themselves, covering all areas of their work including organising, collective bargaining, public policy and their activities as employers.

Unions to be more active in this space and provide support to members of colour:

- Negotiate with employers to introduce our recommendations, including:
 - Bargain with employers to provide opportunities for women of colour to receive peer support or mentoring from other women of colour
 - Negotiate with employers to provide a programme of support and mental health support for victims of racial harassment and bullying in the workplace.
- Train union reps to better identify and challenge individual and institutional racism in workplace:
 - Ensure workplace reps understand the organisational and intersecting structural barriers that impact women of colour and lock them out based on gender, ethnicity and class, and how to act on them when providing workplace representation or advice.
 - Support workplace reps through training, campaigning and organising to challenge these organisational and structural barriers through collective bargaining and action in workplaces.

4

I'm in leadership and my face still doesn't fit

Are you the **company secretary?**

You need **more experience** to comment on that

Oh, I didn't think that **you** were the CEO

Your leadership style is very **assertive**



The barriers to pay and career progression that exist for women of colour in the workplace mean that they are either missing or underrepresented within senior roles and leadership positions.

This chapter will explore how being held back by biased progression; the battle to 'fit in' versus utilising your own authentic leadership style; and not having a 'face that fits' has contributed to the absence of women of colour in these senior and leadership roles.

Key findings:

- 27% of women of colour were told that they do not have the right leadership qualities.
- 34% of women of colour needed to have their colleagues to vouch for them to have their decisions accepted.
- 39% of women of colour compared to 29% of white British women changed how they present themselves to be seen as an acceptable leader.

The current lack of progression is not due to personal inadequacies, nor lack of ambition, but a combination of barriers and systemic biases that impact women of colour throughout their career journey.

Not all leaders are white, you know?

The career journey into senior roles presents particular and additional challenges for women of colour. Torera, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (self-employed) reported how her progression in the workplace was limited by the 'concrete ceiling'. She was not only held back from moving into more senior roles but purposefully kept in the same position under the patronising excuse that it was in her best interests:

"You get that kind of fake praise which is like, "Well, no, you do this, you do it so well, so we need you to do this." Who else would do it as well as you? That's not praise. That's the opposite of it.... For women of colour and Black women in particular, it is not a glass ceiling, it is a concrete ceiling because you can't see through it, right? And you get to that point, and you are banging your head on it and you're getting a headache because you're banging your head, not just on walls, on ceilings as well because you're being kept in."

The constant struggle to 'fit in' and conform is exhausting and many women of colour felt like their efforts were never enough. Being the only women of colour in a team or organisation can be extremely tiring and often is a constant battle between wanting to be authentic and wanting to fit in.

"There are zero people of colour in the top 50 companies in this country. Where am I going to go? ...I can't whiten myself... I can't hide myself. I can't integrate. I walk into a room you know I'm Black. I've got a nice English accent that's really you know, "Oh, you're so well-spoken." Oh yeah. You're so educated. I did as much as I can to fit in but it was still never going to be enough."

Chima, a self-employed woman of Black African heritage

In the 'Different Women, Different Places',³⁴ many reported being asked to "change to fit into the workplace". This concurs with our findings as Torera, a self-employed woman of Black Caribbean heritage, shared with us the toll she felt about not 'fitting in' in her previous role: *"You always did feel that you were having to prove yourself with everything that you did, and having to prove why you should be in the meeting, why you should be on the project. It felt like a constant battle for me and the work that I was doing and needing to get or how to get the acknowledgement and respect for the work that I was doing."*

Racially biased idealised models of leadership

Lack of transparency in recruitment and promotion is often compounded by racially biased and idealised models of leadership. Many women talked about the aesthetics of their racialised and gendered bodies and how they were considered 'out of place' at the highest levels of their organisation. Women of colour in senior roles reported attending conferences and being approached as hospitality service staff or being in meetings and being addressed as the secretary. These examples show the general assumptions about the role and place of women of colour in the workplace.

In our survey, participants were asked to what extent they agreed with a

series of statements about leadership in the workplace. Figure 10 indicates that being a woman of colour was statistically significantly associated with reporting being seen as a less acceptable leader, including being told by others that they do not have the right leadership qualities (27%), such as needing colleagues to vouch for them to have their decisions accepted (34%).

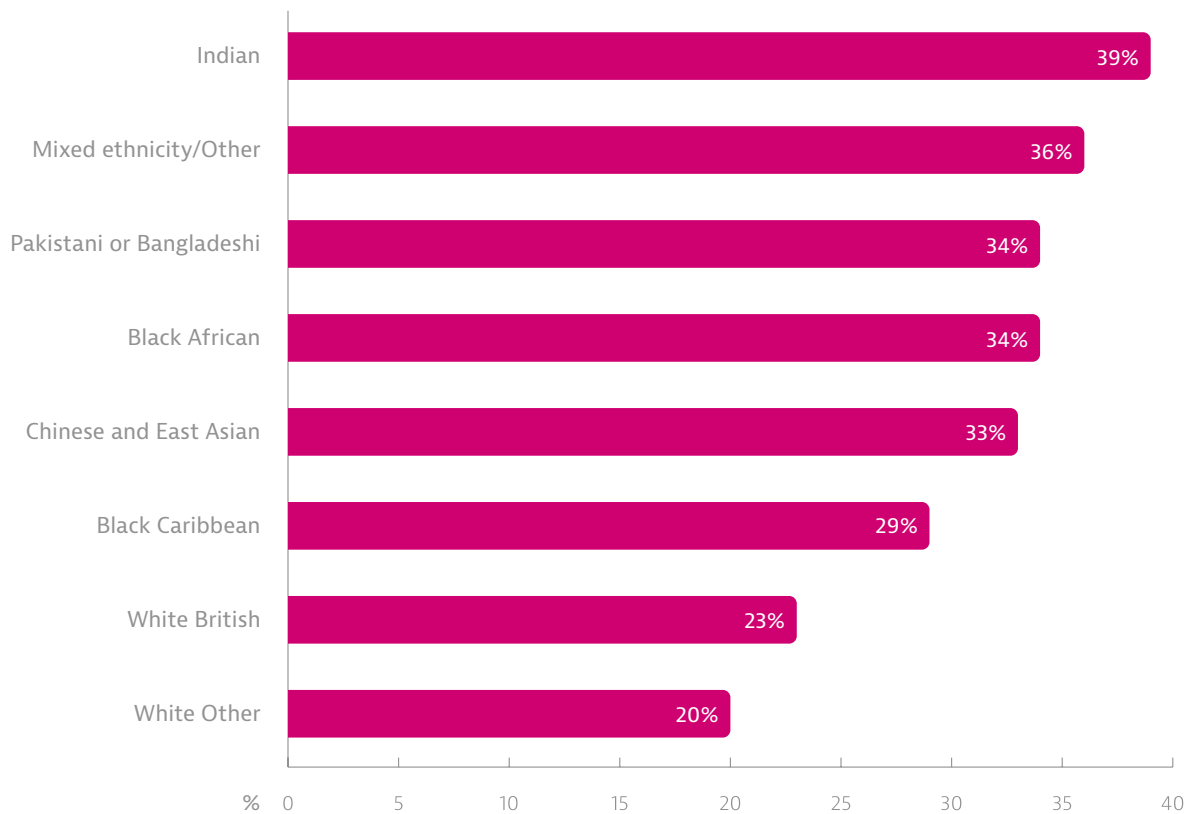


Figure 10: 'Colleagues and managers have had to vouch for me, for my decisions to be accepted', % women who agreed, by ethnicity. | N = 3176. Figures displayed are weighted.

Women of colour are also more likely to have been described as passive (31%) or aggressive (27%), compared to white women (at 20% and 17% respectively). Finally, Figure 11 highlights the invisible labour that women of colour perform in trying to conform to ideas about 'acceptable leadership', with two in five women of colour (39%) changing how they present themselves to be seen as an acceptable leader, compared to 29% of white British women. In every racialised group they are more likely to change how they present themselves than their white British counterparts.

