Misogynoir in the Workplace:

Understanding the Experiences of Black Women in Leadership Positions

RUNNYMEDE

Runnymede Trust

The Runnymede Trust is the UK's leading independent race equality think tank.

For more than 50 years, we have worked tirelessly to build a Britain in which we all belong.

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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Foreword

Professor Dame Donna Kinnair DBE, Runnymede Trust Chair of Trustees

It is so important that research about Black women's experiences in the workplace is conducted, listened to and acknowledged. We see too often how these experiences are dismissed by the prevailing majority, and often these women are left with sentiments such as 'What is all the fuss about? They need to get over themselves', compounding the trauma that they experience.

The challenges that individuals face as women are well documented, and we know that it takes longer for women to reach the pinnacle of their career. Often the obstacles you face feel insurmountable, leading many women to give up on their endeavours to seek promotion. Acknowledgement of this discussion and debate has led to some improvements for women through a range of strategies to increase the presence of women in senior management roles and representation on boards. There is a recognition that diversifying employers makes good business sense.

However, for Black women the intersectionality of being Black and female means that the obstacles faced on a number of fronts are brutal; the racism alongside misogynistic behaviour creates a poisonous environment, where organisations and the people who work within them know that sexism and racism are illegal and conduct such behaviours covertly. Black women trying to raise their experiences, whether informally or formally, find that organisations and individuals vehemently deny and dismiss them, recognising that the validation of Black women's negative experiences can be expensive and reputationally damaging.

Efforts to dismiss these women's claims and experiences often mean that they themselves become targets, and can result in attempts to drive them out of their jobs. By refusing to acknowledge or name racism and misogyny to protect their organisation's reputation, those in positions of power continue to drive inequality, ensuring that the structures and behaviours that exist within the workplace remain normalised and aren't rooted out. Meanwhile, effort is invested in defending the perpetrators who enable these harmful behaviours to continue unchecked, allowing them to act with impunity.

This isolates individuals and has a huge impact on their psychological and emotional wellbeing. In this report, we raise the unique experience of Black women experiencing misogynoir in the workplace because it is clear that more research is needed. It is unacceptable that Black women bear the brunt of this behaviour in our society. Only by shining a light on these issues and discussing the necessary changes can we hold both individuals and employers accountable for improvement and make workplaces psychologically safer for Black women.

Definitions

The definitions in this section are all variations of racism experienced by Black women.

Individual racism: This means holding values that undermine or reduce another human being, solely or mainly because of their skin colour, religious beliefs or practices, or ethnic heritage (example: 'I would be upset if my child married someone who was Muslim'). It refers to expressing stereotypical racist beliefs (example: 'Black people don't work as hard as white people') or exhibiting racist behaviours (example: using derogatory language to describe someone's ethnic background or exacting violence on a human being because of the colour of their skin or their religious, cultural or ethnic background).

Institutional gaslighting: This can occur on an organisational level where an individual is made to feel that information is being hidden, particularly from a more junior member of staff by someone in a position of power. This often leads to feelings of confusion or self-doubt, causing the victim to continually question situations.[1] As well as this, there can be a failure to admit that foul play against a person is recurring within the space, and their complaints are not heeded. Their ability to meet or exceed the demands of their role is often undermined or ignored; other, often less qualified or able colleagues are promoted, while they are set tasks in which they must prove themselves.

Microaggressions: These are covert or everyday racist exchanges which serve to undermine and denigrate a marginalised group. This can include a statement, action or other incident. Despite the prefix 'micro' and while each incident might seem relatively minor, it is the cumulative impact of experiencing a number of these, repeatedly, over a period of time that has an impact. In the workplace, microaggressions might be expressed or justified as being 'a joke' or 'banter', and the subtlety of microaggressions can make it difficult to prove intentionality. However, these incidents are often an offensive statement against someone's cultural background.

Misogynoir: This concept is an example of intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw[2] which illustrates how various social characteristics of our identity overlap to produce interconnected and compounded systems of disadvantage and discrimination. According to Moya Bailey, misogynoir can be described as 'the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women face as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking experience of oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalisation'.[3]

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 or 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'.[4] 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.[5]

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1   Huizen, J. (2024) 'Examples and signs of gaslighting and how to respond', Medical News Today, 22 March, www.medicalnewstoday. com/articles/gaslighting#signs-of-gaslighting.

2   Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6): 1241–1299.

3   Bailey, M. (2021) 'Introduction: What Is Misogynoir?', in *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance, New York*: New York University Press.

