

Black women hope to be better represented in the workplace

The glass ceiling is something women in all industries are familiar with, but how does this ceiling get harder to break through once race is an additional factor to contend with?

In all aspects of society, from the media to the workplace, it is often that the representation of Black women is either lacking, or poor. This can be from having only a handful of Black female staff members in a company that employs hundreds of people, to a lack of inclusivity of Black women in spaces meant for equality.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency shows that UK universities only have 140 Black professors, which is 0.7% of the total, and even though the number of female professors has increased in the last five years, in 2018, only 25 professors were Black women.

According to Business in the Community, only 1.5% of 3.7 million leadership positions in the UK are held by Black people.

The exclusion of Black women in the workplace, discussions, social movements, and media representation is often based on misogynoir. The term was coined by the African American feminist Moya Bailey and is used as an umbrella term for the anti-Black sexism often faced by Black women, which can happen overtly or subtly.



Claudia Walsh is the Deputy Regional Business Manager for a civil service department in London and has criticisms with representation and inclusion in her workplace.

Ms Walsh says: “There’s actually a lack of representation the higher you go in terms of the senior leadership and structure.

“People in my position and lower pay grades I would say is very diverse, but the higher you go the much less representation there is.

“I think it affects me because it gives you the impression that either progression isn’t promoted amongst those on lower pay grades, or there’s something about the way that recruitment is done and perhaps there are some biases involved in terms of giving people positions that are at a higher level.”

In terms of her experiences of discrimination at work, Ms Walsh says subtle instances are more common.

“I think it’s more about microaggressions, and I think there are a lot of those. At one work event with probably 200 or so people, myself and my colleagues were at the registration table. And there were about 3 or 4 of us there and for some reason one of the other attendees decided to come up to me to ask: ‘Where’s the tea?’ and ‘How can I get a cup of tea?’ and they had to pass the other people before they got to me, because I was at the end of the table.

“I don’t want to read into things too much, because I’m quite open-minded, but of the people at the table I was the only Black person, and I was actually the more senior out of us too, but it just made me think ‘Hm, why did they decide to come to me?’”

Ms Walsh has hopes for better inclusion and representation in the workplace, and she feels it should start at the application process.

“I think there needs to be a stronger effort for recruitment panels themselves to be diverse. Then there’s more chance that there will be less bias when interviewing candidates for roles. So, I think if employers and organisations can get it right at the recruitment stage then there’s more chance of there being that diversity and inclusion in the workforce. I think that’s quite key.



Exclusion can be seen in all aspects of society, such as feminism, which often leaves out the experiences of women of colour, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities.

In the book “White supremacy in heels”: (white) feminism, white supremacy, and discursive violence’, Dreama G. Moon and Michelle A. Holling talk about this exclusion of race in feminism.

They explain that there’s a lack of attention on the intersections of race and gender within traditional feminism, which can often lead to discursive violence against women of colour.

As many women on social media have argued, Moon and Holling argue it is important to change the way we understand feminism and educate ourselves on how to become more progressive.

‘White feminism’ ties into white privilege and is considered an exclusionary form of feminism that fails to acknowledge the varied experiences of women from complex backgrounds, such as LGBTQ+ women, and women of colour. This can be seen in times when white women are uplifted for work and achievements while women of colour are dismissed.

An early example would be the Suffragette Movement, as while women who were more well-off were able to vote, the majority of women of colour in the UK at the time would not have been in a position to be granted the same.

Lack of diversity within politics is starkly noticeable, even now. As a result of the 2019 general election, 220 women were elected as members of Parliament. However, only 12 of these women were Black. There is often a misbalance in criticisms against MPs from marginalised backgrounds, such as the long-term public scrutiny of Diane Abbott.

During the 2017 election campaign, an [Amnesty International](#) report found that Abbott was the subject of almost half of all abusive tweets about female MPs on Twitter, and received ten times as much abuse than any other MP.

When faced with these examples, it is clear that there is both an insufficient number of Black women to help change policy to become more inclusive, but also that the few Black women already in parliament are often discriminated against.



A [report](#) by the non-profit organisation Black Women in Leadership Network (BWIL) found that 45% of Black women in white-collar jobs believe they would be overlooked for promotions compared to their non-Black female colleagues.

Over two thirds of the 250 professional Black women in the survey reported experiencing racial bias at work and was even higher at 84% for Black women in senior management positions.

On the report, the director of BWIL, Dara Owoyemi, says: “We hope that this study will contribute to the discourse and engagement around these issues of diversity, inclusion and equity as it relates to Black female professionals.”

It is experiences like these that often lead to a rise in Black women wanting to start their own businesses and brands, so they do not have to deal with potential prejudice.

Cynthia Sargeant, a mother of three from London, works independently for a small-scale electronics business she and her partner established in July 2013.

Ms Sargeant said: "When it comes to women with established businesses, I don't think there's enough of them. There will be soon I'm hoping, because there are so many more women going into business at the moment, so fingers crossed that it all works out.

"After the past few years, I think more Black people are trying to get into business because they know they now have more support than they would have before."

Ms Sargeant could not recall a specific time where she experienced discrimination in the workplace but has often been one of very few women of colour in her employment places.

"I've worked in lots of jobs before with different companies and I had been a minority in a lot of them- there weren't many other Black women, especially in the bigger organisations" she says.

"For me, I don't really care when it comes to who else is at work- as long as I know I'm doing my job, I don't feel any way [about being a minority]. However, a lot of women would do because they don't feel they are part of something.

"I feel like Black women are in competition a lot with people of other races, and I don't think it's as fair as it should be. I do think it's changing, but very, very slowly."

As someone with extensive experience in business, and who looks to progress onto managerial positions herself, Ms Sargeant is hopeful for the future.

"I'd like it to be much more even. I do still feel that there are some limitations for Black women in managerial positions, so I'm hoping it will even out as time goes on.

"I would definitely like to see more [Black girls] from younger generations being in higher position jobs too, because I know how hard they'll have to work for that."

It is a sign of progression to hear that experiences and support of Black women is gradually improving, but it is evident there is still a considerable way to go before Black women, and other women of colour, are held in the same regard as other members of society.