BLACK TO FRONT

For the first time, we are holding a sustained, sensible discussion about race at work. Jane Simms meets four people with personal perspectives on the topic and asks whether it will bring progress, or more paralysis

Portrait ___ Richard Cannon

When business psychologist and author Binna Kandola was first mulling over ideas for a book about race bias in organisations, a friend told him he was wasting his time: racism was, she said, "a thing of the past". Knocked off kilter by the conversation, he tested his idea on others, and the responses were illuminating. "Those who understood my project and responded to it were a diverse group. Those who didn't get it were, without exception, white," he says.

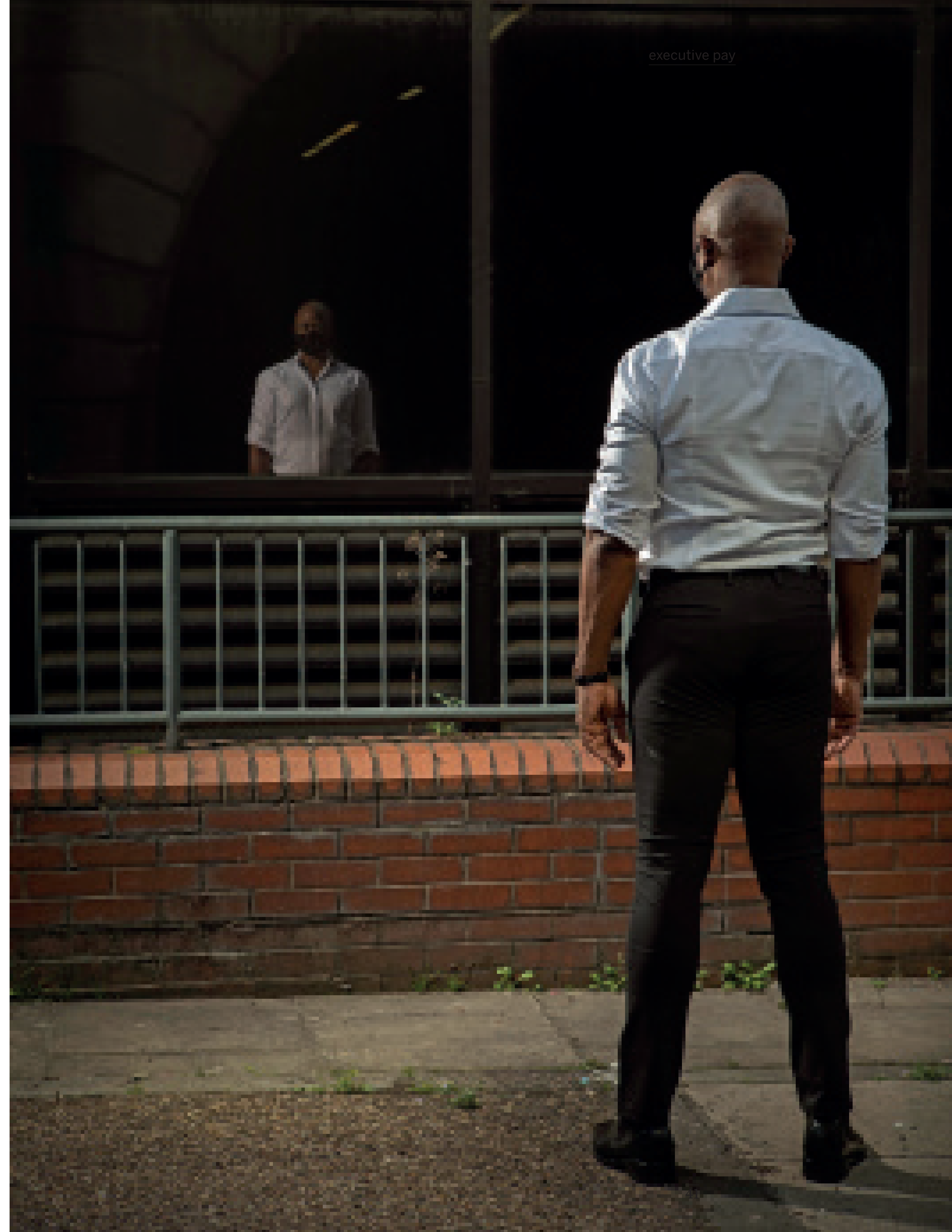
At the heart of the issue, he believes, is that many white people don't recognise the problem of racism because they are not affected by it. This may seem a simplistic perspective from which to tackle a complex debate, but it is too easy to overlook. Forward-looking businesses tackle the issue by hiring D&I specialists, setting up minority networks, running unconscious bias training (something that many believe does not work) and diversity awards, and appointing someone of colour to their boards. Having ticked the 'right' boxes, they get on with business as usual but, even so, racism can be alive and kicking – and in a form that is more difficult to tackle than the more overt racism of the past. "Modern racism is subtle, covert and indirect, and so insidious that we may not be aware that we are behaving in racist ways ourselves," says Kandola.