4   Lingaya, S. (2021) *It Takes a System: The Systemic Nature of Racism and Pathways to Systems Change*, London: Beyond Race/Race on the Agenda, www.rota.org.uk/sites/default/files/researchpublications/It%20takes%20a%20system%20FINAL%20-%20January%202021.pdf.

5   Ashe, S.D., Borkowska, M. and Nazroo, J. (2019) R*acism Ruins Lives: An Analysis of the 2016–2017 Trade Union Congress Racism at Work Survey, Manchester: Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity*, University of Manchester, https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/ code/research/projects/racism-at-work/tuc-full-report.pdf.

Institutional racism: In a similar vein to systemic racism, this can be described as '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 policies, processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racial stereotyping.'[6]

Whiteness: This is a social construct that often positions white identity as the standard norm. It reinforces its dominance by presenting itself as neutral or objective, while often failing to observe its power to sustain dominance.[7]

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6   Sir William Macpherson of Cluny (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c2af540f0b645ba3c7202/4262.pdf.

7   Eddo-Lodge, R. (2017) *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Introduction

> ❝ *It's just a reminder of the fragility of Black lives, of Black women, in the public eye, in a country like this.* ❞
>
> — Malorie, professor

In March 2024, Frank Hester, a Conservative Party donor, made media headlines for his venomous comments about the longstanding Labour MP Diane Abbott, who has since achieved the title of Mother of the House.[8] Hester told his colleagues that looking at Abbott made him 'want to hate all Black women' and that she 'should be shot'. The Runnymede Trust condemns these violent, racist and misogynistic comments. Additionally, considering the political history and legacy of Diane Abbott MP, we felt compelled to investigate the experiences of Black women who hold senior positions across various sectors.

This report highlights the experiences and challenges of senior Black women in the workplace. We illustrate their racialised and gendered experience within their professional lives. By journeying through early-career, mid-career and senior-career trajectories, we unravel how Black women in senior positions understand the intersecting features of their identity – of racialisation, gender, disability and class; how these factors influence their potential to access professional positions of seniority; and the way they are treated while holding these positions. Black women report experiencing the crippling complexity of being both hyper-visible yet hyper-invisible at work. We also explore the ways in which their identity influences the choices they make while they are at work.

The interviews were constructed around four research questions:

- **What are the experiences of senior Black women, in any employment sector?**
- **How does a person's Blackness intersect with their gender to create a specific experience of racism in their work environment?**
- **What are the personal impacts of misogynoir?**
- **What strategies/resources have Black women utilised to create and retain strength and joy, despite these conditions?**

Using evidence from nine semi-structured interviews with Black women from various sectors, this report highlights the key themes that arise, and align with these questions.

Throughout the research, we use the term *misogynoir*. This term is partnered with Black feminist thought, which is the theoretical framework used to shape this project. Further details about our approach to the research can be found in the methodology section below.

The report ends with recommendations for employers, trade unions, government and others to ensure that the experiences of Black women are appreciated, seen and valued in the workplace and beyond, and to advocate for changes to make the workplace safer for Black women.

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8   The traditional honorific title given to the longest-standing female member of the House of Commons.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research study, which is framed by Black feminist thought. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with Black women who hold senior positions across various sectors, including journalism, education, politics, academia, healthcare, charities and unions. All of the women's names have been pseudonymised in this research.

Drawing from Patricia Hill Collins' book, *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), we aimed to ensure that the interviews would allow the women to express their individual voices and self-define their experiences. As Hill Collins states, when Black women self-define, they 'clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so'.[9] Thus, the interviews were semi-structured, in order to probe the women's views and experiences but also to allow them to speak openly and on their own terms.

In addition to this, the interviews were conducted by two Black female researchers who worked to create a safe space and ensure that the interviewees felt seen and valued. The power of this was to centre the voices and experiences of Black women. Historically, research experiences have been extractive, with little to no connection between the researcher and participants' lived experiences. It needs to be noted that although the researcher and participants shared racialised and gendered identities, it cannot be assumed that experiences are identical. Our stories, anecdotes and identities are not monolithic. However, there was a deep shared understanding and feeling of connection. For example, one participant expressed gratitude: 'thank you for providing me the space to share [my experiences] because that's so important. I'm not in enough spaces to share this ... thank you for not judging me or making me feel uncomfortable.'

Participant recruitment was based around the Runnymede Trust's network and connections.

