Invitation to Exclusion – The Continuing Experience of Black Women in Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK)

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Abstract

Black women exist in a contested space in (HE) in the UK where they can be used in a tokenistic way as visible confirmation of the how well an organisation is realising its organisational aims of equality as required under the Public Sector Duty, while at the same time often being denied opportunities which are routinely allocated to their White counterparts (Bernard,2007; Wilson, 2007). While the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) reported the crude racist expressions were now, mostly, features of the past, the findings of this research indicated that Black women could not necessarily expect support from within their organisation nor could they rely on internal systems to either provide them with the protection they needed or opportunities to progress in their careers. Instead, more often, Black women needed to build their own support networks and plot their own paths for progression.

Key Words

Race, Black, Gender, Women, Discrimination, Higher Education

Introduction

Black women occupy a unique position in higher education (HE) in the UK; they are simultaneously publicly positioned to visibly demonstrate the progress an organisation has made in promoting an equality agenda as legally required under the Public Sector Duty,

while at the same time their lived experience embodies exclusion and marginalisation (Bernard,2007; Wilson, 2007). Post the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the international outcry which followed suggested organisations may be more willing to challenge discrimination and to work towards more equitable workplace practice. Further in the UK, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report which specifically examined race relations in the UK, refers to an 'era of participation' (2021: 7) where 'the UK is open to all its communities' (ibid) and individuals, regardless of their race, are judged on merit rather than preconceived stereotypes, can engage fully in all aspects of society and are able to achieve their full potential.

Data shows 'across the UK HE sector in 2020, 75% of staff were recorded as white, 16.5% were recorded as BAME and 9% as unknown' (Belluigi, Arday and O'Keefe, 2023: 32) and 'there were slightly lower proportions of female staff (47%)' (ibid: 28) in the sector. Although this data merges all Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff groups, it is helpful for this paper as it confirms there are fewer minority ethnic groups and women working in HE and no attempt was made for this study to separate ethnic groups into smaller subsections with participants primarily considered through the lens of race and gender. Furthermore, for ethical reasons and risk of identification, this paper does not record the role or position held by the participants.

In the context of stated government aims (and more locally University mission statements) to deliver an equality agenda, this research aimed to explore how pledges were translated into action with regards to the following three questions:

- How were the skill sets of Black women recognised and developed enabling them to move into promoted roles?

- What support was provided to Black women to carry out their roles? and
- How equality is being promoted and advanced?

The findings of this research indicate the optimism of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) to be premature, and rather than being assured of their employers' support and protection (Fahie, 2020), Black women were routinely undermined by having their abilities and qualifications questioned; were allocated unrealistic workloads; and if they challenged workplace processes, were unsupported by a weak organisational systems. Indeed systems which were in place, appeared to be more concerned with compliance and were reduced to perfunctory box-ticking exercises rather than providing meaningful assistance to employees.

In such an uncertain environment, this research demonstrated that while universities seemed content to use Black female staff as convenient visual aids when organisationally advantageous, Black women were obliged to develop their own support networks which acted as refuges from the persistent undercurrent of institutional opposition. Most often, such support was located outside HE and relied on well-established structures based on mutuality and reciprocity. The challenges experienced by the women who took part in this research indicate the need for HE to re-examine its operational practice and to engage with Black women as a means of both identifying deficits in the current system and to build more appropriate mechanisms for the future.

The Position of Black Women in HE

The Sex Discrimination Act (1975, Legislation.gov.uk) outlawed gender discrimination in the workplace in 1975 and the following year, the Race Relations Act (1976, Legislation.gov.uk) was amended and provided similar protections to workers on the grounds of race. Successive multiple Acts and amendments designed to safeguard workers' rights and promote equality were brought together in the single umbrella Equality Act in the UK (2010, Legislation.gov.uk). However, 'despite a well-established record of equalities legislation in the UK… meaningful change on race equality might be labelled at best slow and at worse abysmally static' (Rollock, 2018: 314). Consequently, while protections and assurances have been legally provided, Black women do not enjoy race and gender equality in the workplace, rather they can more usually expect to be 'ogled at' (Varaidzo, 2016: 18) or confined to 'limiting stereotypical roles' (Varaidzo, 2016: 18). Furthermore 'Black women face especially daunting challenges' (Cose, 1995: 79) and ultimately, their endeavours, outputs and ideas are 'simply not regarded in the same way as their white peers' (Cose, 1995: 81).