The starting point in tackling racism at work, then, is for everyone – especially white people – to understand the lived experience of minorities. This is not comfortable, and certainly not uncontentious. Twenty years ago, US academics John Dovidio and Samuel Gaertner likened racism to "a virus that has mutated... into forms more difficult to recognise". People are subject to myriad daily signals that they do not belong. These 'micro incivilities' range from ignoring, talking over or undermining a person of colour, to asking 'where they are really from' and paying them what they imagine to be compliments but are in reality reinforcing a sense of difference. As Karen Blackett, UK CEO of media giant GroupM, has pointed out, people will comment on "the brightness of my clothes and how they match my skin tone", or the size of her lips – "you could take out shares in those". She likens the effect of "daily, tiny little put-downs" to an accumulation of mosquito bites: one is annoying and itchy, but by the end of the day you have a painful swollen arm.

Individual micro-incivilities may seem inconsequential on their own but cumulatively their impact can be huge. And, as became clear when a tsunami of anger erupted following the killing of George Floyd in the US in May, manifested in the Black Lives Matter protests, stark racial inequalities still exist across multiple aspects of UK life – from health and policing, through education, pay and career progression.

In Britain's boardrooms the issue is particularly acute. Gender disparity persists, in spite of years of focus on it. But the problem of ethnic exclusion from board and executive levels is of a different order of magnitude. The 2020 Parker review, published in February, found that just 52 FTSE 100 companies have at least one ethnic minority director on their board. Thirty-one have none and 13 didn't provide sufficient information.

Executive recruitment and diversity consultancy Green Park revealed a similar picture in its most recent →



Leadership 10,000 report, published last December. It found that just 3.3 per cent of chairs, CEOs and CFOs of FTSE 100 companies were ethnic minorities and 7.4 per cent of board and executive committee roles were. Ethnic minority representation in the 'top 100' leadership pipeline is flatlining, it added.

That is of particular concern for black people, who are consistently at a greater disadvantage than other ethnic minority groups. According to Business in the Community research, the proportion of top management roles across private sector organisations held by employees with black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds is currently 10.3 per cent, a figure that falls to 1.5 per cent for black employees (who make up more than 3 per cent of the population in England and Wales). In the US, there are just four black CEOs in the Fortune 500.

Despite a well-rehearsed business case – a 2015 McKinsey report, *Why diversity matters*, found that of the 366 companies it surveyed, those in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity in management were 35 per cent more likely to have financial returns above their industry average – ethnic minority representation appears to be slipping down the corporate agenda. That resonates with Yetunde Hofmann, a black executive with experience at companies including Imperial Brands, where she was global HR director, who says: "I've been invited for interviews with top executive search firms, and been told I didn't have 'the right industry background', and by a chair of a board I met at an event: 'I already have one black woman on my board.'"

> *"Candidates have their reputation to think about. They don't want to be associated with hypocrisy or tokenism"*

Equally, says Green Park CEO Raj Tulsiani, qualified candidates with ethnic minority backgrounds turn down roles if they believe hiring companies are not genuinely committed to equality. "These candidates want their ethnicity to be a value-add to everything else they bring to the board," he says. "They also have their own personal brand and reputation to think about: they don't want to be associated with a company that stands accused of hypocrisy or tokenism."

If white employees fail to understand the lived experience of their colleagues, this disconnect is only more acute in the boardroom. The reasons for the exclusion of ethnic minorities from the senior ranks are myriad, complex – and hard-wired. Part of the problem, says Tulsiani, is that initiatives to address the problem have failed because they amount to 'colouring by numbers'.

In the wake of George Floyd's death, Adidas hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons. The company, which relies on black Americans to both buy and market its products, used social media to condemn racism and call for unity in creating change. Its diversity employment record, however, falls short of its image: its board is entirely white, racial diversity was absent from the diversity statement in its 2019 annual report, and its head of HR left in June amid reports she had dismissed concerns by ethnic minority employees that they were being discriminated against.

The firm is by no means the only example. Other brands have been criticised for their response to Floyd's death – and their corresponding lack of black talent at a senior leadership level – including Nike (which launched a monochrome ad across social media), Spotify (blacked-out playlists and podcasts) and Apple (all-black playlists).