Limitations

Due to time constraints and our decision to respond to Hester's racist, misogynistic comments promptly, we were unable to interview more women and have deeper conversations. The interviews were roughly an hour long on average, making it difficult to gather in-depth details. Additionally, the seniority of the women made it difficult to obtain more time from them or to recruit more participants, due to their own time constraints and work commitments. On request, we returned to participants to seek approval to use direct quotes in the report.

In light of the research questions, the intention of this research is to highlight common injustices that Black women face in different roles, across different sectors. In order to achieve our aim we have refrained from detailing every nuanced difference – apart from profession – between the participants' experiences, but we do not seek to make generalisations or to suggest that these findings are representative of the wider community of Black women. For example, a few participants made mention of distinctions in treatment based on colourism[10] or differences in social class, and although exploring this in depth was beyond our scope, this further proves that the Black experience is not a monolithic one.

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9   Hill Collins, P. (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment,* second edition, New York: Routledge, 97–123.

10   Colourism is discrimination or prejudice based on skin colour, often within a racialised or ethnic group. It involves favouring individuals with lighter skin tones over those with darker skin tones and can affect opportunities, treatment and social status.

1. Intersecting Blackness and gender: The experiences of Black women in leadership positions

> **I'm Black. I'm a woman, I'm working class. I must try 10, 15, 20, 25 times.**
>
> — Stella, councillor

- **What are the experiences of senior Black women, in any employment sector?**
- **How does a person's Blackness intersect with their gender to create a specific experience of racism in their work environment?**

Racialised identity and gender have often been discussed as two distinct concepts. As a result of this, the discussion on 'race' neglects specific gendered experiences that Black women face. In response to this situation, Moya Bailey coined the term 'misogynoir' to describe the 'specific hatred, dislike, distrust and prejudice directed towards Black women'.[11] It is a term that describes how both sexism and racism manifest in Black women's lives to create intersecting forms of oppression.

There are thus two overlapping aspects of misogynoir: first the concept of anti-Blackness and second that of misogyny. What follows explains how this manifests for Black women in various workplaces, in the NHS, the trade union sector, the media, the legal profession and other sectors.

The Black women who participated in this research described a range of professional experiences and impacts of misogynoir. Several women had experienced microaggressions such as objectification of their hair and their bodies; being the only Black woman in the room; and feeling that their presence and position were being policed. One woman, a Black academic, recalled how she had felt policed when attending a research away day. Her seniority and position as an academic was continually questioned and she was assumed to be a student, despite only academic staff attending the event.

We will discuss this in more detail below, but this anecdote illustrates how whiteness, or the white norm or standard, condemns and questions those deemed to not fit this norm. Their legitimacy and viability in spaces and professional roles can be overtly questioned, as with the Black academic highlighted above.[12]

This academic felt 'othered'. This, as she put it, was 'a reminder, like, you're not meant to be here kind of thing'. Through our exploration of the experiences of the Black women who took part in this research, four themes continually emerged that spoke to the two research questions posed above: the pervasiveness of whiteness, double standards and unfair pressure to perform, slower career paths, and institutional gaslighting and bullying.

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11 Bailey, 'Introduction', in *Misogynoir Transformed*, 13.

12 Puwar's space invaders theory sheds light on how the presence of Black female bodies in spaces and professional positions that are traditionally occupied by white, masculine bodies impacts on how these women, and their work, are perceived. Most of the experiences explored in this research are theoretically outlined in Puwar's writing. Puwar, N (2004) *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, London. Berg Publishers.

The pervasiveness of whiteness

We first turn to whiteness, a recurring concept in this research. This is not a term that should be read as 'anti-white people'; rather, it is a description of an existing social reality. 'Whiteness' is a term that refers to the way that the customs and norms of white middle- to upper-class culture operate as the standard against which all other groups are compared. White-dominant culture is also a *social mechanism* which provides advantages to white people, since they can navigate society both feeling normal and being viewed as normal. In the UK, people who identify as white rarely have to think about their racialised identity because they live within a culture where whiteness is the norm.

Importantly, being white does not, of course, mean that you do not experience hardships, disadvantages or oppression. However, it does mean not being racially othered or considered a threat, and white people thus often escape personal encounters with everyday occurrences of oppression and hardship due to racial prejudice and discrimination.

Understanding whiteness is important to this report, because it provides the norms across society, institutions and the workplaces that Black women work in. In a Runnymede Trust report commissioned by the Fawcett Society, *Broken Ladders*, which explores the myth of meritocracy for women of colour in the workplace, 39 per cent of women of colour felt that they had had to adapt themselves to uphold standards of whiteness in order to be seen as an acceptable manager.[13] Deviations from those norms are more often scrutinised, surveilled and punished by institutions. The following discussion provides examples of this in the experiences of Black women who navigate this context, while also platforming their voices for change.