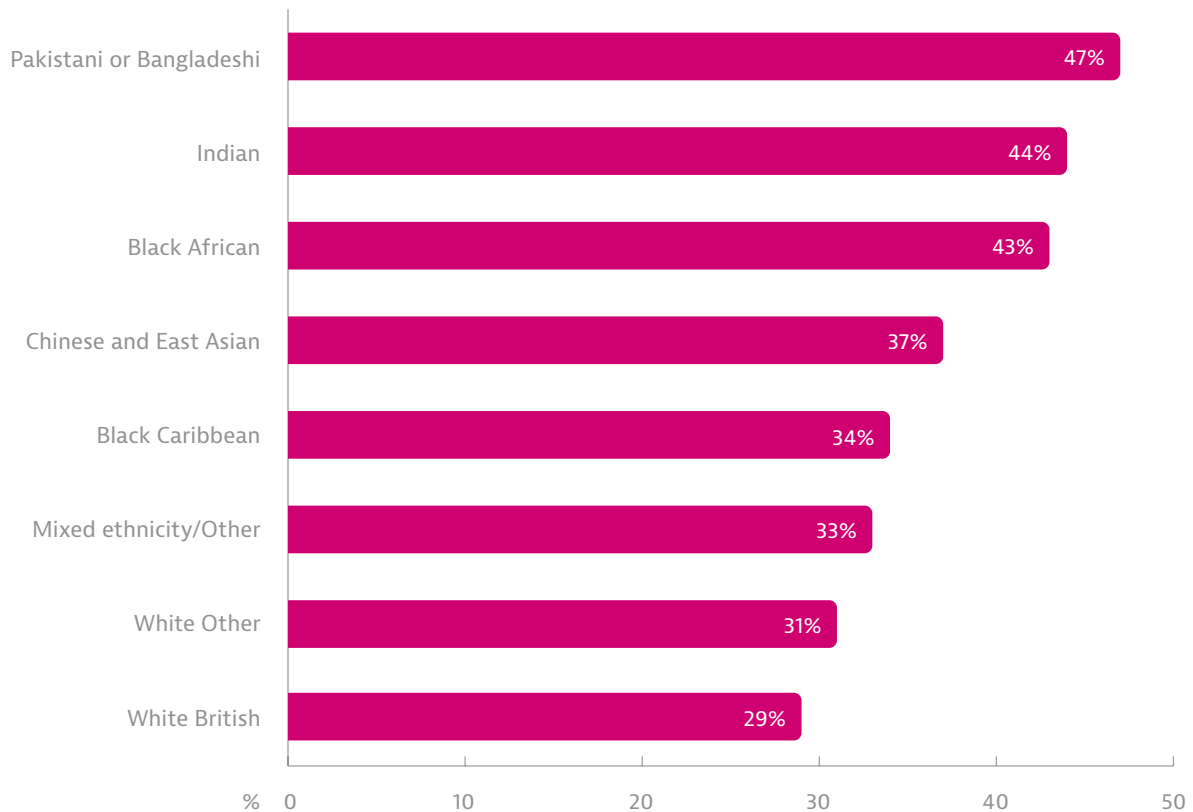


Figure 11: 'I have changed how I present myself to be seen as an acceptable leader', % women who agreed, by ethnicity. | N = 3176. Figures displayed are weighted.

Women of Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage were the most likely to agree that they have been described as passive (40%) or aggressive (35%) in their leadership style, to have been told they do not have the right leadership qualities (35%), and to have changed how they present themselves to be seen as an acceptable leader (47%). Indian women were the most likely to agree that colleagues and managers have had to vouch for them for their decisions to be accepted (40%).

The same pattern can be seen in our interviews, with many women of colour describing being inexplicably side-lined in favour of white male and female colleagues with less experience and qualifications and interpreted these decisions in terms of dominant ideas about 'leadership fit'.

Michelle, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (senior leader):

"...the conversations that I had were just like you know you've done really well! We're really pleased with you. But we think that you need more experience or more knowledge or you need to look more like a manager, whatever a manager is supposed to look like ... it was all men at the top tier and there wasn't any other, there wasn't any Black men let alone Black women in those higher places that I wanted. There was no seat around the board for me at that point."

This concurs with the 'Different Women, Different places'³⁵ study where it was suggested that Black women were often labelled as misfits to the idealised model of senior leadership. This racialised and gendered idea of 'leadership fit' clearly also has intersection with class-based expectations, revealed in reference to accents. For Michelle, these experiences were compounded by a tendency to channel women of colour into the EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) strands of the workplace and to offer them senior positions on these narrow terms, based on identity not their wider skillset.

In 'Different Women, Different Places' participants also described how the image, presence, leadership and communication styles of white women were more positively perceived in the workplace compared to their own. Concurring with this, Black African and Caribbean women in our research commonly described how what was admired and rewarded as assertive leadership in others, was often labelled as 'aggressive'. This was thought to be based on existing stereotypes that reached into tropes about the 'angry Black woman', which again concurs with our quantitative data above.

Why leadership culture of organisations needs to change

Leadership behaviours defines the culture of the organisation and sets the tone for what is and isn't tolerated within the workplace. How those with managerial or decision-making responsibilities demonstrate this definition of leadership helps define the working culture of any organisation in practice. Gender pay gap data over the last 3 years has shown us that the vast majority of UK based organisations' leadership consists mainly of white males. In addition to this, in the last 5 years women of colour had received a significantly lower number of promotions and pay rises (0.2 on average), compared to white women (2.5 on average).

Given the challenges that women of colour face in progressing within organisations, it is not surprising that if they do make it in those leadership roles, they still face bias and discrimination.

Torera, a self-employed woman of Black Caribbean heritage told us about her experiences in the workplace: *"I have progressed in that time, but it was a challenge, it was a battle, and you should not have to fight that hard to have what should be yours. It should not happen. I should not have to do that. I should not have to spend so much time building alliances and getting supporters who then kind of advocate for me. Not having to fight for opportunities like others who don't look like you..."*

Recommendations:

Employers recommendations:

Undertake regular 'stay interviews' (an alternative to 'exit interviews'), giving women of colour safe spaces and opportunities to feedback on their career experiences:

- These can also be an opportunity for leaders to improve their own ability to talk about race and listen to feedback from women of colour.
- These can be both named and anonymous to provide safe spaces for women to be honest in their responses.
- Gathering information on this will enable organisations to better understand where they can improve to better support women of colour in their career progression.

For employers to better understand how racism and discrimination is affecting women of colour before the toll becomes too much and they decide to leave, they should undertake regular 'stay interviews' for women of colour. These are an alternative to 'exit interviews' and provide opportunities for women of colour to feedback on their career experiences.

Sign up to the [Business in the Community Race at Work Charter](#):

- Employers can support the pay and career progression for women of colour by accessing the community and resources available from BITC, which will help to embed anti-racism in their organisation.

Appoint an executive sponsor for race:

- Leaders should connect to employees and convene significant conversations in the workplace for active listening – BITC's [Race at Work: Black Voices](#) recommendations show how.

Leaders should value the skills women of colour bring to leadership, and foster a culture whereby they can bring their differences, expanding the definition of leadership rather than making women of colour conform to stereotypical ideas:

- Leading thinkers regarding leadership are emphasising the need to connect with employees or stakeholders, to learn from difference and adapt creatively to manage adversity. The women in our report demonstrate these skills as they respond to challenges in the workplace - organisations who welcome and embrace their skills will benefit.

Government recommendations:

Government to embed a firm commitment to furthering equality in the workplace in the new Public Procurement Regulations post-Brexit:

- Publicly support organisations that implement inclusive procurement strategies and prioritise this amongst existing and new suppliers to government e.g., Australian and Canadian requirement for indigenous led organisations to provide a service as part of the supply chain.

5

The cumulative impact on mental health



The report so far has shone a light on the multiple challenges women of colour face in the workplace and the myriad of ways this impacts on their identity at work. We have explored how all these factors at various steps of the career journey hold women of colour back and limit their pay and progression. However, the impact goes beyond work with significant implications for the health and well-being of women of colour, sometimes leading them to exit the organisation or industry. Those who stay often do so at a heavy cost to themselves.

Key findings:

- On average, over three quarters of women of colour in our survey reported that experiences of racism in the workplace have an impact on their well-being, confidence at work, job satisfaction, progression opportunities, and ability or desire to stay in a role.
- 39% of women of colour reported that a lack of progression had affected their well-being, compared to 28% of white women, whilst being refused promotion led to loss of motivation for 43% of women of colour.
- Most of the self-employed women of colour we interviewed left their employment due to racism, micro-aggressions and 'barrier bosses'.

Lack of progression and implications for well-being

In our survey, 39% of women of colour reported that a lack of progression had affected their well-being, compared to 28% of white women, whilst being refused promotion led to loss of motivation for 43% of women of colour.

Many participants described feeling frustrated and demoralised by the way that they were perceived and undermined in their workplace roles. For most it was in the day-to-day lack of recognition of their work and the lack of credit that they were given for their contributions. Many also noted their unequal treatment by line managers in comparison to their white and male colleagues, contributing to a serious erosion of confidence and disproportionate levels of self-doubt.

