

Through the looking glass

Experiences of career women of colour at work



Full Colour
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Thank you to the sixteen career women of colour who took part in Full Colour's informal gatherings in November 2024 and January 2025. This report summarises what they told us. We are so grateful for the openness with which they shared their experiences and wisdom. Our conversations were wonderful to be part of.

To all career women of colour, we hope reading this report will help you realise you are not alone and that there is an amazing community of talented, ambitious, kind and generous women on the journey with you.

Report author: Srabani Sen OBE, Founder and CEO of Full Colour

To get in touch, contact Srabani Sen at srabani.sen@fullclr.com or Izzy Taylor on info@fullclr.com

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1 Introduction

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice steps through a mirror into a world that at first looks like one she recognises. Gradually she realises everything is turned on its head, even logic. Running makes you stand still. Moving away from something brings it closer. The Red Queen tells Alice that the world is a giant chess board. She offers to make Alice a queen if she can move to the eighth rank in a chess match, which sets Alice on a fantastical journey.

This well-known children's story could have been written as a metaphor for women of colour's journey up the career ladder: a journey full of unwritten, unexplained rules, where what we are told will make us successful, is often not the case.

1.1 About our informal gatherings and this report

Between November 2024 and January 2025, Full Colour Founder and CEO Srabani Sen hosted a series of informal gatherings of career women of colour, most of whom were middle and senior managers. Sixteen women attended. They came from the world of banking, consultancy, non-profits, public and private sectors.

Despite differences in nature, size and sector of the organisations they worked in, common themes emerged repeatedly about these women's experiences at work. This report summarises those themes.

The purpose of the gatherings was not research. It was to begin to develop a community of career women of colour who could share experiences and knowledge, and who could support each other. **From these gatherings we are forming the Together We Rise Network. You can find out more about this on page 14 of this report.**

The commonality of experiences was so marked, Srabani decided to document them so other career women of colour could see they are not alone and understand that their difficulties were not somehow due to failings in themselves.

This report also aims to help employers begin to examine and address what they can do to ensure women of colour have a more equitable and positive experience at work.

1.2 Thank you

Thank you to all the women who contributed their experiences to this report and who supported each other with such warmth and care at our informal gatherings.

To protect confidentiality this report will not name the women on whose experiences it is based or provide details that could identify them.

If you are a career woman of colour and want to join our the Together We Rise Network, contact Srabani Sen on srabani.sen@fullclr.com or Izzy Taylor on info@fullclr.com. If you know women of colour who might like to join us, please share this report and contact details.

2 Common experiences of career women of colour

Some issues and experiences raised by career women of colour who joined Full Colour's informal gatherings, were specific to their circumstances. Most were common to many. This report sets out the most frequently shared experiences.

2.1 Microaggressions and aggressions

Many women shared experiences of microaggressions and overt aggressions in the workplace which went **unaddressed by their colleagues or their organisations**. In most instances bystanders did not step in. Often the women themselves did not know how to address or report what had happened.

Some of the examples shared were of **overt aggressions and explicit racism**. There is a danger that increased awareness of the term "microaggressions" could minimise the impact of overt aggressions by lumping such behaviour under the same heading.

Many women said that the **impact of microaggressions and aggressions worsened when reported because:**

- **Microaggressions, overt aggressions and their impact were not understood** by those receiving the report. This meant:
 - Women had to take pains to explain why an incident was a microaggression or aggression and the impact it had had. The need to do this compounded the effect of the incident itself
 - The severity of the impact was not recognised or acknowledged by those to whom it was reported
- They were **not believed** or the behaviour they experienced was:
 - Explained away
 - Justified by the person receiving the report
 - Dismissed as unimportant
 - Deemed to be "misunderstood" by the woman reporting it

There is a **generational element** too. Older women of colour spoke of being the "first" in their organisations in many of their roles, making it harder for them or their career ambitions to be accepted by peers. This led to many keeping their heads down and not contributing to discussions, even when more qualified than those who did speak and were listened to. This experience affected how they showed up in subsequent roles.

2.2 Being held to a different standard than others

Many women reported being **blamed, criticised or being expected to address behaviours that were ignored or accepted in others**. The expression "that's just Steve" was used to

explain how others' behaviour was put down to their character quirks, whereas similar behaviour in women of colour was seen as something to be addressed.

Others experienced **being expected to “mother” their teams**, e.g. ensure everyone's birthday was marked or snacks brought in for team meetings. These things were not expected of male counterparts.

Some women spoke of **having to over-explain themselves** or justify their views in meetings for their point **to be heard**.

2.3 Self-doubt

Many women reported that self-doubt was **corroding their confidence, dampening their capacity to achieve their potential**, and in some cases, hampering their ability to form meaningful relationships at work. Self-doubt was sometimes fuelled by how they were treated by others, or by limiting beliefs stemming from past experiences at work or from their upbringing.

Some found themselves actively searching for flaws or reasons to **blame themselves for the behaviour and attitudes of others**. The self-doubt these situations caused often remained long after the situation itself had ended.

For some, the belief passed on by parents and family that women of colour must work twice as hard and be twice as good as others to get half as far, left them **exhausted** or continually **striving for impossibly high standards**.

The biases of others can lead career women of colour to be **perceived as “diversity hires” and not being recognised for their skills**. These perceptions sometimes fed into women's own sense of imposter syndrome, and the need continually to prove themselves to others and to themselves. (See below)

2.4 Continually proving their worth to themselves and others

Most women reported feeling imposter syndrome, including many with senior roles. The presence of imposter syndrome is well known. However, what is talked about less is the experience of career women of colour **needing to prove themselves repeatedly** in the workplace, whatever their skills, experience or level of qualification, whereas **other colleagues' abilities and competence are taken on trust**.