In *Reflections on the labyrinth: Investigating black and minority ethnic leaders' career experiences*, UK academics Madeleine Wyatt and Jo Silvester point out that ethnic minorities have to navigate an elaborate maze to achieve a leadership role – and even then may hit a 'concrete ceiling'. At a certain level, they get tired of peering up at the snowy white peaks and leave, often to set up their own companies – though this route is challenging too (a report by Warwick Business School found black-owned businesses were more likely to be rejected for an overdraft and charged higher interest rates than their white-owned counterparts).

A major contributing factor is exclusion from the informal networks that are critical to career progression. Management professor Fred Luthans concludes that "networking seems to be the key to success [as measured by speed of promotion]... rather than being effective". Such networks are often almost exclusively white. Formal minority networks, on the other hand, can provide safe, mutually supportive spaces, but may unwittingly serve to reinforce the differences between 'in' and 'out' groups.

This network effect has an influence even before ethnic minorities start work. Though highly educated – UK minority groups are 50 per cent more likely to go to university – they are less likely to be predicted the grades required for a Russell Group university, one of the most fertile hunting grounds for corporates. Consequently, say the authors of a 2016 Policy Exchange report, black students cluster in "low prestige, poorly ranked universities", which affects their subsequent progress – not least because of "reduced social connections to the people who carry influence".

At board level there is, Tulsiani observes, "a high level of discomfort addressing 'the race issue'", and the language itself is a stumbling block. The common heuristic 'BAME' is not only unhelpful, reinforcing as it does the idea of 'whites' and a homogeneous lump of 'others', but also, says Hofmann, "inherently racist and discriminatory". Boards are nervous of using the wrong words, of saying and doing the wrong thing, says CIPD chief executive Peter Cheese, and their defensiveness can stem from an unwillingness to "reveal their ignorance" about their companies' records on diversity. Data on ethnic minorities, including exit figures, are in short supply. "Boards have to be challenged and made to feel uncomfortable if things are going to change," says Cheese.

"Rather than trotting out the same old platitudes, we have to educate ourselves, not least by listening to the insights and lived experiences of our ethnic minority colleagues, and by gathering demographics and data."

Adrian Walcott, marketing and sales director of change consultancy Brands with Values, and co-founder of BAME 2020, established to increase the representation of ethnic minorities in the marketing and communications industry, agrees. Race might be a tricky issue, he says, but it's not a good enough reason for failing to address the problem. A politics and economics graduate from the University of London who went to Africa to get his first job in the media because he felt "marginalised" in the UK, he believes the discomfort some white people feel about being white is a good thing because it should give them at least some idea of what ethnic minorities have been feeling for hundreds of years. Some people need to get over themselves, he suggests: "Be open and honest, and lean into the debate."

In her 2018 book *White Fragility*, US academic Robin DiAngelo argued that it is those who are supposedly the most liberal, who 'have black friends' or are 'colour blind', who do the most damage because they fail to see their complicity. Protestations that 'race doesn't matter' prevent us from grappling with the fact that it clearly does, and serve to "reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy".

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For Kandola, the belief that we are not racist – and that by extension our organisations aren't either – is one of the most serious obstacles to making racial equality a reality. We need to acknowledge we are all, to a greater or lesser extent, racially prejudiced – and understand where that prejudice comes from. To do that, he says, we need to go back nearly 600 years to the "genesis of modern racism". On 8 August 1444 in Lagos, Portugal, 235 captured black Africans were sold into slavery, marking the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. At the auction, the slaves were graded by colour, and the lighter the colour the higher the price they commanded. "At that point, the notion of 'blacks' as being inferior first emerged, and it changed everything," says Kandola.

Until then, skin colour was not seen as an indicator of someone's personality, qualities or intellect, and dark-skinned individuals held high office in the church, the military, science, philosophy – and business and commerce – in countries where white people were in the majority. "Racial prejudice is, therefore, not an inherent human function," writes Kandola. However, by the 19th century, "the ideas of the so-called science of race – the idea that some humans were superior to others – permeated everyday life" and the stereotypes that influence us today, despite our conscious efforts to eradicate them, were engrained.

Such stereotypes die hard. Research from law firm Slater and Gordon in 2019 found that three out of five BAME workers felt their career would suffer if they didn't 'westernise' their name. Even white men with 'black sounding' names get paid less than white men. And research by Martin Wood and others in a series of experiments carried out by NatCen for the Department for Work and Pensions in 2009 found that when like-for-like 'black' and 'white' CVs were sent as part of job applications, a white candidate needed to make 9.3 applications, compared to 16.2 for a non-white candidate, to be called back to the next stage.