Janine, a woman of Black African heritage (senior leader): *"I just have this complete self-doubt and it's because I start hearing all those voices of people that said, "This isn't for you," and although, you know it's not true, you hear that echo. So, I think that's what it does, it knocks your confidence, and you have to find other ways to rebuild that confidence all the time."*

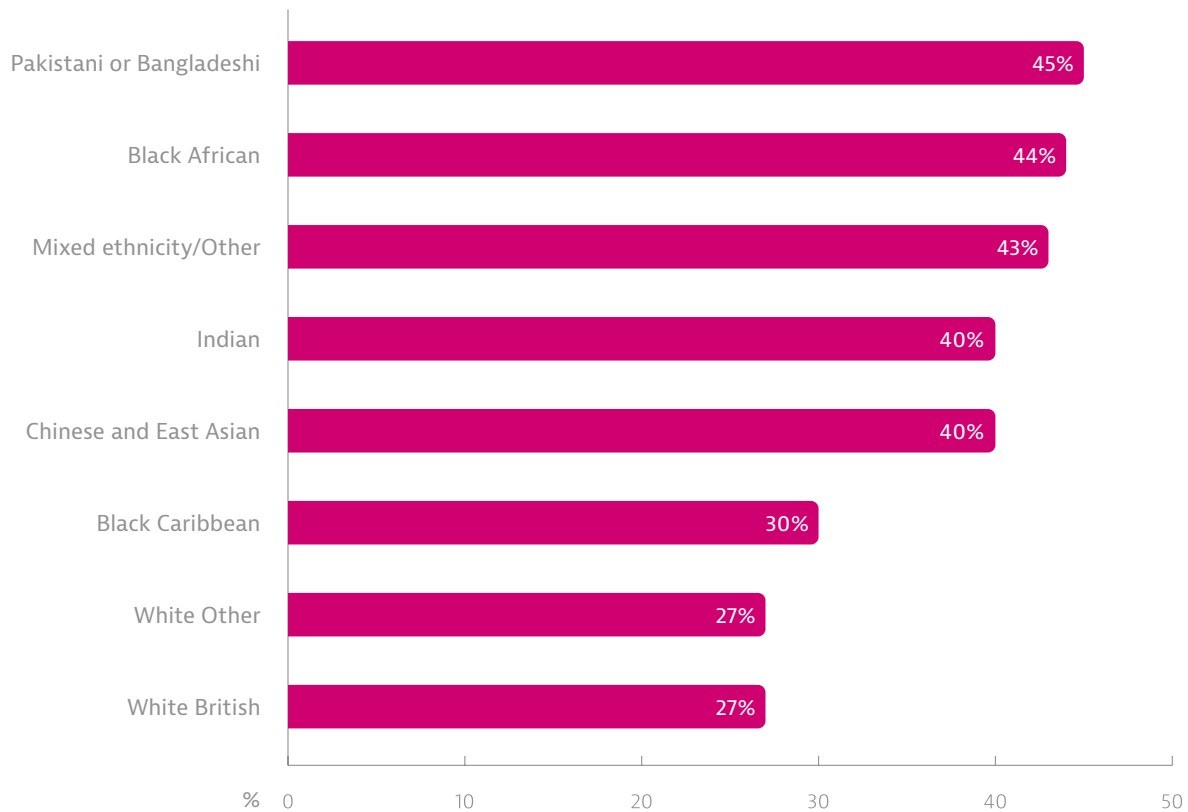


Figure 12: 'Lack of progression at work has affected my wellbeing', % women who agreed, by ethnicity. | Unweighted N = 2501, weighted N = 2428. Figures displayed are weighted.

It all adds up: impact of everyday racism

The self-doubt women of colour experience is reinforced by the second guessing they have to do in the face of micro-aggressions, questioning their own judgment on whether their experiences are 'real' or whether they are reading too much into certain behaviours. Janine spoke about the impact of this:

"You're never quite sure what's going on in situations, you can assume it's because you don't fit in because of your colour or your gender, but you're never quite sure. And that creates a kind of stress and tension all the time. So, I suppose it's an anxiety- low level of anxiety."

Feeling 'othered' and excluded within workplace cultures means that women of colour spend precious mental energy trying to 'fit in', whilst questioning whether they should even be there as described previously in this report. Research shows the harm that comes from trying to change aspects of yourself to 'fit in', this has been shown in relation to 'masking' in autism but there is recognition that this affects non-autistic people too.³⁶

Hayley, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (early-career) shared with us: *"I was just dealing with everyone around me and thinking well, I'm trying to fit*

³⁶ Milner, V., McIntosh, H., Colvert, E. et al. A Qualitative Exploration of the Female Experience of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). *J Autism Dev Disord* 49, 2389–2402 (2019)

into this space but I'm clearly very different! And people obviously make that clear... and then I think do I deserve to be here? Do I have to earn my right to be here and how do I do that? It's a constant battle in your head."

The invisible labour carried out by women of colour to continually prove themselves and their credibility comes at a high personal cost. This is exacerbated by the loneliness of their position, often as one of the few women from an ethnic minority or religious group in their position or organisation. This contributes to the isolation that senior women of colour we spoke to face in the workplace, who feel burdened with the requirement to represent their entire 'community'.

Michelle, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (senior leader) talks about the significant burden of being the first and/or only women of colour in a leadership role and its impact:

"I'm the first so everybody who has to come after me, I have to bear everything and do everything right. They're going to base their experience of having had me in that management position, how that then impacts on other Black women or Asian women or whatever I would like to describe ourselves then coming in subsequently. So, there's an awful lot of pressure as well...I have to be over and above in terms of my delivery for them."

Michelle, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (senior leader)

The experiences of all the women of colour interviewed shared a common theme of facing racism and biases in both the workplace and in self-employment, which has been explored throughout this report. Our survey asked women of colour who had reported experiencing racism at work how much, if at all, their experiences had reduced their well-being, confidence at work, progression and promotion opportunities, job satisfaction, and/or ability or desire to stay in a role.

As per Figure 13, on average, over three quarters of the women of colour reported that it had affected each of these things, with 43% reporting that it had done so either 'quite a bit', or 'a great deal'. An average of one in five women of colour reported that it had affected them 'a great deal'. 45% of women of colour said it affected their ability or desire to stay in their role.

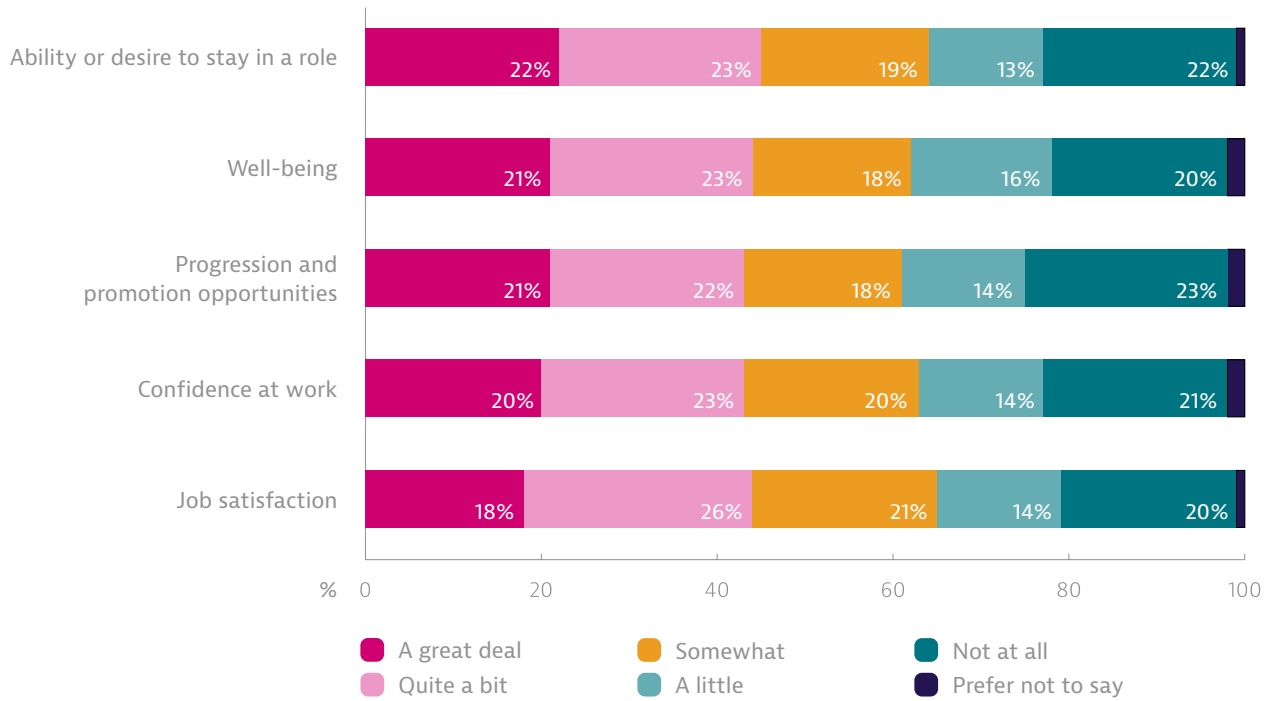


Figure 13: Extent to which experiences of racism reduced each response item, for women of colour. | Unweighted N = 1565, weighted N = 209. Figures displayed are weighted.

Dealing with racism and micro-aggressions contributes an additional layer to complex workplace cultures that women of colour have to navigate on a regular basis. Many women of colour spoke about this in our interviews and focus groups, identifying this as an additional barrier to being able to just get on with their jobs.

Shazna, a woman of Pakistani heritage (senior leader), talked about the racism she experienced and how as a senior leader, she felt the weight of responsibility to respond to racism: *“So, in terms of racism and being treated differently, it’s really hard to put your finger on it and I just, again, I come back to if I don’t like something I’ll change it, you know, and I’ll vote with my feet, which is probably not the right-... You know, maybe I should fight in my current organisation, but it’s just it’s very stressful to try and challenge all the time to be the only voice.”*

All of the women of colour in senior positions talked about the impact on their well-being and confidence of years of battling stereotypes and racism. Some mentioned the impact of this stress on their physical health, for some it eroded their confidence such a degree, that they waited to be 'perfect' before applying for promotions, and for some it meant that they left their sector or organisation altogether.

