PHOTOGRAPH: ED ACCURA

▼ *Ed Accura, Co-founder of the Black Swimming Association*

Swimming: why does it lack ethnic diversity?

As a generational fear of water lives on through black and ethnic communities, what is being done to diversify swimming?

Eva Millett

Zeinab realised she couldn't swim when she was 18 on her first girls holiday to Ibiza.

"When I hit the water I knew. I was absolutely petrified. I had to desperately scramble to grab onto the side of the boat as much as I could," says Zeinab.

"I thought, okay, I can't swim, this is going to have to be something I deal with because right now I'm making myself really vulnerable."

Zeinab Batchelor, 29, a Black British photographer spent another 10 years unable to swim before she learnt with the group Swimunity, set up for victims of the Grenfell Tower in West London.

"I had lessons when I was in year five. I was under the impression that swimming was the same as riding a bike. You pick it back up. I was sorely mistaken," says Zeinab.

Although stereotypes have cast shadows over swimming for ethnic communities for decades, glimmers of hope are emerging in diverse corners of the UK through groups like SwimDemCrew, Muslim Sisterhood and Swimunity.

The organisation is a sanctuary for those affected by the tragic fire in North Kensington. Zeinab chose female-only classes, attended mainly by women from ethnic minorities unable to swim. "When I started looking at classes I was already overcoming a fear. I didn't want the anxiety of leering eyes from men on top of that," says Zeinab.

"So when I came across Swimunity I thought 'Oh My God, this group is perfect.'"

Zeinab isn't alone in her experience. The fear of water she felt is shared by many other black and ethnic minorities, preventing them from learning the crucial life skill. As Sport England statistics show that 95% of black adults and 93% of Asian adults can't swim - it's clear it's a systematic issue.

The generational fear dates back to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, loaded with collective grief and unspoken trauma, resulting in a strained relationship with water for many black communities. Dr Norwood from the University of Illinois explained the fallout of a monumental period in history. "Black people who were enslaved were bought by boat. This was against their will, and the conditions were so arduous they felt so hopeless," says Dr Norwood.

"From generation to generation we have an inherent, developed fear - a natural fear of water."

Addressing the fear of water amongst black communities is Ed Accura, 58, Co-founder of the Black Swimming Association (BSA). An IT technician by day, Ed has tirelessly dedicated the last five years of his life to campaigning for diversity in swimming.

From Ghana, he learnt to swim five years ago when his daughter Lolita was seven-years-old. "I read an article about a father who was with his daughter, she fell in the water, he couldn't save her and she drowned," says Ed.

"I said to myself, if that ever happened to me, I would never forgive myself. Simple. That was it. That was the trigger."

In 2020 he released a successful documentary 'Blacks Can't Swim', capturing the experiences of those from a range of different backgrounds asking them the simple question 'Can you swim?'.

"I can't give you a reason why I didn't swim. It's almost like asking why can't you fly a plane? Swimming was something that had no impact on me before I learnt," says Ed.

The BSA co-founded in 2020 is a non-profit organisation which aims to 'diversify aquatics through education'. "Everyone seemed to say the same thing, the black community is such a hard to reach community," says Ed. "I always say, we're not hard to reach, you just have to know how to reach us.

"My goal is for us not to exist, once the Black Swimming Association no longer exists that's when I will say yes, we have achieved our goal."

Alongside organisations such as the BSA, people are campaigning across ethnic communities in order to address the lack of diversity in the sport. Summaya Mughal, a British Pakistani who hosts a daytime show on BBC Radio Leicester presented the 'Brown Gal Can't Swim' podcast in 2022. The podcast followed Summaya learning to swim 500m as a South Asian Muslim woman with the help of Rebecca Addlington.

"It felt like overnight I'd become a voice for adults that can't swim, and I was proud to be that voice," says Summaya.

The podcast was built off the Swim England statistic that 98% of South Asian women can't swim - the highest group in England.

Summaya inspired girls and women from similar cultural backgrounds that it's okay to wear more modest swimming costumes, without your arms and legs showing. "My swimming teacher told me about a little girl who'd saved up to buy the same swimming costume as me," says Summaya.

"Just knowing that there's a kid out there that's connected with Brown Gal Can't Swim made me cry. It wasn't about me learning, it was about normalising it within my community."

Swim England carried out a campaign that conducted research into the barriers preventing ethnically diverse communities from accessing water-based activity. "It highlighted for us that it's not just about ethnicity, it's about faith as well. Someone who is South Asian and Muslim would have very different barriers to someone who is South Asian and Christian," says Kerry Watkiss, Head of Insight from the England Swims campaign.