Other women interviewed described the pervasiveness of whiteness being demonstrated by a lack of representation in senior roles and stark racial disparities. Mary described starting a new role as a journalist at a large media corporation and seeing 'a building of 150 people, only five of them … Black, two security guards, two cleaners, and then me'. She described how when she was younger, she had been 'filled with so much passion', but when she witnessed these disparities, it drained her of enthusiasm and motivation to be in the professional sphere. She went on to say that 'some of the realities are upsetting, because there's not many people that look like me, that are, statistically, in a lot of senior roles. It's very tricky just to see yourself represented in such high spaces.' Her reflections demonstrate the sense of deflation and isolation that stems from under-representation in senior roles.

Double standards and unfair pressure to perform

Monitoring performance is a common feature across most organisations. However, performance management can also be weaponised unfairly to undermine and undervalue employees. A common theme in all of our semi-structured interviews with Black women pertained to the constant fight of navigating whiteness and the unfair pressures that they faced in their jobs. For instance, Juliet, a senior journalist, said:

> **I would say that I've had to excel in everything, that I've put more pressure on myself than my counterparts, that I've had to sweat more for everything to ever change. I just can't bear the idea of making an error. Whereas I know that is not necessarily the case for my white colleagues. And I've seen especially men, actually, often get rewarded for mediocrity, you know, it's kind of failing upwards. So, I don't think I would have the luxury of failing upwards.**

13   Gyimah, M., Azad, Z., Begum, S., Kapoor, A., Ville, L., Henderson, A. and Dey, M. (2022) *Broken Ladders: The Myth of Meritocracy for Women of Colour in the Workplace*, London: Fawcett Society, www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/broken-ladders.

Here, this participant references a compulsion to constantly 'prove herself', to dispel the myth that she is not good enough, because of the way her racialised and gendered identity is viewed by colleagues.

Through comparing her experiences with those of white colleagues, particularly white men, this participant platforms the inequity and double standards that she has to face while endeavouring to excel. With no room for error, a privilege hierarchy that favours white men for progress in an organisation quickly and more easily emerges. Meanwhile, our respondent, as a Black woman, experiences the burden of heightened pressure to prove her worth for progression. Being punished more harshly for errors and having a higher threshold for good performance can lead to exhaustion, impacting mental health, as we discuss in more depth below.

Malorie, a senior university professional, echoed these sentiments when relaying her reflections on a conversation she had had with a white male colleague who stated that he had never known a challenge that he had had to overcome. She went on to say:

> ❚❚*I am aware that personally I don't know what that life looks like. I don't know what it means to have everything go your way. I don't know what it means to have people constantly in your corner. I don't know what it means to raise a suggestion during a meeting and – even if it's [not] a very good suggestion – not have that slapped down. I don't know what it means to not apply for promotion countless times. I don't know what it means to never hear from a job that I've applied for where I don't just meet the criteria, I exceed them. I don't know what that means. I don't know what it means when you have senior people wanting to champion themselves rather than champion you. So, when that colleague said to me, things have just gone his way, I am almost looking at him with confusion, thinking: you mean to tell me there's a life where you don't have to fight?*❚❚

This quotation illustrates various negative experiences that one Black woman can face, such as not being listened to, or stunted promotion progression as a result of dismissive responses or a lack of career advocacy. These experiences often perpetuate feelings of alienation, compounded in cases where, as a number of our respondents reported, they are the only Black woman in their organisation or with their level of seniority. In this context, feeling alone in the professional space and not having someone within that space who is experiencing similar systemic injustices was a common experience.

Furthermore, some of the women we spoke to felt that they had to 'operate with different standards' as a direct impact of racism and sexism. Juliet voiced this:

> ❚❚*you are not allowed to make a mistake or even to be too vocal or too visible, or you kind of need to keep quiet. I'm not making any mistakes. And I'm just thinking about the different standards of Diane Abbott having to apologise for drinking a mojito on the tube when you think about what other politicians are up to, you know, it's ridiculous. So, yeah, it's kind of a double standard.*❚❚

This double standard creates a disparity in treatment where Black women are held to a higher, often unachievable standard and unfairly judged, making it difficult and more taxing to thrive and advance in the workplace.