In Michelle's words:

"It's been absolutely exhausting when you think about the burden, and I could only think about it in those terms and talking to other women of colour and you will understand this. There are days that you're just saying to yourself, if I thought about it properly, I wouldn't even get out of bed when you think about just what you have to face on that day-to-day basis."

The experiences of being underrepresented, being denied progression opportunities, feeling invisible, experiencing direct racism, micro-aggressions and stereotyping had impacted the physical, mental and emotional well-being of women we interviewed, and we heard this just as much from self-employed women of colour.

Jocelyn, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (self-employed), got quite emotional when talking to us about her experiences: *"I had to leave my industry when I was in my early 30s. The experiences of working in my industry, was so poor and so damaging to my mental well-being that I had to make a choice either to stay in institutions and be subjected to what was cultural violence and racism or to preserve my well-being, my mental health, my long-term future, and that's what I chose to do."*

Jocelyn is adamant that racism had impacted her mental health so badly to the point where she felt that to protect her sense of self, she had to leave. Despite loving her job and all the securities it brought her, she had to walk away and start her career again from scratch from a place of complete vulnerability.

Chima, a woman of Black African heritage (self-employed) also, describes the toll of constantly trying to 'fit in' has on Black women: *"The number of women who suffer because of their mental health because of this exact issue is much higher than is known because Black women are strong. You just stay strong. You can't show weakness. We crack inside."*

The cumulative impact of racism and micro-aggressions takes its toll physically as well as mentally on women of colour. One woman of colour told us that she had a stroke and believes it was linked to the stress of constantly needing to prove herself, and several women in our interviews and focus groups spoke about ending up off sick from work due to the severe impact of these experiences.

Our research did not set out to explore the mental health of women of colour at work, but it is a theme that has emerged at every point in this study.

It is clear from the research that the experiences of women of colour at work are impacting their health and well-being significantly, and this has implications not just for them as individuals but for businesses, the economy and society. The message cannot be understated. The physical and mental impact of racism and discrimination at work has consequences for women of colour that cannot be ignored.

This is an area that requires further research and focus urgently. For the purposes of this report, as the wide-ranging relevance of mental health was not expected to this extent, we have referred to work already done in this area and our recommendations speak to this pre-existing body of work.

Recommendations:

Employers recommendations:

Have a plan for reducing cumulative and extra pressures of micro-aggressions and working in unwelcoming spaces, to address mental health and well-being of women of colour:

- Mental Health First Aid England has provided guidance for employers on how best to support people of colour in the workplace to reduce disproportionate incidences of poor workplace mental health experiences.

As has been highlighted throughout, organisational Anti-Racism Action Plans should tackle the root causes of these pressures, but we acknowledge that this is a journey and in the meanwhile appropriate support should be put in place for women of colour facing racism at work.

Government recommendations:

Investigate how experiences of institutional, structural and interpersonal racism impact on both the mental health and career outcomes of women of colour:

- As noted by the NHS Race and Health Observatory 2001 report, most of the evidence has treated mental health outcomes (broadly defined) and career progression as separate but the two are likely to be interlinked.
- Ideally, government should acknowledge the impact of structural racism on the mental health of women of colour – of which workplace outcomes are just one piece of evidence - in order to best start to address this.

6

Exit into self-employment: the untold story



We have explored the lack of pay and career progression opportunities for women of colour in employment, but what is happening for self-employed women of colour? Has the exit into self-employment made any difference to their career journey? The landscape for self-employed women of colour has revealed that they still face challenges.

Key findings:

- The UK's ethnic minority population makes up 14% of the UK population, but only 1.7% of venture capital investments were provided to ethnic minority businesses at seed, early and late stage between 2009 and 2019.
- 33% of employees in the venture capital industry in the UK have graduated from Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Stanford or a business school.
- The expectation of free labour or charging lowers fees for their work is an obstacle for self-employed women of colour.

This chapter outlines the key issues that have led to women of colour leaving employment to start their own businesses as well as how they manage micro-aggressions from clients, and the challenges of accessing funding to grow their business.

Was I pushed or pulled?

For many women of colour, the pathway into self-employment was about:



Self-preservation
and to protect
mental health
well-being

To escape
'barrier bosses'

The opportunity
to gain the
flexibility needed
to balance work
and family life

To escape daily
continuous
workplace bias and
discrimination

Due to ongoing workplace discrimination many women of colour we spoke to left employment with no or little time to prepare themselves.

Jocelyn, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (self-employed) told us: *"I didn't even contemplate self-employment as an option. I was literally pushed into it. I left without a job. I left without a notion of what self-employment could be."*

Our interviews revealed that lack of career progression and representation was a key factor shared between women of colour in their decision to pursue self-employment.

Chima, a woman of Black African heritage (self-employed): *"I never wanted to run my own business, but I never wanted to be in that same position again...I did as much as I can to fit in but still never going to be enough."* Chima, like many other women of colour, expressed frustration, stress and anguish at having to spend so much of their working life trying to 'fit in' and the realisation even after all their efforts to 'fit in' doesn't mean they will progress in their careers. All it did was add to the 'mental gymnastics' of being a woman of colour in predominantly white workplaces.

The self-employment dream vs Groundhog Day

Given that many women of colour enter self-employment due to push factors as described above, the chance to escape racism and bias is appealing. However, from our interviews it has become clear that many of the same or very similar issues prevail, which comes as an unpleasant surprise for many women of colour. Dealing with the same challenges as in the workplace has meant that – as earlier in this report about researching potential employers – some self-employed women of colour feel it is necessary to undertake research on potential clients regarding how they interact with women of colour before agreeing to work with them.

Torera, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (self-employed): *"If I'm thinking about working with a particular client, I will have an informal conversation with someone just to say, "What do you know about them? What have you heard about them?" I'm going to start asking clients for references as well."* This pre-emptive behaviour is like what women of colour interviewing for job roles did – researching potential employers, as shown earlier in this report. Despite now being self-employed, women of colour have not escaped the need to navigate micro-aggressions and biased behaviours towards them. These experiences continue to impact mental and emotional well-being.

Still struggling for better pay

Our findings reveal that on average, self-employed women of colour earn less than their white female counterparts, despite now having more control over their pay progression.³⁷

Government figures have shown that median net earnings for self-employed men have remained consistently higher than those of women over time, but the difference is smaller for part-timers in most years.³⁸ Currently government figures have not been broken down by ethnicity or the intersection of gender and ethnicity. However, given the challenges that self-employed women of colour continue to face, it is not surprising that our findings show difference in earnings along intersectional lines.

When we asked about their earning capability as self-employed women, their responses were mixed. Jocelyn, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (self-employed) told us that: *"Pay has been really, really difficult. I started off much, much lower than I should've been in order to try and have contracts."*

Self-employed women of colour shared their experiences of being asked to lower their fees or there is an expectation that they'll work for free. Samantha, a woman of Black African heritage (self-employed), was told that her consultancy fee for a particular bid was too high, so Samantha and her associate, a woman of Chinese heritage, adjusted their bid fees accordingly. However, Samantha found out that this wasn't happening to all other consultancies in her field: *"They happened to give information about who they recruited...they even listed who they picked. When we did a lot of background checks and we looked at their qualifications, you know, they were clearly like - they weren't as experienced as us... we noticed that they had less experience than us, but the daily rate was so much higher than what we bid for - than what we were even going to - because we've been told earlier to come down a bit."* This corresponds with earlier examples in the report of women of colour not being awarded pay rises or progression opportunities, despite being qualified and/or taking on additional workplace responsibilities.

In addition to being asked to lower fees, there is also an unspoken expectation of women of colour providing services for free. Chima, a woman of Black African heritage (self-employed), shared her experiences of this: *"I'm asked to speak, and I'm told there's no budget and then I go and I find someone else is being paid. Why does the Black woman have to be free? Why is there no budget for me but there's a budget for them? Oh, it's really great exposure... Stop expecting us to do stuff for exposure because it's good for our brand. Our brands are worthless unless they are worth something to you. So, pay us for*

37 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2020) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* Pay and Progression of Women of Colour (fawcettsociety.org.uk) pg.60

38 UK Government (2021) *Family Resources Survey: financial year 2019 to 2020* - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

expertise. ... Stop over complimenting and undercompensating."

The expectation of free labour from women of colour is prevalent in workplaces and often continues into self-employment. While establishing the scale of this would be a subject for further analysis, what we do know from our research is that the additional labour of navigating these requests and expectations adds uncertainty to the already precarious career position that many women of colour find themselves in. The impact of not knowing if discrimination was a factor in being asked to work for less money or free cannot be underestimated or denied and is another example of 'mental gymnastics' at play.

In conversations with potential clients, Alisha a self-employed woman of Black Caribbean heritage, shared with us her suspicions that potential clients feel that she shouldn't be charging high prices for her work because of her ethnicity and business location:

"I sometimes feel that because people know where in the UK my business is based and it's thought of as a poor area and also a really a Black area, it's like I sometimes feel like they're saying I don't have the right to sell things at that price...I can't just sell them cheap because I'm a Black person."