There is a sense now that we may have finally reached an inflection point on racism. "There is a great deal of frustration about how long we have been talking about this. People want action," says Cheese. "We can't leave it to chance. We must create action plans and put sustained focus on this. The recent anger has been a massive wake-up call for lots of us, including me, and I've been working in this space for years. We have to commit to doing things differently."

Robust ethnic pay gap reporting (the outcome of a government consultation, which closed in January 2019, is still awaited) would help because it would focus corporate attention, but tackling the issue will not be a straightforward task. Even within the HR profession, there is still some way to go – the CIPD lacks people of colour in its senior ranks, admits Cheese, and while around 12 per cent of UK HR professionals have an ethnic minority background, the numbers reduce as seniority increases.

Dismantling the complicated corporate infrastructure that supports organisational bias, Walcott believes, will require a comprehensive culture change programme, rather than simply bolting on more potentially counterproductive initiatives. Ethnic quotas, for instance, are advocated by some, while others believe they may put those who are thought to have benefited from them in an invidious position. But Cheese remains hopeful that "the anger stemming from the death of George Floyd will last long enough to provide cover for us all to create meaningful change".

Centuries of negative stereotypes may have led us to where we are now but, concludes Tulsiani, the focus needs to be on creating positive change, rather than recriminating about the past. Taking a systemic approach, he believes, will benefit other areas of exclusion too, as well as setting organisations up to better cope with some of the challenges that lie ahead, such as climate change. Failing to do so will make companies "vulnerable to the next black swan event", he warns. "It's about creating sustainable businesses. You have to adapt yourself to the future." Those above-average financial returns reported by McKinsey for businesses with a good record on ethnic diversity are a starting point, but it's clear they are no more than that. →

TOVE OKUNNIWA

“The idea that all ethnic minorities have similar experiences is not helpful”

Okunniwa is CEO of London Sport, an independent director at Sport England and a trustee of third sector business Catch22. She previously led two successful brand engagement agencies

The assumption that there is ‘a way’ that someone of colour progresses up the corporate ladder suggests more homogeneity than there actually is. My white counterparts have done exactly what I’ve done – you get to a certain stage and take on non-executive director roles. Like the catch-all ‘BAME’, the idea that all ethnic minorities have similar experiences is not helpful.

I don’t get up in the morning thinking ‘I am a black woman; what does that mean for me?’ Apart from the odd time, thankfully, I’ve never had my ethnicity pushed in my face. And I have never consciously faced a barrier or impediment in my career that was about my skin colour. But more recently I have sometimes wondered whether opportunities I wasn’t given were because I genuinely wasn’t good enough, or for other reasons – like being black, or a woman, or just a bit different.

I’ve never felt I’ve been invited on to a board as a ‘token’. I’m selective about the organisations I work for – I look at cultural fit, the value I can add and whether our aspirations are aligned.

Being a woman of colour doesn’t make you a D&I expert. As a leader, I need to grow my own knowledge and skill base in this area. The vast majority of people I come across want to do the right thing on D&I, but are sometimes frightened about being clumsy around it. It can be an uncomfortable conversation to start to have, but it begins with education.

Race is a sensitive subject, which, over the years, I had chosen not to talk about, because I didn’t really want to be defined by it. Only recently have I started to feel differently, and I think part of that is about feeling more secure about who I am. I spent many years assessing what I needed to be to thrive in a particular environment. The point where it became OK to bring your ‘authentic self’ to work, was when I started to embrace the fact that I don’t necessarily fit into anybody’s assumptions of who I ought to be. →

Diane Patrice/University of Greenwich

Richard Cannon

ERIC COLLINS

“Black people are dying... we have a crisis”

Collins heads Impact X, a venture capital firm set up to support under-represented entrepreneurs in Europe and the UK. It has raised around £100m from backers, and has so far invested in 17 businesses

There’s no reason the next big successful business shouldn’t be run by a black person. But you need lots of capital, and institutions to believe in you. And apart from Impact X, where is the institution in the UK that believes the way to make a lot of money is to invest in black entrepreneurs?

Attempts to understand the issue have simply ‘polished the problem’. We have a black crisis in the UK: black people and black businesses are dying. But that’s not the majority view. Most people have the luxury of sitting and reading the newspaper and saying: ‘You know what, this is terrible!’ There’s no urgency.