Slower career paths

A common theme that came up across all of the women we spoke to was their feelings that their career journey was hindered due to their identities as Black women. On multiple occasions, women spoke of there being a marked limit to their progression and a disparity between their progression and that of their white counterparts. Working for the charity sector, Harriet detailed her

> *eight years of stress and hell ... I kept hitting a glass ceiling ... I internalised it and thought, well, and seeing the equivalent, there's no question. If I put myself off against my white equivalent. There was no question where I was, with my skill set because I'd worked in different environments. I should have gotten better. Even some of my Black male equivalents, who were great, but they certainly weren't as good as me really. And I saw them leap, leap way above me.*

This experience evidently shows the numerous obstacles that this woman faced. The intersectionality and nuances of racialised and gendered identity are clearly highlighted here as she observes how her Black male counterparts excelled ahead of her too. In addition to this, her experiences are an example of being qualified yet overlooked – something echoed by a senior academic professional who recalled having applied for a promotion knowing that she met the criteria but being told that she had been unsuccessful and didn't meet them. These narratives highlight the frustration felt about the injustice of institutional barriers that continue to block Black women from progressing professionally.

These findings reflect those detailed in the Runnymede Trust report *Broken Ladders*. That report provides a deep understanding of the barriers that women of colour face throughout their employment journey. For instance, it was found that 42 per cent of women of colour, compared with 27 per cent of white women, reported having been passed over for promotion, despite frequent good evaluation.

On the other hand, some participants highlighted how they were grafting and working in capacities that exceeded their current role but were not given the title, pay or recognition. Juliet, a senior journalist, had worked out that she was being paid '25 per cent less than [her] predecessor, a white man'. Furthermore, she had noticed that employees with less experience and a lesser reputation were being moved to the executive committee team, although she thought her expertise, skills and knowledge were worthy of this role and that she would have been better placed for the move.

Similarly, Natalie, a union worker, had reflected on her senior career and come to realise the unfairness of her position in terms of progression in comparison with a white female colleague who had worked in the same local authority.

She went on to say:

> *there was nothing that was different about us in terms of our ability and our skills, and our opportunities in terms of job opportunities, being good and being supported and being told, you know, you should go for that role. I'll give you all the support that you need. I didn't receive those things.*

There is a clear disparity between the two colleagues in terms of the levels of support they had received: the white female colleague had received career support and encouragement that allowed her to progress, while the Black union worker was left excluded. This experience highlights how critical encouragement and career mentorship can be in allowing for opportunities and progression.

Across all nine interviews, women reported feeling othered and ostracised. Feeling othered within the professional sphere can lead to loneliness and exhaustion. We also found as the participants described their career trajectory that the more senior they became, the lonelier they became. Juliet recalled the company having a Black woman CEO for the first time; however, she had the 'shortest tenure of any CEO'. Black women are facing challenges at the highest levels of leadership due to systemic and institutional racism along their career trajectory.

The Black Young Professional (BYP) Network has found that over 50 per cent of Black women quit their jobs due to racism and feeling overlooked, invisible and helpless.[14] These findings demonstrate the burden placed on Black women who aspire to higher positions in various organisations. Unless systemic racism is uprooted, Black women are confronted with two options: strive and strain to meet these standards without promise of progression, or leave. Some participants decided that to 'jump ship' and leave certain roles was the best option in order to escape toxic, racist and stressful organisations, benefiting their mental health. However, doing this often affected their career progression, as they might have had to go to a less senior role.

Institutional gaslighting and bullying and their impact on hypervigilance

Most women mentioned that they did not feel psychologically safe in their workplaces. This feeling stemmed from having been challenged, undermined or not believed, and through insensitive verbal and non-verbal communication, which incited professional insecurity and resulted in them constantly doubting themselves. Some of the participants described losing confidence in themselves and their capabilities as an employee.

Harriet, who works for the charity sector, explained:

> *You're constantly overthinking when things don't go right, you're constantly overthinking when you're being challenged, thinking, is it me? Did I do it wrong? Am I thinking wrong? Am I seeing things wrong? Am I imagining things? So I think this is why it's so painful.*

This internal turmoil and constant questioning makes the workplace an emotionally taxing environment to be a part of. In fact, one participant explained their coping mechanisms in toxic work environments: 'I have learnt to be hyper-vigilant – not knowing who to trust because people were overly competitive, jealous and undermining.'

The Black women we interviewed described how hypervigilance had led to them becoming tired of constantly having to 'contort [their] bodies into 50 angles and still [the employer is] not happy'. Hypervigilance is often a response to heightened, intense and traumatic situations, impacting physical and mental health. For instance, it can cause fatigue, anxiety, depression and poor sleep. All of these impacts also further affect performance within the workplace. In *Broken Ladders*, over three-quarters of women of colour (76 per cent) reported that experiences of racism in the workplace had 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.