Summaya's podcast addressed faith, alongside modest swimwear and the rise in prices of swimming. Listeners were allowed a raw insight into the development of Summaya's relationship with her Pakistani Dad who at first was very dubious about her learning to swim.

"For him, because he has a deep understanding of the Muslim and Pakistani groups, he was really uncomfortable because he didn't feel like swimming was a part of those communities," says Summaya.

"Essentially, he was worried about me having my boobs and arms out on telly. But those are real concerns for someone from a Pakistani background."

Summaya found out that swimming is a good deed in Islam, as one of the four sports encouraged for Muslims as a life skill. "To my dad I said babe, Allah told you to do this," she says. "Once he realised he had a contribution to play, it was important from a health perspective but also Islamically, he got on board.

"I'm so proud of my dad, because it's hard to admit things as an adult, and in the end it repaired a broken part of our relationship having this conversation."

Those from Muslim, Sikh or other religions requiring parts of the body or hair to be covered, can still attend swimming lessons.

Naomi DePeza, 57, a Bejun British swimming teacher from St Albans teaches swimming at the London Fields Lido pool in Hackney. At an all women's programme she taught, lots of the women were Muslim. "The blinds went down, no male access and I'd say the majority of women were in hijabs or absolutely floor length coverings," says Naomi.

"But as soon as they get into that environment, it's learning, saying look you're going to be heavier in the water, but in terms of their willingness to learn, it's all there."

"The sessions are absolutely magic. It inspires me seeing the women turn up in all their gear, watching the change in expression and relaxation when they float. It's groundbreaking for their community."

Caroline Akello, 45, channels all her energy into her daughters swimming. She hopes for her eldest six-year-old daughter Josephine to go pro. "I tend not to think about any of the stereotypes. Josephine clearly has swimming ability, so by teaching her hard work and determination with Swimunity, the colour of her skin will never hold her back," she says.

Caroline couldn't swim until adulthood. Her Dad was an army officer and Mum a teacher, but she never had a conversation with them about swimming. To this day she doesn't know if her Dad can swim.

Kerry from Swim England described an apathy amongst some ethnic communities where the sport isn't considered a part of life or conversations. "Some ethnic groups had zero interest in even letting the person into the building to talk about our research," she says. "It was just, 'Oh it's a swimming piece. We don't swim. Our community doesn't swim.'"

After not taking well to lessons at school, Caroline remembers going on countless holidays watching other swimmers, desperately feeling like she was missing out. A trip to Tunisia during her twenties was the defining moment when she decided she was done being on the sidelines.

"We went on a pirate ship and everyone was jumping off the boat into the water. They were wearing life jackets, but I couldn't even bare jumping in with a life jacket on I was that scared," says Caroline.

"You can't turn the clock back. But if I wanted to re-experience somewhere it would be Tunisia, because it stayed with me. I just saw how much everyone enjoyed it and I couldn't. Me and my friend who also couldn't swim had to sit and watch.

"But everything has its time and I've been able to recapture some of it."

Caroline eventually learnt to swim at the Janet Adegoke pool in Hammersmith in her late twenties. "While I was learning I'd spend three, four hours in the pool. I fell in love with water," she says.

"I can't believe I spent the first part of my life without it. I was always drawn to water but the fear held me back, and as a black person I'm so glad it hasn't been passed onto my girls."

Although Swimunity is mainly made up of ethnic minority swimmers reflective of the area, a disparity is apparent amongst the teachers who are mainly white.

Caroline's six-year-old daughter Josephine is moving up classes, and she asked her mum if the race of her prospective swimming teacher would be white - personifying swimming for a little black girl.

"She said 'Mummy, is my teacher going to be peach?' That's all she knows. That's all she's seen," says Caroline. "But we've never had that conversation about diversity, it's so important because I don't want to raise her in a way where she sees the difference. I'm trying my best but she does unfortunately. All kids say peach. I don't know why they think Caucasians are peach, but they do. This is the conversation we need to have."

Tianna Morrison now 17, was one of Swimunity's first members. She began swimming at various leisure centres when she was five-years-old, then when she was 12, her Mum made the decision for her to join Swimunity.

Tianna now volunteers at the organisation as a teacher, using her skill to inspire the lives of many young black and brown children in North Kensington.

Her Mum is encouraging swimming, to try and break "generationl curses" that caused a fear of water in the family. "My Great Grandma used to tell us little horror stories about swimming," says Tianna.