Alisha, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (self-employed)

Yet despite this, all the self-employed women of colour we interviewed believed in their ability to earn more now that they were self-employed, especially for those who were working in fields or using skills similar to their previous paid employment.

Bich, a woman of Vietnamese heritage (self-employed): *"I think I have a much greater potential because if I fill up my calendar, I would earn way more than I would in the corporate world."*

The combination of earning more and progressing further in their careers is something a few of the women reflected on. Jocelyn reflected: *"So, I'm finally earning what I am worth, and I'm 50, and I've been in the industry since I was 25...Had I stayed in employment, would I have got the promotions to have achieved that? Probably not."*

Chima agreed with this: *"When I left employment, I was earning just shy of 60 grand a year. And we've turned over just shy of 200,000 this year... and we have projections to keep growing. Yes, we're ambitious but it's now unlimited potential because it depends on what value I can offer the workplace, at what value I can offer my clients."*

The prospect of being able to earn more as a self-employed woman of colour is being realised, despite having to still navigate the same or similar issues as when they were in employment.

Alisha

I'm Alisha, I live in London and I'm self-employed working in the creative industry. Becoming self-employed was not my first choice, but in my job in the arts sector, I really struggled to progress as I was constantly overlooked for promotion opportunities despite being really good at my job. It was starting to feel like Groundhog Day. I struggled to progress above junior positions and felt that my pay was much lower than it should have been given my experience. I couldn't prove this though as we never talked about money at work. I just couldn't see a way of paying for childcare, being there for my children and working a full-time job. But as I had a family to support, I stuck it out. Eventually I left my job.

Do I feel that I was pushed into self-employment? Yes. A mixture of things pushed me into starting my business. Not wanting to be employed by racist institutions in the creative sector; not wanting to be underpaid and struggling to get a promotion or to be recognised. After being made redundant for the third time, I was done working for other people. So, I decided to go it alone, but I'll tell you it hasn't been without its challenges.

I was recently approached by a big UK magazine, to showcase my products. It was after this magazine had done a lot of Black Lives Matter posts (I always check to see how organisations have/are addressing this) and they'd said to me "We're really aware of your business. We love what you're doing. We think you'd be a really good fit." I scrolled to the bottom of the email, and I saw they wanted me to pay £300 for this 'opportunity'. My heart sank. I called them out on this in an email and told them they should be more careful and thoughtful when emailing small, particularly Black-owned brands. The fact that they didn't even think about offering me a subsidised or free slot just shows they're not truly focused on anti-racism despite their public gestures.

Do you know what really annoys me? They ignored the email I sent. For me it was just another micro-aggression in my workplace. A way for them to look good about supporting a Black business, but not in reality. It's just business as usual to them. And I was the one left wondering if I'm overreacting, if I should say something or if I should take the opportunity and just be grateful.

I talked about this on Instagram, about how it's not acceptable, especially for marginalised small businesses. I had a couple of white followers come back and say, "Oh, I don't think they meant anything bad by it. I think they just sent that out to everyone. Don't take it personally. I don't think it's racist." It's micro-aggressions like this where people come back and say "Don't take it that way" and try and tell me what I should and shouldn't take offence to. It's just so complicated and exhausting. Yet, I'm kind of used to it. I'm not surprised that a white person would say that, it's often the 'go-to' response to situations like this. To deny it happened or tell Black people not to take it personally or to view it as something else. I get it.

This isn't the first time it's happened and I'm sure it won't be the last. The thought of racism makes white people uncomfortable, so deflecting from it is how it often gets dealt with. But this is wrong, damaging and has an impact on our confidence and well-being. A white person could never understand what it's like to navigate these issues on repeat and if I'm honest, I'm disappointed that despite being self-employed I still have to navigate these issues as a Black female business owner. It's exhausting.

Why don't self-employed women of colour get funding?

In employment, the inability to take on unpaid internships due to financial constraints impacts women of colour's career choices. In self-employment the equivalent for women of colour is lack of access to equitable funding; or over reliance on personal savings or alternatives such as crowdfunding to fund their business. Given existing gender and ethnicity pay gaps that affect women of colour, the ability to have adequate savings to rely on to fund business growth is limited.

According to EY sponsored report 'Minority Businesses Matter'³⁹ ethnic minority businesses contribute at least £74 billion to the UK economy. Despite this high contribution figure, many, particularly those of Black African and Black Caribbean heritage, experience barriers in accessing capital and investment in their businesses. Whilst being self-employed brings more career freedom, women of colour face additional barriers accessing financial support to grow their businesses.

The UK's ethnic minority population makes up 14% of the UK population, however only 1.7% of venture capital investments were provided to ethnic minority businesses at seed, early and late stage between 2009 and 2019.⁴⁰ The data on access to venture capital funding by ethnicity is limited but what we do know is that very little venture capital investments goes to UK based ethnic minority led businesses.

The share of overall funding shows that 0.02 % went to Black entrepreneurs, 3% East Asian, 3.3% Middle Eastern, 2.8% South Asian and 91% white. Female founders receive the least investment, and the data shows us that women of colour fare even worse. Black female entrepreneurs receive 0.02%, east Asian 0.3%, Middle Eastern 0.3%, South Asian 0.8% and white women 9.2%.⁴¹ There are a myriad of intersecting factors that affect the lack of investment into women of colour's businesses including class, educational attainment and lack of inclusion in investors' decision-making processes.

Some of the women in our research expressed their belief that women of colour are often at a disadvantage when becoming self-employed due to the lack of being able to fund their business growth themselves or finding suitable funding sources that takes their needs into consideration.

39 Legrain P and Fitzgerald M (2021), [Minority Businesses Matter - OPEN \(opennetwork.net\)](#)

40 Brodnock E,(2020) Diversity Beyond Gender: The state of the nation for diverse entrepreneurs [Reports | Extend Ventures](#)

41 Brodnock E,(2020) Diversity Beyond Gender: The state of the nation for diverse entrepreneurs [Reports | Extend Ventures](#) pg 19

Bich, a woman of Vietnamese heritage (self-employed) highlights the impact that lack of funding or personal savings can have particularly for women of colour: *“When you’re at the beginning stages, you have to evidence a real willingness to put in your own labour and money ... you basically just live without a pay check for a long period of time, because that’s what my friends had to do, so there’s a barrier there already, isn’t it? You have to have a certain level or some form of financial privilege to be able to just even kind of get started on a funding journey.”*

Often the application process for financial investment is too complicated or is not a good match for many self-employed women of colour. This double bind has led to a lot of frustration and the reiterated feeling of being invisible yet again. The consensus from our interviews is that funding inequity is the key thing that is stalling their pay progression. A few of the women interviewed shared with us that they didn’t believe they would receive funding from formal investors as it is not designed for self-employed women of colour.

Shipa a woman of Indian heritage (self-employed): *“I felt a little bit like nervous to approach them because I’m not a tech entrepreneur, I’m not a finance entrepreneur, and a lot of these industries are very male-dominated, and I felt intimidated...they might just think I’m not—my business isn’t worthy enough and that’s the truth. Yeah, that’s the truth. And as a woman of colour, sometimes I have felt like all these people—I don’t want to say—I’m just being very honest here. I don’t stand a chance.”*

These intersecting factors have an impact before funding application stage, but there are also factors that women of colour face at the application for any type of funding. Jocelyn: *“So when you think about how I might access funding, I will have to take time unpaid to fill in an application. That time is unpaid. And then within that application process, I need to find partners and that requires networking. And as I’ve said already, I can’t guarantee that those networks are onto me because I have to knock on 15, 20 doors before I get one response. I don’t have the time.”*

Not having the time to search for and compete funding applications and not having access to quality networks to partner up with for funding is a stumbling block for self-employed women of colour. This lack of network support is similar to the experience of women of colour in employment who cannot progress due to not having access to informal supportive networks that aid career progression. For self-employed women of colour being able to successfully gain funding, particularly those with long decision-making rounds and multiple stages, presents additional challenges and these factors need to be considered by funders and financial institutions.

How funders and business advice hubs can be the change women of colour need

Our interviews revealed a sense of frustration at the quality of business support available for women of colour. Alisha told us that: *“The support is very limited and not useful to someone that’s been in the working world for 15 years...I think mostly what Black self-employed people need is access to money and lots of it and like genuine training. It’s basically the most basic stuff as if you’re like 12 years old and you’ve never seen a phone before.”*

Torera wants to see more comprehensive support for business owners: *“There should be a programme that you can sign up to and it will teach you things like how to price or teaching how to do your contracts, it will teach you about what kind of insurance you need to get, it would teach you about marketing, it would teach you about managing, making the transition, the mental transition from being an employee to being a consultant. It will do all of those things.”* The issue of education and knowledge on how to do research was something that Alisha highlighted as an additional barrier.

In addition, most of the women of colour interviewed felt that access to networks and mentors, (particularly those that understand the challenges that people of colour face) would lessen pay progression gaps between them and their white counterparts. Currently business advice hubs like Business Growth Hub and Smallbusiness.co.uk do provide practical support for new business owners. However, many of our interviewees also wanted access to business mentors who were people of colour. The journey into self-employment can be an isolating one and having someone who understands their unique challenges to guide them through what is necessary to succeed would be invaluable.