The same experience of not being believed or being undermined can be applied to another interviewee. Charlie, a senior nurse, had received racist and bullying emails from another staff member. When she reported this and challenged her human resources department, the aggressor

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14   BYP Network (2022) 'Over 50% of Black women in the UK quit jobs due to racial inequalities', 15 September, https://byp.network/over-50-of-black-women-in-the-uk-quit-jobs-due-to-racial-inequalities.

was asked to 'work from home, but had no clinical duties' and was still able to engage in everyday administrative work such as sending emails. Charlie felt that if it had been a Black person sending the emails, they likely would have been suspended much sooner. The investigation grew, and eventually, the individual was suspended. The delayed decision to suspend the member of staff made Charlie feel as though her grievances were not being taken seriously. This case exemplifies the pressure that some Black women have to face in their work, especially since they are often left to fight to resolve their own grievances at work, with little, or hesitant, support. Rather than being supported, they too often find their grievances silenced.

Each of these themes has emphasised the everyday lived experiences of Black women working in senior positions in a variety of employment sectors. These women have illustrated how their Blackness has intersected with their womanhood at work to create a variety of negative experiences, such as fatigue, and the constant need to prove one's worth in comparison with white counterparts, particularly men. In the next section, we will explore the personal impacts of misogynoir in greater detail.

2. The personal is professional: Personal impacts of misogynoir

> ❝*I feel lonely, I feel I'm on the outside.*❞
>
> – Harriet, charity worker

- **What are the personal impacts of misogynoir?**

The title of this section is a play on the famous slogan – the personal is political – popularised by activist Carol Hanisch. Spawned from the 1960s second wave of feminism, its aim is to expose the interconnection between personal experiences and the wider sociopolitical landscape. In this context, we wanted to show the overlap between professional and personal experiences. Most of the women we spoke to discussed the emotional, physical and mental toll that experiencing misogynoir takes. Malorie powerfully stated:

> ❝*I remember feeling that no one takes our experiences [as Black women] seriously … When you go to your hospital appointment, you're probably having to fight to be taken seriously. How much extra time does that take? How much toll does it place on your body? When you come home, and you're exhausted, and then you have to feed your children, you then have to deal with work, you then have to deal with a feisty line manager. No one acknowledges you have to deal with these things or their impact in terms of time and in terms of stress on your body. No one's saying 'I understand'. And this is not me suggesting special pleading, this is me inviting the question of, if we are looking at this through a lens of equality, and dare I say democracy, then we should have due regard to the disproportionate impact of everyday life on certain groups, and in this case, Black women.*❞

This senior academic professional clearly illustrates the extra labour that Black women have to take on. This extra invisible labour is a direct result of not being seen or heard in different facets of everyday life, spanning health, motherhood and one's professional life. This lack of acknowledgement pushes Black women into a battle for respect and recognition, impacting their wellbeing. Therefore, the personal impacts of misogynoir – fatigue, feeling sidelined and stress – are due to systemic and institutional failures that do not centre Black women's experiences and perspectives..

From all of the conversations we had, it seemed that there is a lack of understanding of the intense effort it takes to be Black and a woman in society, let alone in the workplace, especially as for some there can be a lack of support from white counterparts. Malorie emotionally expressed that:

> ❝*I feel as though Black women are fighting while dying inside. We're fighting for survival while our bodies are collapsing. We're fighting to raise children, we're fighting to be strong while our bodies are crying under the load.*❞

There is a constant battle to survive through the treacherous sites of misogynoir. For example, Juliet returned from maternity leave to be treated in a sexist and non-inclusive way by her bosses and colleagues. They made her 'demonstrate' that she could do her job, proving that she deserved

to return to work after becoming a mother. Even though she was contracted to work part time, other members of the male-dominated team she was a part of would persistently use phrases like 'I want you in the office every day' or 'thanks for popping in', which caused her to rush to return to full-time work, feeling that by working part-time she and her work were 'losing legitimacy'. This is a micro example of the way others lack cognisance of what it means to be Black woman in British society, particularly for someone who has given birth and is seek to re-enter the workforce.

In contrast to the above, however, the next section will uncover the strategies and resources that the Black women we interviewed have utilised in the face of adversity to maintain their strength and joy throughout challenging employment.