"She used to swim in the sea when she was little, but when she came to England and tried out for the swimming team she was terribly bullied.

"They were really mean to her. She told the family they couldn't swim out of fear, so we wouldn't get persecuted the same way she did."

Portuguese and Jamaican, as a child Tianna had to adapt to the lack of swimming costumes available suitable for non-white people.

"Swimming costumes at the time weren't made for black people. Our bodies are bigger and different. I was quite chubby so I'd always get the shorts costume as a pose to the normal triangle one that they'd recommend," says Tianna.

"I couldn't wear the triangle one because all my bits would be hanging out. So I felt really left out."

Brands like Soul Cap are providing crucial access to those from ethnic minorities to swim equipment suitable for their bodies. The swimsuits start at an extra small and end at a three XL, equivalent to a size 28-30. "People of all colours are covered from 18 months up until end of life," says Head of Brand Ashley Oakey.

In Tianna's West London community where the Grenfell Tower took place, feelings of frustration and hurt run deep. It's marked with the 72 lives that were tragically lost due to a colossal systematic failure. Tianna knew four people who died in the disaster. Her school was just a two minute walk from the flats, and she remembers seeing kids come to school in pyjamas as refuge from the catastrophic horror. But Tianna was only 11 and didn't really know why. Six years on, she understands the emotional debris left behind from the traumatic event that shook West London to its core.

Swimunity is a healing space where those from disadvantaged backgrounds can have their voices heard in a community that feels discarded. "I feel like it's not really taken seriously because the building's still up there. A lot of people are still temporary accommodations so it's a lot of broken promises," says Tianna.

All the youth clubs in Ladbroke Grove where Tianna lives have been shut down since the disaster. "Everyone's bored, and boredom leads to idle hands," she says. "People have nothing else to do so they're getting themselves involved in bad things.

"That's why Swimunity is so special. There's nothing else like it round here."

Zeinab took part in a programme with Swimunity offering free lessons to all children and women. "It was lovely because it was pretty much only black and brown women. There were one or two white women, but essentially, us black women weren't the minority - and that was really nice," says Zeinab.

"There were also a lot of Hijabi women who typically haven't felt comfortable going to pools because they haven't seen it as a space for them. They were all in modest swimwear. It was just amazing."

Access to female-only lessons was pivotal in Zeinab's swimming progress. "Being with an all women group, all of your insecurites about

▼ *Summaya Mughal behind the scenes at the Brown Gal Can't Swim podcast*

PHOTOGRAPH: SUMMAYA MUGHAL

PHOTOGRAPH: SWIMUNITY

▼ *Zeinab Batchelor (pictured left) with women from Swimunity enjoying a learn to swim session*

> *"Us black women weren't the minority - and that was really nice."*

your body instantly go out the window because you're not thinking about how someone else is viewing you," says Zeinab.

"When it's just women, nobody cares. We were all there because we had a common interest in wanting to learn, and face our fears. I remember by the end of week six, we were having a therapy session, and so many of the women and teachers were crying and it was beautiful because we all shared the resounding feeling that it helped us in some way.

"It's great to overcome your fear, but having a female support group, checking in and growing together - it was more than a sport for me."

"We had a very contentious history with large bodies of water."

As 80% of black children in the UK can't swim, it's clear the fear associated with water is still being passed down through generations, dating as far back as the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The atrocities that those who were enslaved suffered still influence the black communities' relationship with water today.

"Many of them just jumped overboard to commit suicide because they felt death was better. The whole spirit of water during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, we had a very contentious history with large bodies of water," says Dr Norwood.

Alongside people who attempted to take their own lives, victims of the slave trade were thrown overboard and many drowned during the transatlantic journey. They were often prohibited from learning to swim by enslavers as a means of control, as those in charge feared that if the slaves became proficient swimmers it could facilitate escapes.

During the period of segregation in America, although black people were permitted the right to swim, attitudes of systematic racism and discrimination were rife.

"There were stereotypes that black people were unclean, dirty and lazy. The laws that were created in America during this period meant the world we lived in was segregated," says Dr Norwood.

"A black person couldn't even be in the same pool with a white person, let alone use a pool that a white person would later want to use. If a black person happened to be in the pool, all the white people would have to get out.

"Then they would have to drain the pool completely and sanitise it because a black person was in there. These were the ideals that were carried worldwide."

In less privileged areas of the country, many ethnically diverse communities don´t have access to swimming pools.

"Pools are closing due to rising costs. A lot of pools are under threat. It's putting squeeze on the sector, and it's not giving people access to swimming pools. Those people who do want to swim, who do want to use aquatics to exercise, they often can't - which is devastating," says Kerry from Swim Egland.