Race and sex discrimination work in tandem to 'compound inequality and disadvantage' (Burgess, Dhakal and Cameron, 2022: 4) to ensure that Black women continue to be othered, positioned as deficit and forced to occupy the fringes of academic life often being 'trapped in race work' (Cose, 1995: 81) where they are tasked with the challenge of undoing 'centuries of injustice that have created the inequity and disadvantage suffered by marginalised groups in many modern democracies' (Ladson-Billings, 2024: 5) only to be blamed when they do not succeed, with their failure attributed to 'their own individual and group traits or cultural failings' (Meghji and Chan, 2023: 190). Black women are thus double damned by being denied opportunities to progress and expected (without relevant support) to erase established and entrenched prejudices, ideologies and bigotries.

By using an intersectional approach, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a mechanism for examining how the spheres of race and gender intersect to perpetuate a hegemony of White privilege where 'Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) academics are more likely to experience subtle, covert forms of racism, are less likely to be pushed forward for promotion and less likely to be in senior decision-making roles (Mirza[a], 2018: 10) and to understand how 'ethnic minorities continue to be discriminated against in the job market, educational institutions and elsewhere across society' (Housee, 2023: 196); for while 'race may not be the only factor … it is never not a factor' (Hayes II, 2023: 165). CRT demonstrates how race assumes a central role in organisational decision making and operates as a limiting factor for many BME workers in education for much of the time so that structures of privilege and dominance are reinforced and maintained, ensuring continued 'withholding [of] privileges from people of colour' (Kendall, 2013: 63). In this environment Black women are 'pathologized and positioned as inherently deficient and responsible for their own lack of progression' (Rollock, 2018: 321) and assumed to either be incompetent or unwilling to work. As a result, many Black women in HE are routinely challenged or asked about their presence in the university and have through experience become conscripted experts in understanding the multidimensional representations of the 'relationships of domination and subordination' (Bhavnini et al, 2005: 15).

Rather than being welcomed in HE as workers capable of bringing new perspectives which can enrich organisational life and enable universities to better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse audience, 'Black women have historically been excluded from academic institutions' (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018: 151). Once in HE Black women often struggle to be acknowledged as serious academics and are more likely to be constantly re-imagined and recreated as poorly qualified inadequate outsiders. By using perspectives of

CRT that recognise intersectionality these experiences can be interrogated and 'the ways in which race … and gender intersect' (Hartlep and Ozment, 2023: 211) become more apparent and a deeper more nuanced understanding of the oppression of Black women in HE can be better understood as identified by Eddo-Lodge (2018) who explains the various hues of White privilege and DiAngelo (2019) who describes the defences employed by some White people to justify the ways they subjugate and marginalise other racial groups.

As 'bias and discrimination against members of ethnic minority origins is shown to underlie much of ethnic disadvantage' (Li, 2018: 105) effective leadership is needed which understands 'diversity, equity and inclusion issues' (Larkin, 2022: 76) and is committed to undoing discriminatory structures and 'making employees feel valued through positive reinforcement' (Dhakal, 2022: 19). While 'many scholars have committed themselves to the struggle for educational justice' (Matias, 2023: 217) this level of commitment does not seem to have transferred to organisational management and 'despite well-meaning intentions, contemporary university reforms have failed to ameliorate race … disparities in education' (Hartlep and Ozment, 2023: 211). Black women have thus continued to be punished in the HE and too frequently HE appears to promote 'a kind of leadership that abdicates any ethical and moral responsibility' (Accioly and Macedo, 2022: 2), at best ignoring and at worst appearing to tacitly support unequal and negative treatment of Black women. Unless and until universities commit to designing and creating structures in collaboration with Black women which 'harness the potential and talents of their workforce' (Burke, 2020: 12) Black women can expect to be excluded, unfairly treated and ignored for it is only when leaders begin to 'dismantle the racist ideologies, structures an processes' (Diem and Welton, 2021: 138) that Black women will be able to receive the recognition and support they need in HE.