Representation within the self-employment space and acknowledgement by funders and financial institutions that they understand the unique position of self-employed women of colour is something that was described as important by many of our interviewees. They wanted funders and business networks to prioritise how they can make themselves more accessible to wider and more diverse demographics.

Karen, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (self-employed), highlights that women of colour face specific problems trying to access financial investment: *“When people say, “Oh, it’s easy to get a loan,” you know, is your name Suzanna Brown and do you have blond hair and a scarf? Or is your name Calisha and you’ve got a really good business? Whose journey are they filtering through for you to be inspired from or learn from. And that’s not saying you can’t learn from other people’s journey, but representation matters.”*

The criteria to access funding had been raised as an additional hurdle for women of colour. Many women discussed how things such as their choice of business, employment situation, low earnings or lack of proof of concept hinders their ability to access funding.

Karen, a woman of Black Caribbean heritage (self-employed): *“I think there’s something about the criteria... [and not] understanding the nature of the people that are running these organisations. So, for everybody, this is not a full-time job. Just a different perspective as to why her organisation may only take in 5 or 10 grand a year. Not because they didn’t work, but because she’s doing other stuff. And I think funders don’t necessarily see that or if they do see part-time, they then discard it as not being worthy.”*

When funder’s view these view women of colour’s businesses through a very narrow lens focused just on proof of concept and current profitability, it effectively locks women of colour out of the funding circles that should be readily available to them. This in turn impacts on their ability to grow faster.

As noted previously, biases and racism are rooted in organisational cultures and structures, and this is no less true for funders. Lack of diversity within venture capitalist funders impacts both what the criteria for funding is as

well as the final decisions made on who gets funded. Most employees in the venture capital industry have a similar educational background. Currently 33% of employees in the venture capital industry the UK have graduated from Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Stanford or a business school.⁴² The lack of diverse representation within these educational institutions which then feeds into the venture capitalist funding industry, means that there is an acute lack of awareness of the specific challenges that women of colour face both in employment and wider society. This lack of awareness means that often funders and investors often rely heavily on unacknowledged biases and built-in stereotypes about women of colour's business and their capability to run a business.

Chima, a woman of Black African heritage (self-employed): *"When the person walks up for an interview and is a Black woman running a Black business with a Black partner, you can't help it. Your brain will automatically think, "I'm not sure if this business is viable". You can't help it. You think those things because that's what you've been programmed through subliminal messaging all your life. Black people are bad with money...Black people that you see on TV, who are they? They're always the ones who are in the poorer neighbourhoods in America, in Britain, in Brixton. They're not Chelsea so they're poor with money. Black people aren't in power. They're bad with decisions. They're bad with leadership. You don't know that you're absorbing it but you as a Black person are absorbing it and you, as a white person, are absorbing it."*

A common response from funders to criticisms about the lack of diversity in investment is that people from ethnic minority backgrounds simply don't apply for funding in their businesses. Yet, this simplistic view dismisses the root cause of the problem and places additional emotional labour on women of colour to rectify a problem that they have not created. Our interviews revealed that many women of colour opt not to apply for funding due to lack of faith that they'll be successful. The lack of an equitable application and decision-making process is the real barrier. This is what reinforces the self-perpetuating cycle of lack of investment in women of colour's business ventures. This has resulted in women of colour business owners making the 'choice' not apply for financial support from mainstream funders.

42 Diversity in VC and OneTech,(2019) Venturing into Diversity and Inclusion 2019: Addressing the diversity deficit in VC, [Venturing into Diversity and inclusion 2019 – Diversity](#) pg.12

Torera

My name is Torera and I'm from Manchester. I decided to leave my employed role and set up my own consultancy as I basically got to the point where I felt limited in terms of progress where I worked. I'd keep pushing, fighting for opportunities to progress but I'd get nowhere. There was one opportunity that, if I'd been offered, I would've stayed in my job. I still would've had my business on the side, but I would've stayed focused on the organisation for at least the next 18 months or two years, but they chose to give it to someone else. They didn't even consider me, so I decided there was nothing beneficial for me there anymore, so I left.

When I started my business, I spent a lot of time looking for grants and funding to get my business moving. But there didn't seem to be much that I could apply to, and what I did find was targeted around tech, the financial sector, or product-based businesses, which wasn't suitable for me. As a result, I have had to build my business from scratch with no financial support, which has meant that it has taken me much longer to get to the stage I am currently at.

I've also had the added stress of not having any guidance or central place to look for business support. I've spent countless hours effectively looking for a needle in a haystack. I've had to rely a lot on informal support, depending heavily on my connections to introduce me to key people that could help me grow my business. Starting a business is hard and I just didn't have the time to be trawling the internet to look for the specific support I needed to get going. I couldn't afford to, my business had to be earning money fast. As I was new to this, my contacts in this space were limited and I've had to put a lot of effort into building up a network of people who understand the issues I face as a Black female business owner and can provide support or introductions to others to help move my business along. I've been fortunate that I've been able to make this work. Not everyone has those contacts where they can approach to ask for help and that means they're just left lost.

As women of colour, we're not necessarily always afforded the benefit of the doubt or the opportunity to take an idea and grow it into something. We're always asked to provide something tangible – we get the “I need the thing in my hand before I'm going to give you anything” stance. You can't always do that because some businesses are literally just an idea, an aspiration, a dream and you need someone to have faith and confidence in you so that you have the time to build that dream. It feels like you're hitting a brick wall, that same 'concrete ceiling' trying to prove yourself yet again like it was for me in my employed role.

When I faced this in my job, it really impacted my confidence. Having to prove why I should be in the meeting or why I should be on a specific project. It was a constant battle for me, needing to get acknowledgement and respect for the work that I was doing. It always felt like I was being kept in a box as I was good at what I did, but I was made to feel like that was all I could do. I wasn't considered for anything else, and I was meant to take that as a compliment! And even now as a self-employed woman, I'm doing lots of EDI and anti-racism work with organisations. Pitching as a Black woman for D&I work is accepted right? But that's not all I do. I do strategic work, I do lots of other things, which fall outside of EDI work but it's hard to get those new

clients to recognise that. Because yet again I'm being pigeon-holed and being told where I can show up as a Black consultant working with predominantly white led organisations.

It's also about recognising the unique nuances and the unique challenges that you might have as a woman of colour, as a woman of colour trying to market yourself to what is often a predominantly white audience. It's really hard. Women of colour business owners just need that little bit of help to get going, to be seen, to be heard and to allow us to explore our ideas and build them out.

If I'm thinking about the income, I've generated in building up my business, it's just shy of six figures that I've managed to generate. That was me doing a full-time job for about eight months and then focusing on my business full-time for four months, with no support. If I'd had the support, guidance, and a little bit of funding to get me going so I could hire someone, who knows what I could have achieved in that period! We do it, we're doing it anyway - we just want someone to take a chance on us and be given a fair shot to build and grow our businesses like everyone else.

Recommendations:

Support self-employed women of colour

Financial institutions, charitable grant funders and investors should implement Anti-Racism Action Plans for themselves which should prioritise:

- gathering data broken down by ethnicity of funding portfolio,
- active engagement with women of colour,
- targeted funding for women of colour,
- review their business start-up funding processes so that people of colour do not have to excessively retell their hardships in order to qualify.

Business start-up services e.g., Business Growth Hub, Smallbusiness.co.uk to provide more business mentors that are people of colour at different stages in their entrepreneurial journey:

- This will allow self-employed women of colour to gain practical advice that caters to their specific business needs.

Resources

We hope that this report has been insightful and provides you with enough to start making the necessary changes required to support the pay and progression of women of colour.

There are many resources available to support you in making those changes and we have included a few here to get you started.