3. Maintaining joy

"*Do not doubt yourself.*"

– Harriet, charity worker

- **What strategies/resources have Black women utilised to create and retain strength and joy, despite these conditions?**

Despite the challenging experiences that they have endured, the Black women we spoke to had each developed certain strategies and coping mechanisms to help them retain strength, and often to strengthen each other, throughout their careers. Juliet highlighted that there were networks and communities that had been formed to help other women of colour progress professionally:

> *So, I created a network for professional women of colour, and we support women of colour in the workplace. Often they [were overqualified], so they're not the problem. So, what we do with the network is that we offer training to leaders and we also lean into a sponsorship scheme, where senior leaders actually take them under their wings, and they have to open doors for them and just kind of do the things that they don't do naturally.*

Some spoke of the importance of supportive networks and building rapport with other senior Black staff members. A journalist explained that it is crucial to:

> *find your people early on. And also don't think that you don't belong. Or that you're not bright enough, because you are, and you know, kind of what you've achieved and where you are years later proves the point. So maybe don't doubt yourself as much. They gave you the job for a reason, and you do belong.*

The power of forming a community within the professional world can be crucial in combating the loneliness that Black women can face when working in a white-majority workplace.

Maya, who works in politics, emphasised that systemic change was the only viable solution to bring about significant change. As a young professional, she identified that changing her behaviour had not improved the way she was treated. As a result of this realisation, she had decided to remain her authentic self, in hope of systemic change in the workplace in the future. Her hope was not a mere emotion, though; she also professionally challenged poor organisational choices and their impacts, such as a lack of ethnic diversity among staff leadership.

Some women emphasised the significance of rest. Being able to step away from toxic situations had allowed them to rebuild their resilience and strength, and to evaluate whether or not they should remain in the workplace. Self-preservation is a crucial tenet for strength when stress, racism and sexism place a heavy burden on one's quality of life.[15]

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15   Robinson, S. (2021) 'The roots and importance of self-care in Black political activism', Mindwalk Yoga, 2 October, www.mindwalkyoga. org/blog/the-roots-and-importance-of-self-care-in-black-political-activism.

Conclusion

" I just think that people really need to understand what misogynoir is and how it shows up within, you know, their own interactions with Black women, I think as a baseline requirement? Do you know what it is? Do you know how it might impact the way that you speak to a Black woman? Do you know how it might impact the way that you undermine or relate to what she said? I think that, like, you know, that basic awareness is important. And I wonder if there's something also about ensuring that we think about these structural things around promotion and leadership. "

— Paula, researcher

Following Frank Hester's comments about Diane Abbott, there were open debates about whether his remarks were racist. We remain steadfast in our belief that they were inherently racist, and that they were a sharp reminder of the challenges that Black women face in British society. The women we spoke to also detailed that Hester's comments had generated a physiological response. Some reported anger, disgust, vomiting and crying. For instance, one participant who works in the charity sector explained:

" I could feel it, the pain, if I'm honest, the pain in my own body as a Black woman, and just thinking she's high profile, and, you know, everything around her level of education, which she went through going to Cambridge … You know, when you just feel something, you know, [in your] body so strongly, so strongly that it makes you exceedingly just want to rage. That's how I felt, just total enrage. And it just, of course, it just makes you, it just brings you back to where you were. All the experiences I've had around being a Black woman. "

These intense emotional reactions portray the shared experience of misogynoir among Black women. Their empathy, and the visceral pain that stems from it, highlight the reverberating impact of persistent and pervasive racism in Britain.

This research has brought to light that there remains a lack of understanding of the nuances and intersectional experiences of being Black and a woman at work in the UK. Black women continue to experience microaggressions, racism, sexism, bullying and a slower career progression path, which is manifesting in the negative impact of physical, emotional and mental anguish. An academic we spoke with clearly articulated:

" We don't really pay attention in this society, on UK soil, to what it means to be Black and a woman. We're not good at understanding what it means to be Black – the idea of anti-Blackness is not fully understood and articulated – certainly in policy circles. Being a woman seems to be only possible if you're white but to exist at the intersection of woman and Black is to be invisible. "

This juxtaposition of hypervigilance and invisibility causes some Black women to fight their own battles to be seen and heard, while at the same time being careful not to become 'too visible', as previously stated by Juliet. In addition to this reflection, it can be argued that when Black women in senior roles are, simply by doing their jobs, perceived as hyper-visible, they are punished and

penalised for it. Ultimately, through the accounts of the women we spoke to, we have witnessed the exhaustion they face due to their experiences of misogynoir.