Research Design

The research design was driven by the ambition to privilege 'the participants' own words as generative of meaning and knowledge" (Chandler et al. 2015: 1) and to centre their voices as well as being based on a theoretical framework (CRT) which cherishes participant engagement. The nine participants were recognised and valued as experts of their own lived experience and as capable of expressing their experiences in an accurate and proportionate way.

The researchers worked together to collect and analyse the data, with one researcher interviewing five participants while the second researcher interviewed four. As both researchers and the participants had encountered each other at conferences and other academic events over time, participants were allocated to each researcher on the basis of least familiar. The rationale for this choice was to mitigate against having a casual conversation and to increase the robustness of the interview process.

Semi-structured interviews were used to capture data for their utility in simultaneously retaining interviewee focus while enabling a wider exploration of issues which the participant they deemed relevant. The more fluid nature of semi-structured interviews also provided the time and opportunity to create a welcoming and purposeful atmosphere, thus promoting a dialogue akin to an everyday conversation, and in turn facilitating the production of rich, detailed data (Denscombe, 2021; Newby, 2014).

Utilising participants familiarity with online working and providing the opportunity to access any part of the UK, nine interviews were conducted over micro-soft Teams, audio-

recorded and transcribed in real-time using the built-in Teams function. Data was therefore accurately and comprehensively recorded. During the interview, the camera was left on so that both parties could see each other and was used to facilitate communication between researcher and participant in this way it was easy to see whether the participant was comfortable with the line of questioning or if modification was required. The camera was thus used as a tool to enhance communication and to identify signals such as enthusiasm or annoyance. Microsoft teams was used in preference to meeting the participants in person as while there were risks with online interviews (including for example reception failure) it was more time and cost efficient for both parties and avoided the need to travel to nominated venues (De Villiers, Bilal Farooq, Molinar, 2022).

All participants who engaged in this study gave written consent, consistent both with the host University's ethical code of practice and BERA 2018 ethical guidelines which were, at the time the research was completed, the most recent edition. The research design was driven by the ambition to uphold the principles of 'inclusive and culturally acceptable ways of doing research that is culturally appropriate and ethically correct for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge' (Leroy-Dyer,2022: 34). Further she also asserts 'cultural respect is shared respect and is achieved when research is conducted in a safe environment … and where cultural differences are respected' (Leroy-Dyer,2022: 35).

This safety was, in part, facilitated by the personal identity of one of the researchers, who is a Black female academic and therefore share the same inclusion characteristics as the research participants. As an insider researcher she was able to use her 'special position in terms of understanding (those) shared aspects of experience' (Bridges, 2004: 73) to facilitate dialogue with the research participants. Her gender and race tied her to the research participants through shared cultural experience and gave her a particular understanding of

contemporary issues associated with being a Black female academic working in UK based university. Even though this connection supported accurate listening, care was taken to avoid ventriloquy and not to superimpose personal agendas, and the connection was used to encourage participants to openly share their experiences of working in HE and to actively to lead the conversation (Trevithick, 2011). While the second researcher identifies as a White male and was therefore different from the research participants, he has for many years worked in race equality and is recognised in the field through his work as an active anti-racist ally.

Participation was wholly voluntary and participants could, if they chose, end the interview at any point. Participants were recruited using researcher academic networks which had been built up over a number of years and were initially approached either directly in person or through email. Some potential participants who met the study inclusion criteria (self-identified as Black and female and currently employed in a UK university), declined the invitation to take part in the study despite assurances of confidentiality and anonymity suggesting an unease about the research. Furthermore, even though some possible participants had an awareness of the researchers' credentials and previous published work in the field of race research, they still were not secure in engaging in the study. Using this strategy, participants were recruited from a range of settings including Russell Group, pre-92 and post-92 universities. Participation was not based on age or post held within their setting and these features were not used to analyse the data.

Each participant took part in a single interview compromising 20 topic-based questions which explored areas including how their personal histories had been acknowledged or valued; the prevailing organisational climate; the nature and availability of institutional support; promotion and training opportunities; and perceived changes to the

sector over time. In addition, participants were asked four position questions including time in HE, time with current employer, size and geographical location of their setting. However, in the end this position data was not used as it could potentially reveal the identity of the participant, compromising the participants' anonymity and breaking the ethical contract between the researchers and the participants.