Individuals

- NHS: Call 111 for urgent help or advice which is not a life-threatening situation. NHS helplines can be found at: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/>
- MIND services and contacts, including advocacy, legal advice, peer support, and talking therapies: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/legal-rights/discrimination-at-work/overview/>
- The Equality and Advisory Support Service, for expert information, advice and support on discrimination and human rights issues. Phone: 0808 800 0082 or visit <https://www.equalityadvisoryservice.com/app/help>
- TUC guide to race in the workplace – providing support for union members on race discrimination: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace-guidance/equality-and-discrimination/race>
- The Monitoring Group, a London based organisation providing support to victims of race and religious hate crime: Visit: <https://tmg-uk.org/>
- Black Founders Hub – peer support for UK based Black owned businesses: <https://blackfoundershub.com>
- Asian Women Mean Business – peer support for Asian women led businesses: <https://www.asianwomenmeanbusiness.com>
- Black Lives Matter UK: <https://www.blacklivesmatter.uk>
- The Kings Fund – Support if you have experience racism or discrimination: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/inequalities-inclusion-nhs-providers/support-racism-discrimination>

Employers

Advice and guidance for employers on discrimination, equality law and promoting inclusion:

- Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com>
- CIPD – Ethnicity pay reporting: a guide for UK employers: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/diversity/ethnicity-pay-reporting-guide>
- Mental Health First Aid England – Supporting people of colour and Black colleagues guide: <https://mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/news/mhfa-england-guidance-supporting-black-poc-colleagues/>
- Fawcett Society – Tackling Sexual Harassment in the Workplace toolkit and Guide to Intersectionality: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/tackling-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace>
- Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas), providing advice

and guidance on workplace issues and employment law: [acas.org.uk](https://www.acas.org.uk).
Phone 0300 123 110 or text 18001 0300 123 1100

- Employment tribunal, which hears claims from people who may have been treated unfairly by an employer or potential employer: [gov.uk/courts-tribunals/employment-tribunal](https://www.gov.uk/courts-tribunals/employment-tribunal)
- National Bullying Helpline, for information, advice and support if you are being bullied at work, home, in the community or in education: <https://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk/>
- Migrants Rights Network - providing support for migrants to understand their rights: <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/>
- Stop Hate UK, offering independent and confidential support to people affected by hate crime: <http://www.stophateuk.org/>
- Civil Legal Advice, who can tell you if you're eligible for legal aid: [gov.uk/civil-legal-advice](https://www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice)

Appendix – Methodology

A. Approach

Our research approach was informed by the gaps and limitations of existing research related to women's pay and progression in the workplace:

1. *The academic scholarship in this area has tended to homogenise all groups of women of colour and assumed broad universality in their experiences.* In response to this, we committed to ensure that our research disaggregated groups wherever possible and acknowledged that not only are experiences of pay and progression different between groups, but there will be differences within groups too. Individual differences including socioeconomic status and disability status, mean two women of the same ethnicity may have very different experiences in the workforce.
2. *There has been a tendency to focus on specific career stages in the existing literature which inhibits the ability to think about long term trajectories of cumulative experience.* Our intervention was to organise research around career stages and to complement this by exploring career biographies and paying attention to cumulative impacts, over a longer trajectory. The need for a longitudinal study is clear here – but this was beyond the scope of this project.
3. *There was a lack of attention to what women of colour recommend and identify as possible solutions.* We wanted women of colour to feature in our research not just as subjects of research but to be advocates for change. Often, research patterns operate on a narrow model where participant experience is collected and professionals then generate recommendations. Our response was to spend significant time exploring with participants their recommendations and to centre their ideas for actions going forwards.

One of the other principal commitments of this research was that all the qualitative research was designed and conducted by women of colour researchers. This was in recognition that marginalised groups often report the research experience as being extractive and disconnected to them. It was an important feature of our research that women of colour could feel and see that they were in 'safe' research spaces with researchers who themselves had experience and empathy for the research topic and we are aware from feedback that this was welcomed by participants and encouraged their participation.

The commitment to centre the voices and experiences of women of colour in the research also feeds into the way the report is presented; we decided to include extensive extracts from the focus groups and interviews so that we could, as far as possible and within the constraints of this format, present the voices of the women who shared their experiences and recommendations with us. We have also included case studies - extended career biographies, that allow participants' experiences to be shared in terms that allow us to understand the cumulative experience that racialised and gendered discrimination can have on an individual woman. We decided to write these as anonymised accounts, retaining the voices of women of colour and present them as individual case studies, but relating them in a style that

would capture a whole lifetime's experience in a short accessible format. The research showcased in this report had four strands: the Literature Review; consultation events; the qualitative focus groups and in-depth interviews; and the quantitative survey.

1. Literature Review

Our Literature Review brought together a broad view of the existing research highlighting the barriers that exist for women of colour regarding employment; and used a career pipeline approach both to scan the literature, and to map out the various iterations at different stages. We also collated recommendations, solutions and initiatives proposed in the literature, to form a pool of ideas that could tackle these barriers.

We focused on filling in knowledge gaps and avoiding replicating the limitations from existing research, so we disaggregated ethnic minority groups wherever possible and looked not only for information on pay and progression differences between groups, but differences within groups, too. We used some studies where groups have been aggregated for the purposes of providing a thorough collation of findings with this caveat in mind. Where there were no disaggregated UK studies in understanding specific barriers or a time point in the career pipeline, we extrapolated from US-based research.

2. Consultation events

In addition to the formal research process, we hosted two online consultation events with women of colour. In line with our aims of incorporating the voices of women of colour throughout the project, these events – which were held after the focus groups but before the interviews and survey – presented findings so far and invited input on possible recommendations. This enabled us to test proposed recommendations, ensuring that they resonate and reflect experiences of a wide range of women of colour from across the UK.

Taking into account geographical disparities in terms of who the project had already reached, one event was targeted at women living and/or working in the Midlands and the other in the North of the country. Both events were held in partnership with local race equality organisations who promoted the event. Our co-hosts for the Midlands event were the Race Equality Centre and the Faith and Belief Forum, and this was attended by 34 women. The North focused event was co-hosted with the Race Equality Network in Bradford and Manchester BME Network, and was attended by 30 women. Both events were women of colour only with all speakers and facilitators also women of colour.

3. Qualitative methodology

As this research was conducted over the period where Covid-19 related public health regulations were active, all the research was conducted online. As a result, we were able to reach a wider number of women across regions and sectors in a short space of time. Notably, our research was not focused on

43 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2020) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* Pay and Progression of Women of Colour (fawcettsociety.org.uk)

the experience of low-income women of colour where this decision may well have been a significant impediment to access given the digital inequalities experienced by lower income groups.

Recruitment was based around a widespread social media campaign and through existing networks available to The Fawcett Society and Runnymede Trust. All communications directed potential participants to register their interest through the SmartSurvey platform which recorded various personal and professional characteristics. The recruitment window was open for three weeks between June and July 2021, and registered just over 300 valid participants. We used that list to create samples for both the focus groups and the in-depth interviews. All selected participants were required to confirm understanding and consent to data-handling via email.

The qualitative research was divided into two main stages; focus groups and in-depth interviews.

The focus group sessions were organised around ethnicity and career stage and were conducted in summer 2021 consisting of groups of 3-8 women, including 39 women in total:

- 4 groups who were 'early career' (less than 5 years) and 4 groups who were 'mid-career/management' (6+ years, in management or trying for management).
- We organised the sessions based on self-identified ethnic minority categories: Indian/Chinese, Bangladeshi/Pakistani, Black African/Black Caribbean for each career stage.
- We used a semi-structured questioning method, whereby we asked the same initial questions to all groups but let the conversation develop organically and used that to guide our follow up questions.

We used framework analysis to analyse and organise the emerging themes. This method involved combing through the data and identifying threads using an open table that was carefully consolidated through the themes that emerged from the data. This first stage of analysis created an opportunity to pause and reflect before designing the in-depth interviews.

In Autumn 2021 we moved into in-depth interviews with women in senior management positions and self-employed women. With the first group, we selected women across a range of regions and employment sectors, who had been in employment 20+ years and identified as being in a senior role in their sector. For the self-employed women, we selected women who were active in a range of sectors and who had different lengths of experience in self-employment. We interviewed 8 senior women of colour and 8 self-employed women of colour and used a range of semi structured questions with the aim of allowing women to speak as much as possible on their own terms. As above, the results were analysed using framework analysis.

4. Survey methodology

– Aims

The survey aims were to assess the prevalence of the key barriers to progression identified in the focus groups, to explore how these barriers vary for different groups of women of colour, to explore their cumulative impact over time, and to determine which workplace reforms/solutions to

overcoming these barriers are favoured by women of colour.

– Data collection

Fawcett commissioned Survation, an external research agency, to conduct the data collection. Data were collected between 19th November and 20th December 2021 via an online survey, hosted on the Alchemer survey platform. Participants were members of online survey panels, to which they had been previously recruited on an opt-in basis. Participants received points / credits for participation, which were fungible to money or tokens.

– Sampling

Participants were representative of UK women of working age. More women of colour were included in the sample, but in the overall results participants were weighted to be representative by ethnicity. This means that participants responses were counted either more or less, so that the sample overall reflected that of the general population. Data were also weighted by age, region, working hours, and level of qualification, for women of colour and for the overall sample.

3231 women in the UK aged 18-70 who were either currently in work or had worked in the past five years responded to the survey. However, 55 women did not provide information about their ethnicity, leaving a final sample size of 3176 for most analyses, including 1994 women of colour (62%) and 1182 white women (37%). After weighting, the resulting sample was 279 women of colour (9%) and 2897 white women (90%).