Overall, we are concerned by the experiences of these Black women. These women, including Diane Abbott, occupy prominent positions in their respective professions, yet their access to higher socioeconomic status does not protect them from experiences of racism and misogyny.

Our aim in this report is that by speaking to Black women and hearing their experiences first hand, we will be able to harness a deeper understanding and empathy. Based on the conversations that took place, we have drawn out recommendations for the government, trade unions and employers, as well as ways for Black women to support themselves.

Recommendations

❚❚*I'm sick and tired of your policies, sick and tired of your research, I need implementation, I need action.*❚❚

– Natalie, union worker

These recommendations explicitly refer to Black women, in line with the report's focus and aims. However, implementing these actions will also benefit women of colour more broadly and contribute to a more equitable workplace for all employees. The recommendations are divided into three sections: employers, trade unions and government. Together, they aim to address the need for systemic change, as well as the care and support needed to improve Black women's mental health.

Recommendations for employers

Anti-racist action plans: Companies must work to produce and implement their own anti-racist action plans to tackle misogynoir in the workplace. This must include:

- producing and circulating an ethnicity and gender pay gap report, and using it to develop an anti-racism action plan for improvement, based on the specific challenges faced by the organisation

- recording the number of complaints of racial harassment and bullying, including the outcomes of the complaints

- gathering and analysing data on disciplinary procedures to identify any differences by ethnicity

- publishing ethnicity progression data for staff at all levels and making it readily accessible for job applicants as well as current employees

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

- training line managers to better understand misogynoir and be able to provide integrated mental health support for Black women

- when there are only one or two Black women within an organisation, investing in access to an external Black woman of seniority to provide ongoing mentoring

- having clear and transparent processes for reporting racism, with multiple reporting routes, including options outside of line management structures, and making sure that employees are aware of them

- using data about the organisation to develop an anti-racism action plan with SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) targets and accountability built in

- appointing an 'executive sponsor for racial equality' who will evaluate the progress of these actions

Line management support: Companies must set up structures that ensure line managers deliver equitable and fair progression and promotion outcomes for employees. This must include:

- line managers recognising the central position they have in ensuring the wellbeing and progress of Black women at work
- senior managers, therefore, needing to appoint line managers who have proven cultural sensitivity and the ability to relate to, understand and support people who do not look like them
- linking 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
- providing support and training for managers in how to conduct appraisals so that they are supportive and developmental
- broadening appraisal systems to ensure 360-degree input and feedback, so that evaluation outcomes are not reliant on one individual

Recommendations for trade unions

Trade unions must commit to providing more support for Black women experiencing misogynoir in the workplace. This must include:

- ensuring that union representatives understand the organisational and structural barriers that impact Black women and prevent them from reaching their full potential
- training union representatives to better identify, record and challenge incidences of misogynoir in the workplace

It's about time we started to believe in the convictions of what is out there in terms of research. It's not only having a voice at the table, but it's also implementing what we're saying that we're going to be doing.

— Natalie, Union Worker

Recommendations for the government

Effective ethnicity pay gap reporting:[16] We welcome government plans to introduce mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting for all companies that employ over 250 employees under the proposed Equality (Race and Disability) Bill. It is important that such reporting include:

- a narrative analysis, which will allow the company to establish a benchmark
- a requirement to publish an action plan to combat any disparities
- disaggregating the data according to the Office of National Statistics (ONS) ethnicity categories[17]
- intersectional pay gaps by gender and ethnicity
- a two-years-on review to assess progress made by employers

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16   We recognise that this is not an easy step to take in the first year. Companies may want to take a period to develop and quality-assure processes and mindsets in preparation for implementation.

17   Additionally, companies may want to choose a smaller number of categories in their first year of reporting.

Expand the Worker Protection Act: The new Worker Protection Act should be expanded to cover all forms of harassment, not just sexual harassment. This would require employers to take a proactive, preventative approach to addressing harassment in the workplace. By adopting a risk-based approach, employers could better understand and mitigate the various risks faced by employees, particularly how these risks are compounded for Black women.

Accountability: It is important that companies are held accountable to new and existing employment legislation. The government must introduce a well-funded independent enforcement body to enforce workers' rights and tackle non- compliance with employment legislation.

Support services: The Equality Advisory Support Service legal advice helpline must have its funding increased so that it can provide more services relating to race discrimination and make its services more widely known.

Discrimination claims: Funding must be increased for the Equality and Human Rights Commission to prioritise using investigation powers against employers with a high incidence of discrimination against Black women.

Acknowledgements

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