While the interview pilots indicated 60 minutes should have been sufficient for the interview, it is significant all interviews lasted at least 90 minutes with some interviews lasting over two hours, which to a degree confirms the desired safe space to share information had been successfully created and the participants' enthusiasm to share their stories. We are hoping to build on this interest and extend to a second stage of data collection with new participants. Interviews were audio-recorded using Teams, and transcripts shared with participants for data accuracy checking before being coded and thematically analyzed. The findings of this paper are therefore solely centred on the first phase of interviews. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

During the analysis process, each researcher initially worked independently to create a set of transcriptions. Each researcher took responsibility for completing initial coding and creating themes for the participants they had interviewed through reading and re-reading each transcript. The researchers then examined the second set of transcripts created by their co-researcher and repeated the process of coding and creating themes. After each researcher had completed the initial analysis of all nine scripts, the two researchers came together and shared their preliminary analysis. Through a process of peer interrogation and cross-checking, the researchers selected the most robust themes which could be empirically supported by the data and used these to formulate their findings, which in turn were then

related back to the three research questions. By working together in this way the researchers preserved the integrity of the data and were able to benefit from each other's understanding

Findings: Heads You Win, Tails I Lose

The interviews provided illuminating data which indicated how Black women experienced HE and how they perceived how they were treated in their respective universities. The conscious decision to not take part in the study by some potential participants is a significant finding and suggests concern about being connected to research which could be critical of universities which in turn supports the notion that Black women may feel less secure in their employment and did not wish to risk drawing attention to themselves. Using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) The data produced four main themes which mapped directly back to the three research questions. These were: Black staff were viewed as less competent than others; they were commodified and used as tools of organisational gain; there was little to no effective organisational support for Black women; and Black women were, for their own well-being, obliged to develop independent support networks beyond the university.

<u>Black Staff Seen as Deficit</u>

Black women described an environment where they were consistently underestimated and had their competence and ability to complete academic tasks questioned. Despite some of the participants holding more advanced qualifications than their peers, with doctorates as opposed to Masters, or relevant work-related professional experience, they were often viewed as either incompetent of fulfilling their role or operating at a lower standard. The

three quotes below from Leandra, Nadine and Nzinga demonstrate how Black women were consistently framed as the other and collectively judged as less capable than their colleague against an elusive and unarticulated set of standards.

Leandra *The narrative has been ingrained. Sometimes they don't think of Africans as academics.*

Nadine *I still put all my energy in to prove, to prove my worthiness, my capability, even though I don't need to and I shouldn't.*

Nzinga *I've been around too long and I'm too old now to be putting myself in those kind of spaces where people are kind of looking down on me with their benevolence like I need something. I'm not doing it.*

There was a further suggestion of posts being gifted to Black staff in some way and there was an implied, possibly racist, assumption that Black women did not deserve to be and should not be in certain roles.

Sara *It's almost by default you're accused of taking somebody's job away from them, whoever that potential other is who doesn't look like me. Don't think about promotion because you ain't there yet. It's that kind of implicit stay in your lane.*

Henrietta *Rather than my colleagues saying 'actually maybe she has some experience that we could draw on' I continue to be treated like someone without any experience and that can be quite frustrating. It's like 'You're not wise. You can't have been a teacher. You can't have had all these years of teaching'.*

Sometimes, as a result of constant negative workplace messages, participants started to doubt their own abilities before coming to the realisation that such messages were a veiled attack on the core of their being.

> Kamala *I've worked in institutions where I have felt professionally as if I was failing…there hasn't been an objective failing but failing is a sense that there is something quite fundamentally, wrong with you.*

> Arya *It's it's a kind of hostility that is masked by smiles and being, you know, people performing this niceness. But there's a lack of trust and a lack of safety. Not knowing who you can trust and you don't trust anyone enough to have an honest conversation about how you actually feel; and that's toxic.*

This constant scrutiny produced a double jeopardy in that Black staff were viewed as incompetent and had their skill set challenged, which in turn impacted on their personal confidence and thus put them at risk of underperforming and confirming the doubts of their critics.