More specific ethnicity information was needed for disaggregate analysis, and this was available for 2953 participants. We analysed eight groups: Black African, Black Caribbean, Chinese and East Asian, Indian, Mixed / Other Ethnicities, Pakistani or Bangladeshi, White British and White Other. Sample sizes are provided alongside analyses throughout the report. Demographic information can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Sample demographics

Number of participants by demographic characteristics; unweighted and weighted counts. N = 3231

Characteristic	Value	Unweighted		Weighted	
		N	%	N	%
Age	18-24	695	21.5	344	10.6
	25-34	1013	31.4	786	24.3
	35-49	975	30.2	1082	33.5
	50-64	490	15.2	910	28.2
	65+	58	1.8	109	3.4

Characteristic	Value	Unweighted		Weighted	
		N	%	N	%
Ethnicity	Black African	365	11.3	38	1.2
	Black Caribbean	336	10.4	50	1.5
	Chinese and East Asian	355	11.0	35	1.1
	Indian	362	11.2	46	1.4
	Mixed Ethnicity / Other	175	5.4	62	1.9
	Pakistani or Bangladeshi	359	11.1	44	1.4
	White British	1001	31.0	2482	76.8
	White Other	181	5.6	416	12.9
Ethnicity combined	Women of colour	1994	61.7	279	8.6
	White women	1182	36.6	2897	89.7
Religion	Christianity	1318	40.8	1331	41.2
	Islam	515	15.9	121	3.7
	Other religion	373	11.5	161	5.0
	No religion	932	28.8	1540	47.7
Country	England	2916	90.3	2741	84.8
	Scotland	188	5.8	263	8.1
	Wales	90	2.8	144	4.5
	Northern Ireland	37	1.1	83	2.6
Region in England	London	886	27.4	373	11.5
	South	834	25.8	1061	32.8
	Midlands	540	16.7	534	16.5
	North	655	20.3	773	23.9

Characteristic	Value	Unweighted		Weighted	
		N	%	N	%
Disability	Yes	738	22.8	777	24.0
	No	2298	71.1	2264	70.1
Highest Qualification	No Qualifications / Level 1	380	11.8	851	26.3
	Level 2 / Apprenticeship / Other	623	19.3	790	24.5
	Level 3	514	15.9	473	14.6
	Level 4+	1714	53.0	1117	34.6
Household Income	Less than £20,000	1408	43.6	1395	43.2
	Between £20,000 and £39,999	1114	34.5	1114	34.5
	£40,000 or more	709	21.9	722	22.3
Employment Status	Employed	2702	83.6	2601	80.5
	Unemployed	121	3.7	121	3.7
	Student non-employed	107	3.3	41	1.3
	Not economically active	301	9.3	468	14.5
Working hours & type	Full-time employed	1542	47.7	1479	45.8
	Part-time employed	861	26.6	908	28.1
	Self-employed	201	6.2	174	5.4
	Temporary / agency / casual / zero-hours work	98	3.0	41	1.3
Years In Work	Less than 1	586	18.1	419	13.0
	1-5	871	27.0	533	16.5
	6-10	472	14.6	370	11.5
	11-20	536	16.6	558	17.3
	21-30	393	12.2	568	17.6
	31-40	220	6.8	430	13.3

Characteristic	Value	Unweighted		Weighted	
		N	%	N	%
	41 or more	153	4.7	353	10.9
Standard Occupational Classification Level	Level 4	1187	36.7	898	27.8
	Level 3	595	18.4	587	18.2
	Level 1 / Level 2	1449	44.8	1746	54.0
Industry	Agriculture And Fishing	37	1.1	27	0.8
	Banking, Finance And Insurance	829	25.7	721	22.3
	Construction	74	2.3	78	2.4
	Distribution, Hotels And Restaurants	590	18.3	692	21.4
	Energy And Water	34	1.1	34	1.1
	Manufacturing	91	2.8	105	3.2
	Public Admin. Education And Health	996	30.8	1006	31.1
	Transport And Communications	163	5.0	123	3.8
	Other Services	417	12.9	445	13.8
Employer Size	1 employee	238	7.4	300	9.3
	2 to 9 employees	415	12.8	379	11.7
	10 to 49 employees	694	21.5	637	19.7
	50 to 249 employees	750	23.2	634	19.6
	250 or more employees	1134	35.1	1280	39.6
Caring Responsibility	Children	1445	44.7	1399	43.3
	Family	632	19.6	539	16.7
	Friends	213	6.6	122	3.8
	None	1291	40.0	1392	43.1

Characteristic	Value	Unweighted		Weighted	
		N	%	N	%
Furlough	No, and didn't ask for it	1987	61.5	2131	66.0
	No, although I did ask for it	272	8.4	181	5.6
	Yes, and continued to work for my employer afterwards	779	24.1	727	22.5
	Yes, and lost my job	193	6.0	191	5.9
Sexual Orientation	Lesbian / Gay / Homosexual	150	4.6	194	6.0
	Bisexual	200	6.2	156	4.8
	Straight / Heterosexual	2739	84.8	2774	85.9

– Data analysis

The survey question responses were weighted (as described above) and cross-tabulated by Survation. Further data analysis was conducted by the Fawcett Society, in which parametric analyses (multiple regression, chi square, and t-tests) tested whether differing responses from groups, including by ethnicity, religion, household income, occupational level, and employer size, were statistically significant. Tests were only conducted where sample sizes were deemed sufficient; no tests were conducted where any group of interest contained less than 50 participants. False discovery rate corrections were made to adjust for the risk of false positives due to conducting multiple tests. All Fawcett's analyses were conducted using R version 4.1.1 and RStudio 2021.09.0-351.

– Questionnaire

The topics were chosen with reference to our Literature Review⁴⁴ and focus group findings and consultation event feedback, to assess the prevalence of key themes which arose from these and address any gaps.

In questions 1-6, participants were asked about their entry to work, including careers advice, job searches, and hiring processes. Questions 7-10 focused on day-to-day experiences at work, including relationships with colleagues and managers, work culture, and experiences of racism and their impact (the latter being only asked to women of colour). Questions 11-15 explored promotion and progression at work, including satisfaction with current progression and opportunities, a count of recent promotion(s) and/or pay rises(s), and experiences of leadership and sponsorship at work. Questions 16 and 17 asked participants to rate their support / opposition to several employer and government-based

44 Dey, M. White, C and Kaur, S (2021) *Pay and Progression of Women of Colour: A literature review* Pay and Progression of Women of Colour (fawcettsociety.org.uk)

recommendations for facilitating workplace satisfaction and progression.

To limit bias, the order of response options was randomised (unless the order was meaningful, for example, within a 5-point Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree scale). "Don't know" and "Prefer not to say options" were utilised to reduce drop-out rates.

To access the full questionnaire please contact the Fawcett Society, we will be happy to provide this on request.

B. Research limitations

The use of focus groups and in-depth interviews have similar limitations.

– Both methods invite participants to share their experiences in open and discursive terms rather than set out rigid and prescriptive questions but are framed by a discussion guide which sets an overall format for reference and therefore limits the breadth of discussion somewhat. Thus, we were mindful of allowing the conversation to develop in the way that suited participants. The facilitator in each session was attentive to allowing time and opportunity for all to contribute and to offer space for all to speak and be heard.

One of the most serious gaps in the research is the absence of longitudinal studies that follow different women through their educational and professional careers. Though the focus groups and interviews were spaces for reflection, there is a need to go beyond the snapshots taken here, and to engage more deeply with how these experiences develop cumulatively over time.

In order to manage within the scope of the project, we made the decision to focus the qualitative research strands on the experiences of professional women or in higher paid sectors, therefore omitting the experiences of women working in low paid, informal and insecure work where women of colour are over-represented. We made this decision strategically to ensure adequate coverage of professional women, but we are clear that there is an urgent need to research the experiences of women of colour in low-income, often precarious employment sectors.

The quantitative survey also poses limitations. The data relies on participants' self-report, and primarily focusses on perceptions and attitudes regarding workplace entry, daily experiences, and progression. Therefore, it cannot make claims about cause and effect, but instead can provide clear information on the prevalence of various common experiences and views of women of colour.

Due to constraints in the survey length, we were unable to collect information in places which would aid the interpretation of the results. For example, participants were not asked about the ethnic diversity of their own workplace, which would help to interpret results regarding workplace culture, daily experiences, and progression. Furthermore, it was not possible to interpret the survey results for self-employed women; since they were not targeted in the sampling frame, they only comprised 5% of the sample (after weighting, 6% before weighting), and the survey questions were mostly appropriate for employed, rather than self-employed women.

C. Ethical considerations

One of the key ethical principles of this research was that women of colour should be engaged on terms that were not extractive or exploitative, and that the research findings should aim to benefit those contributing, rather than further the research prestige of organisations. The problematic issue of women of colour providing labour for no compensation comes up in our research and we wanted to ensure that we did not replicate this problem. All participants were therefore offered some payment towards the time they contributed. We also decided to give all participants a pseudonym and generalise some of their employment data in the report to ensure they were not identifiable from their contributions.

Some of the survey questions concerned experiences of racism and posed a small risk of distress to participants. Thus, at the end of the survey participants were signposted to a list of organisations providing practical and/or emotional support to individuals who have experienced racism or discrimination.

All survey data was stored securely and in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) on Fawcett's file system during analysis. Personal data will be deleted one year after the publication of the Pay and Progression of women of colour final report, although research participants may request that their data is deleted prior to this via use of [this form](#). Grouped and fully anonymised data will be kept longer for future further analysis

Similarly, Survation processed all data securely in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act and will keep data only as long as necessary for project completion, reward reconciliation, and query resolution. Survation is a Market Research Society (MRS) Company Partner and adheres to the MRS Code of Conduct and MRS Company Partner Quality Commitment. Survation is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

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