Often celebrated for its beauty, cultural significance and affinity to the black identity, afro hair is an issue many black women struggle with when swimming.

Many women with afro hair have meticulous, expensive hair care routines making swimming a non-priority. "When you go swimming, if you go to a leisure centre, there's a hair dryer or a straightener," says Zeinab. That works for the mass majority, but for us, it's a whole process. You've got to take lotions and creams and combs and all of these things when getting our hair done in itself is already a mammoth task."

Dr Norwood described that a "cultural assimilation", where black people style their hair more in line with European standards has increased the length of time spent on hair care routines for black women. "It's caused us over centuries to alter the natural state of our hair so that it does appear straighter," says Dr Norwood.

Abigail Black, 31, a solicitor from Hackney has promoted her swimming journey as a White and Black Caribbean woman online. "My mum has locks that go all the way down to her bottom. She wouldn't be able to swim because if her hair gets wet it becomes incredibly heavy for her to carry. I remember growing up, hats were awful. They would literally tear your hair," says Abigail.

Where some women have found their afro hair to be a barrier, others have embraced the difficulty, determined to not let it prevent them from swimming. "Every week I had to wash my hair, do a different type of hairstyle and wear two hats while swimming which used to give me the worst headaches. I just had to find lots of different ways for me to be able to carry on swimming while wearing the hat without it falling off and being embarrassed," says Tianna.

While the thickness of afro hair inevitably makes it harder to achieve a streamlined head shape, a key aspect in the competitive world, Caroline is adamant hair won't be a barrier for her daughters, Josephine and Isla. Other parents have commented on her children's hair.

"I didn't mean any offence but I said 'well I'm not going to let her hair stand in the way of anything she enjoys.' I make the girls hair products and I try to keep everything natural," says Caroline.

The maintenance of hair after swimming is much more taxing for those with afro hair than caucasian. Caroline explained a phrase used amongst black communities "wash and go" - where white people can wash their hair and leave it to dry naturally.

3.5 times higher risk for black children to drown than white.

(Royal Life Saving Society UK)

"I have to do a bit more for my hair, I have to give it more time. But I'm okay with that," says Caroline.

"Josephine can't give up her dream because of her hair. She already says she's going to the Olympics."

The structure of afro hair typically has a tighter curl pattern, making the hair more porous and therefore susceptible to chlorine penetration into the hair's shaft. The result of chlorine damage for afro hair is loss of elasticity and increased frizz.

Soul Cap is pioneering swimming caps made in sizes suitable for afro hair. Co-founders and best friends, Michael Chapman and Toks Ahmed, started Soul Cap together while at university when they took up adult swimming lessons. Their first purchase of 250 larger swimming caps sold out in hours, and within months they were able to take their business to Amazon and Shopify - allowing life-changing access to people from ethnic minorities worldwide.

Head of Brand, Ashley explains: "Hair is a big barrier. We know that as a Caucasian when you come up in the sea your hair is all over your face. Imagine swimming competitively and hitting that barrier constantly because your cap is sliding off," says Ashley.

"The biggest difference it makes is mental health. When people are feeling sad or lonely, their connection to water can totally transform their mindset, and I think that's the most important thing. We talk a lot about hair but that's actually just one thing. That's eliminating the issue, but it's not actually what it does to you. The end goal is making everyone feel happy and secure in water and they do.

"That's probably the best feedback we get, that you've transformed my life. You gave me a cap to protect my hair, but you also gave me my mental health back, my well being."

In the conversation around race and swimming, it's often said that black people have 'denser bones', therefore can't float in the water.

Research from the University of Illinois examined racialised osteology, which refers to the idea that African people have denser, thicker bones, guarding against fracture but impeding buoyancy.

Although research suggests the stereotype is true, Dr Norwood explained that the black community are torn on the legitimacy, some believing the myth is another way to marginalise black people. "For the black community, their long, complex history is marked by adversity," she says. "There's been so many stereotypes that they're done with."

Abigail Whyte, 39, from Hereford, a digital journalist for Outdoor Swimmer magazine believes it to be a myth. "I can't believe that such negative tropes still circulate. There's no scientific backing at all. I'm really surprised it's still going around, this is what we have to stamp out," says Abigail.

Whereas Naomi, a swimming teacher with 20 plus years grassroots experience confirmed the stereotype.

"The tenseness of the muscle makes it harder to swim. The fluidity, the lengthening of the body doesn't happen because you've got compacted muscles, and therefore it's harder to move through the water," says Naomi.