<u>Black Staff Were Used for Convenience of the Organisation</u>

Black women perceived that while their presence seemed to be barely tolerated as academics, they recognised on occasions they were utilised as organisational commodities to highlight the progressiveness of the University. Although this may have made them institutionally useful and to visibly appear to be part of the University community, it did not confer a sense of belonging to the research participants instead many felt exploited and believed themselves to continue be outsiders to the institution. The quotes from Nadine and Deana below reveal a challenging conundrum for the women, in retaining their agency and refusing to be used by the organisation, while retaining their dignity, they risk being

pushed further away from the institution and could be labelled as disloyal. Such a label would be a disadvantage should the women, at a later stage seek an internal promotion or if they asked for a reference to work elsewhere.

> Nadine *I always seem to fall outside… You become ready for any attack. You feel that. Anytime I, you know, will be ready to defend myself. I am definitely refusing to have my name or my face to promote an agenda that will benefit the institution. I'm aware of those kind of games institutions play.*

> Deana *My profile fits the widening participation projects which make me suspect, my brown face was an advantage. I'm also a good visual aid in that sense.*

Black women were therefore required to manage the challenges of enhanced visibility resulting from being used for marketing purposes while concurrently being ignored and professionally and academically sidelined. These actions created a kind of 'double consciousness' (Dickson and Bruce, 1992: 300) where the women were, at the same time, both hyper-visible and unseen. This created a sense of alienation and uncertainty, making the Black women feel the need to be hypervigilant at all times to protect themselves against possible exploitation and or attack and leaving them with a persistent feeling of insecurity. Black women were not naïve, and recognising the ways their race had been commodified to feed an organisational agenda which appeared to support inclusion, tried to resist being reduced to an ethnic visual aid and treated in this way.

> Sara *They say the right things, but when you try and dig deeper, it's very much at a superficial level. The environment is aligned to legislation to make sure everything works. So tick box me. Look at us, we're world leading, we're doing this and this. We're tolerated in those spaces because it looks good legislatively.*

Absent and Limp Institutional Leadership

Leadership was seen as particularly important for the career trajectories of Black women and they expressed they received little organisational support often having their ambitions and career progression actively blocked or hindered by malign leadership. Rapid changes in the workplace fuelled by technology and new working patterns, have increased competitiveness in employment and Black women believed their individual security had decreased leaving them at greater risk of dismissal if organisational cost savings were needed and directly connecting to the 'last hired, first fired' narrative present in some Black communities

> Deana *We just did not get any support at all. No real support, not in money, not in other types of resources. Bureaucracy, it's always hidden in the bureaucracy. Blocking in a big way. The system should not allow that to happen. Incompetence on the part of leadership. People who would push you out of the way. I would interpret it as malice, but the system allows it to happen and the leadership does nothing about it.*
>
> Nadine *I'm always having to defend myself and then there's a sense of you always being confrontational. The sense of always undermining me, making me always like think less of myself to the point where everything kind of blew up and they would throw me under the bus and they were willing to do that if it meant showing me as not capable.*

Despite having high levels of qualifications, finding and retaining employment in HE was believed to have become more difficult and there was little in-house support to further develop their skill sets to help them remain in post. If help was offered, it often seemed to

be too little, too late and with no recognition of the expertise they already held. Such behaviours called into question the notion of a supportive academic community committed to the idea of equality. Even when training packages existed, such was the toxic climate in HE some staff did not believe that such provision would offer any real benefit to them and could not see the point in engaging with these programmes.

> Henrietta *The whole idea of sharing, of working as a community of researchers is something that they have to develop. It's not a community, in general it's individual, everyone for themselves.*
>
> Kamala *Nice people committed to equity, committed to social justice and they talk about race. They talk about voice, they talk about all the right things. It's hard to put your finger on it, but it doesn't mean that there are these other voices.*
>
> Nzinga *Umm. Organizational support systems. To be honest, to be honest. Well, I am not sure if they exist, but even if they do exist. I wouldn't put myself forward for anything from the organisation in that way.*

<u>Need to Develop Support Beyond Institutions</u>

With ill-fitting university support systems, the research participants created or designed their own, situated structures to help them navigate and persist in HE. While these sometimes overlapped with university provision, the centrally created and formally endorsed systems were seen to be of little use and were more associated with regulatory compliance or the need to signal that the organisation was actively promoting an equality agenda. As such these systems seemed to lack relevance and did not recognise the ways living the experience of marginalisation and discrimination impacted on the research participants.