Most boards are made up of a lot of average people, until you get to a conversation about which people of colour you should look for, and then you have to have Barack Obama or our chairman, Ursula Burns, the only black woman to have run a Fortune 500 company. I get calls every day about suitable candidates for board positions but it feels a bit like asking the slaves about things we could do to make slavery more palatable.

Conversations about diversity typically focus on women on boards and equal pay. When race is discussed, it is usually in the context of BAME, which is too amorphous. It’s only because of the Black Lives Matter protests that we’ve started to look at finding solutions to the challenges faced by people of the African diaspora. The language has changed. Now terms like ‘systemic racism’ and ‘microaggressions’ are in greater use.

I face barriers based on the colour of my skin every day. The dean of Southwark Cathedral invited me to a meeting in his house, and as I rang the bell someone asked me if I was making a delivery. That may seem innocuous, but it indicates an ‘otherness’ that has to be negotiated – and that can escalate very quickly into something that is not just uncomfortable, but dangerous.

These days I won’t work with organisations that don’t have black partners, because there is a conversation to be had that I don’t have the time or capacity to take on.

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Liz Seabrook

KIKE ONIWINDE

"Someone like me doesn't fit the usual description"

A former Team GB athlete, Oniwinde is co-founder and CEO of BYP Network, a platform that connects black professionals. It has more than 40,000 members

I did well at school and university, I was an international athlete and won awards and competitions – doors have always opened for me. But I suddenly realised that others around me weren't getting those opportunities. People like us just don't have the connections that lots of white people do. My time in Florida [as an athletics scholar] was a turning point: I met black students with lots of different backgrounds doing exceptional things, and it broadened my horizons. For a lot of people the epitome of success is to be an athlete or musician. Yes, we have that, but it's not the only story.

When I started trying to raise money, I didn't realise what the statistics were. Less than 1 per cent of venture capital funding goes to black businesses and only 4 per cent to women. The VC world is super-elitist and it's dominated by white men. They invest in people who look like them. They 'pattern match' and someone like me doesn't fit the description.

Every one of us has racism stories. In sixth form, my maths teacher refused to give me the A* prediction I needed to go to Oxbridge – despite getting 92 per cent in my AS level. I dropped further maths AS level because of that. None of the black students got the A* predictions they needed and they never gave us a reason. There are too few black teachers and professors, which doesn't help.

We are constantly being told it is traumatic to be black but I'm optimistic that things are changing. The narrative on the news is knife crime, high Covid deaths, police officers kneeling on people's necks. Colin Kaepernick [the NFL quarterback who knelt during the national anthem to protest against racism] lost his job. The fact that all sorts of sports stars are now kneeling and not losing their jobs shows progress. Beyond that, companies have pledged more than $1.6bn to black initiatives and organisations, and more people, including 'allies', are speaking up.

There is an expectation in our communities that when you are successful, you send the elevator back down. My ambition used to be to become the world record holder in javelin. My ambition now is to impact black lives globally.

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SONITA ALLEYNE

"Young people will challenge us to change"

Alleyne became the first female master at Jesus College, Cambridge, and the first black master of an Oxbridge college. She has held board roles including at the BBC Trust, British Board of Film Classification and London Legacy Development Corporation

It wasn't a conscious decision to set up my own company as a route to 'success'. If you've defined success at a young age you're already limiting yourself. I was aware of racism when I was growing up, but when I set up [content agency] Somethin' Else my driving force was building the business, so I couldn't limit myself to working on projects about race topics.

There are various equality issues at the BBC, and I think there needs to be more honest conversations about how people come into the industry and move into positions of responsibility. There are maybe not enough black commissioners across radio or TV.

Any good chairman or nomination committee will be going to their search firm and asking for diverse long and shortlists. Sometimes I'm approached because I tick that box, but a lot of times I'm approached because I'm good – and I've always gone through all the stages of interview along with everyone else.

Role models are very important. When I was 11 or 12 and I saw [anti-racism campaigner] Trevor Phillips being interviewed as chairman of the National Union of Students, I thought 'wow, that's amazing, I could be a student, I'm going to go for that'. You have to be 'visible' and accessible to people, especially young people.

Young people are fairly inclusive and engaged with diversity. Increasingly they will be challenging organisations to change, to the extent that they will stop buying from them or applying to work for them. Maybe children are already asking their parents what the organisations they work in look like from a diversity perspective.

I do get scrutiny as a black woman leader. You can't have a mediocre day. People were jubilant when Obama was elected president, and I said: 'We'll know we've got true equality if we can say he was a rubbish president.' I'm not saying he was, of course, but we need to move to the point where we can just be people. W

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