"Teaching beginners they find it very difficult moving their limbs because they've been working out in the gym and they haven't got that looseness around the neck and shoulders, which you really need to turn your head to breathe, or put your face down into the water.

"When it comes to lying on your back, the legs are dropping. If you've got a higher bone density, it doesn't mean you're going to be really good at floating, because you're not. So you have to work harder to kick."

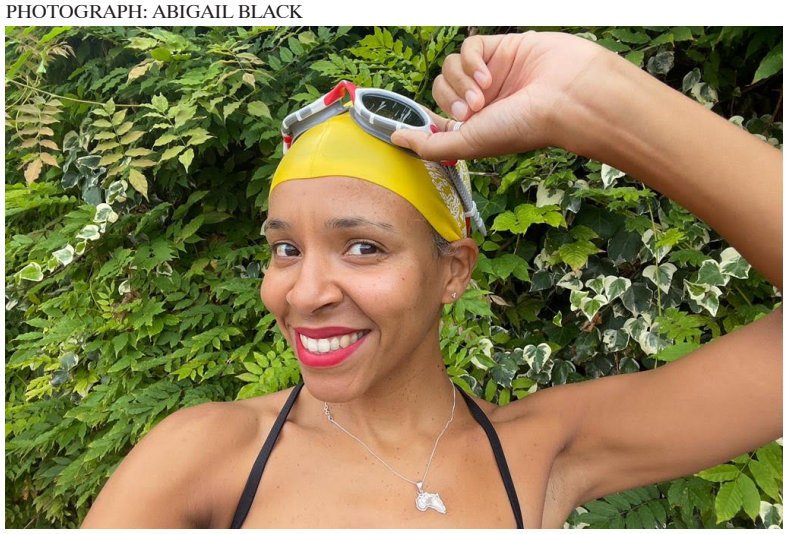
As the stereotypes continue to feed into the glaring lack of ethnic diversity in swimming, calls for change are louder than ever.

Summaya continues to promote swimming to those from ethnic minorities struggling with the shame of not being able to swim as adults. "I felt really embarrassed because it felt like saying I couldn't write my name, or ride a bike," says Summaya.

"It's something it feels like everybody can do, and the shame was exacerbated by my age and the fact I was 27, and that there were kids who were a fraction of my age who could swim."

"But swimming is one of the only sports on the planet that could save your life one day. It's so valuable. Letting that sink in, the embarrassment went over time and learning to swim changed my life."

PHOTOGRAPH: ABIGAIL BLACK



▲*Abigail Black a keen outdoor swimmer posing after one of her lake swims*

Michael Gunning: professional athlete

Michael Gunning, former Great Britain and Jamaica professional swimmer retired two years ago. At just 30 years old, his aim of retirement is to inspire young people that sport is for everyone no matter your background.

Frequently labelled during his career as the 'gay black swimmer', he often felt discredited for his swimming abilities. "People would disregard me before a race, the stereotype was that I couldn't be good because of the colour of my skin," says Michael.

"It was tough because I always had to justify myself. For many years I put extra pressure on myself to overperform. Otherwise I'd be falling into the stereotypes of underachieving."

In 2016, Michael chose to start representing Team Jamaica, however due to the lack of exposure of the sport he wasn't welcomed by the country. "I thought it was going to be great and there'd be no stereotypes," says Michael.

"Because I was swimming, even though I was representing them I think they still questioned why I chose swimming when athletics is so favoured in Jamaica."

Michael came out as gay in 2018 on E Entertainment's reality tv programme 'The Bi Life', and was a Pride House Ambassador for the 2022 Commonwealth games. Although he's now proud of his sexuality, he was bullied at school and questioned who he was for years.

"At school I was coming in at half past smelling of chlorine and not many people understood," says Michael. "Because of the colour of my skin, people saw there was something different about me. So I didn't want to share any feelings about my sexuality to be any more different."

"That's why I'm so open now, because I don't want a young Michael to go through what I once did."

As the first out, gay, mixed race British swimmer Michael uses his title to inspire kids across the country to get involved with swimming. As part of the Speedo Swim United campaign, Michael visits schools in the most deprived parts of England using large pop up pools helping the kids swim 25 metres.

"It's great to be part of the process," says Michael. "Rather than waving and saying I'm here to support everyone but not actually doing anything. To get to jump in the pool and splash around with the kids, it's amazing."

▲*Adam Peatey, Michael Gunning and Ellie Simmonds with Speedo X Swim United*

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL GUNNING