Sara *As a staff member you're treated differently. We're not treated the same as everybody else. There's also that time when you're trying to deal with racism on a regular basis; sometimes you're so tired you can't articulate an answer. Friends and family members have said treat it like a job. Leave that at campus. Just leave it behind. It's really hard for me, it's really difficult.*

Leandra *Colleagues who are friends or who have gone through the same. Like I had a colleague and we did the PhD together. So yeah, that kind of working together helps. My family too. My Mum, I talk to my Mum throughout.*

Further, while assigning a staff member a mentor may seem useful, if the allocated staff member did not have a good understanding of equality or was not committed to making progress regarding these issues the relationship had little chance of success and less chance of being a mutually beneficial learning situation. Indeed, if anything poor mentor matches were more likely to increase frustration and disillusionment on the part of Black women employees as the allocation of an inappropriate mentor would confirm the organisation had not taken the specific needs of the staff member into account and may be adopting a one-size-fits-all approach from the perspective of White privilege. As a consequence, Black women needed to locate and sometimes build their own support structures. The impact of this was Black women had less opportunity to build professional internal relationships with those in influential positions and were more reliant on family and friends outside the university. While this may have been emotionally useful, it did not necessarily meet professional needs. Therefore Black women had less chance of becoming an established

member of the academic community, which in turn could negatively influence their opportunities for progression and promotion.

> Henrietta *What has helped me is my relationship with individuals. It's my relationship with people. Most of us are professionals and a handful of us work in academia. I just go to hang out with them. They're the ones I trust be able to come back to me to say the things that will help me.*

In the absence of relevant, culturally specific support systems, participants were often obliged to find an inner strength and to develop their own mechanisms to help them to persist and work in HE.

> *Arya I don't think I've had any support. I haven't had a very good time with unions. I just thought, well, unions must be for white people. I know I have to protect myself. I know the looking after myself thing is a priority. It's like basic maintenance. Where work is concerned that you have to protect yourself. There's a prayer I listen to when I drive in and it's a battle prayer. It's a real warrior song and I sing it all the way in. And I just think. Yeah. Yeah. The very vibration of these words are formed like a protective shield. If I don't do that prayer, I'm going in unarmed.*

Discussion

Despite successive iterations of equality legislation the findings of this research suggests that Black women have still not achieved equality in the workplace. The continuing lack of progress as articulated by Bernard (2007) and Wilson (2007) prompted the UN in 2015 to assert the 'need to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' as well as

calling for an ‘end to all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere’ (UN, 2015: 21). This global commitment to gender equality was reaffirmed by the G7 nations in 2021 in London who agreed to ‘sign up to new global targets’ (Gov.UK, 2021) to improve opportunities for women. While gender equality may have been recognised as globally important, it remains an aspirational goal rather than an achieved outcome in HE.

In a similar vein, race equality has also not yet been achieved in the UK and the inequities discussed by Ladson-Billings (2024) and Housee (2023) persist. Most recently, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has highlighted how, in multiple areas including education and employment ‘Black lives haven’t mattered’ (Yates, 2021: 31). As a result, Black people in employment have routinely been more poorly treated and have experienced worse outcomes than their white counterparts as they continue to ‘fight for a place and future in the country’ (Olusoga, 2016: 517).

The collision of race and gender inequality in HE means Black women live in a ‘contradictory combination of progress and stasis’ (Winant, 2006: 988) where they are both rewarded and valued for their outward facing institutional utility while also being disregarded and punished. This situation is maintained by slow to non-existent change and supported by the ‘many libertarians [who] subscribe to an extreme view that denies the existence of positive rights and favors a laissez-faire free market no matter how horrible the consequences may be’ (Ladson -Billings, 2024: 3); this is ‘color-blind’ (Leonardo and Grubb, 2019: 7) and a ‘luxury to avoid understanding how race works’ (Leonardo and Grubb, 2019: 7). Through failing to understand the contours of the way race and gender discrimination operate in HE these inactions consign Black women to be poorly treated by systems and

individuals and deny them the opportunity for access to affirmative action programmes which could offer more relevant support and better support their progression.

By taking an instrumental approach and implementing easily quantifiable metrics such as, for example, how many staff have completed online racial literacy training 'or the superficial inclusion of bodies and buzzwords like diversity' (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018: 152), universities may easily persuade themselves they are taking robust action to challenge inequality while the structures, systems and policies which produced have produced discrimination remain in place. Meaningful change can only be achieved if systems are 'fundamentally reworked with principles of racial equity at the core' (Rollock, 2018: 327). This more profound approach needs to be preceded by the active deconstruction of current structures of oppression.

The challenge that lies ahead for HEs is the need to wake up from 'the historical amnesia that offers selective views of reality' (Accioly and Macedo, 2022: 1) and to confront racial and gender inequities even if this requires radical or uncomfortable action such as needing 'to face their own racist behaviour and to name the contours of racism' (Hayes II, 2023:165). HE needs to move beyond statements of good intent and to actively engage with Black women to determine 'what works and what does not in assisting' (Leroy-Dyer, 2022: 41) this group instead of imposing solutions which, based on the composition of management teams of many universities, have most likely been generated by a white male leadership team who may lack sufficient understanding of gendered race discrimination and therefore may not have identified the most appropriate action. Because race and gender discrimination depend on 'multiple factors that operate together to reinforce exclusion or preferential treatment' (Burgess, Dhakal and Cameron, 2022: 4) no single action could

redress the complex intersections and presentation of oppression. Only through a systematic process of deconstruction of current systems followed by a race-and-gender-alert reconstruction of the HE can Black women hope to attain 'equal opportunities and organisational support mechanisms to succeed and grow' (Dhakal, 2022: 19) and to move towards equality with their counterparts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Because 'gender and race were the key factors organising access to and rewards in the US and United Kingdom labour market' (Burgess, Dhakal and Cameron, 2022: 5) and 'institutional initiatives to address race inequalities often fail to engage seriously with the fundamental aspects of race and racism' (Rollock, 2018:314), Black women have been and continue to be disadvantaged in HE. While many academic staff believe in equality and find ways to incorporate the principles of social justice into their practice and into the structures of their workplace HE 'is now deeply colonized by neoliberal policies and practices' (Matias, 2023: 217). As these practices are so deeply entrenched they have become normalised to such an extent that they are no longer visible and are accepted instead of being questioned and actively opposed. This creeping normalisation of subjugation represents a significant threat to progress for racial and gender equality with 'new patterns of insidious racism and deep inequalities' (Mirza[b], 2018: 176) taking root in HE and 'white dominance and privilege' (Housee, 2023: 199) taken as the given and only way to organise HE.

In this environment where the voices, knowledge and understandings of Black women are located on the fringes of university life, old failed practices are returned to in a mistaken optimism that they will succeed instead of finding ways to 'embrace a new era of

democratisation and diversity' (Mirza[a], 2018: 5) which value and cherish the voices of Black women and actively engage them in both the formal and informal decisions making structures of the organization. HE needs to urgently re-examine internal operational practice and engage with Black women to identify deficits in the current system and to build more appropriate mechanisms for the future.

A serious approach to equality demands 'more than access to material benefits, it also refers to recognizing and encompassing difference' (Burgess, Subas and Cameron, 2022:4) and supporting 'managers and leaders to envision, create and implement [an] organisational culture that is based on mutual respect and openness' Haramincicp, 2022: 159). As part of this change HE necessarily needs to provide meaningful training and other progression opportunities to Black women to support their personal and professional development. Such openness and respect is a perquisite in signaling organisational willingness to value contributions made by Black staff and is an important step in removing current barriers encountered by Black women and creating a more inclusive, encouraging institutional culture; a culture where Black women can be confident they are not solely an equality statistic, they are valued, fully-fledged members of the organisation supported to play a significant role to play in the future of HE.

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