This need to continually reprove themselves is not only tiring, but it also fed into many women's self-doubt.

2.5 Not knowing the rules of the career game

Many career women of colour have been taught, either by their families or by early career experiences, that to progress up the career ladder they need to work hard, accumulate

qualifications and build experience or a track record of success. However, when applying for more senior roles, these **accomplishments do not always lead to the career success** they were led to believe was possible.

Many talked about **not knowing the unwritten rules of the “game”** such as how to position themselves for career progress or be considered when promotion opportunities came up. Others talked about **not knowing how to access the people or “rooms” where key decisions are made**, and where they could demonstrate their abilities and value.

Women shared that **progression can be as much about connections as competence**. Other responsibilities such as caring for children or older family members can restrict some women's abilities to network outside of working hours, which can limit their ability to form the relationships that can set them up for career success. Others talked about not wanting to schmooze to progress, but that this was expected.

Some talked about recruitment agencies feeding back to them about having to actively lobby for them with prospective employers. The **agencies could see their accomplishments, talent and potential in ways that prospective employers could not**.

A small number of women of colour expressed **fear of moving to new organisations** in case other organisations' workplace cultures were worse than what they were currently experiencing.

Some talked about **hitting a ceiling of progression** and not knowing how to progress, even though they were more experienced and qualified than peers who were promoted. An older career woman of colour noted that it **took her twice as long to progress up the hierarchy as her peers**, though she noted that this may have been compounded by self-doubt. She pointed out that there were few fast track or dedicated programmes available to her when she was building her career.

2.6 Managing the emotions and biases of others

Many of the women reported **having to manage other people's discomfort around discrimination**.

A common theme in EDI work is that leaders and others with “majoritised” characteristics express fear, guilt or discomfort when addressing bias and discrimination. While understandable, this has the effect of centring their emotions rather than the feelings of people directly affected by the issues.

The cost to the emotions and resilience of career women of colour from having to manage the emotions of those who benefit from the way things work now was a constant theme.

Another theme was **those not affected by issues** faced by career women of colour **thinking they understand**, but in reality, their understanding was limited. This can lead to well-meaning but inept attempts to help and not recognising that they needed to learn.

A recurring theme was **feeling the need to support junior career women of colour** who turn to senior women for support. This can involve having to reassure and advise them, and having to “hold” emotions offloaded to them. This can add a **heaviness and exhaustion for senior women of colour**.

A specific issue raised by several women of colour was **not knowing how to navigate the biases of colleagues while maintaining positive relationships necessary for effective collaborative working**. That those raising the issue felt that in part, they were responsible for dealing with the biases of others was telling in and of itself.

2.7 Harder to be authentic at work

For the last few years there has been an **increasing focus on leaders being “authentic”**, however this has **added** a degree of **complexity to women of colour who achieve leadership** positions. There are several reasons for this.

- There may be a **greater separation between who they are** outside of work and the leader they need to be within work, e.g. due to different religious and cultural expectations outside work
- Consciously or unconsciously, **women of colour are often seen through the lens of stereotypes and their leadership judged on this basis**. E.g. the stereotype of South Asian women can be one of meekness or subservience, meaning confident, articulate South Asian women leaders can be considered strident or aggressive
 - One woman described this as being perceived as “the bitch”.
 - Others described it as not knowing how to be heard
- **Colleagues “receive” authenticity differently** when offered by people with “majoritised” characteristics, e.g. white men showing their vulnerability is often seen as a strength, whereas in women can be seen as weakness
- **Peers still do not visualise leaders as women of colour**, which makes being “authentic” harder.

Women of colour shared that they had to choose how to be in the different work situations. They said that they **don't feel they have the luxury to be authentically themselves**.

2.8 Expectations of others and themselves to champion EDI

Repeatedly career women of colour reported **either explicit or implicit expectations on them to champion EDI simply because they have minoritised characteristics**. E.g:

- They are **expected to represent other women of colour** (even though their experiences are unique to them) or understand the issues of all people who may look like them
- They are **expected to take part in or lead EDI** efforts whereas “majoritised” colleagues are not
- People ask them to **share harmful experiences** to provide as an “easy” way for people with “majoritised” people to learn

Some women had a self-generated sense of responsibility to contribute to change so the next generation of career women of colour have better experiences. Some described this as **feeling the need to “send the lift down”** for those earlier in their career.

2.9 Being “the only”

Being the only woman of colour in professional settings is a common experience. As well as feeling more **visible or exposed** in a work setting, if they do experience double standards, microaggressions or other challenges, career women of colour can feel:

- As if **they do not have anyone with whom they can talk through or process** what they are going through.
 - Even with sympathetic “majoritised” people who do not understand the nature, emotional or intellectual impact of the challenges, the act of having to explain in order to get support can be exhausting
- Their ability to form deep **working relationships is hampered**
- That because others do not always recognise microaggressions or overt aggressions or their impact, they do not try to provide support

2.10 Decision fatigue

Decision fatigue is a well-recognised phenomenon, with personal development gurus urging us all to minimise our number of daily choices as much as possible. For many career women of colour this is not possible. E.g. Many women reported **code switching**, where people adapt their language and behaviour to fit in, as being a normal and necessary. This **requires constant assessment of the current situation and decisions on how to behave**.

Career women of colour regularly must make **choices on which issues to raise and which battles to pick**. This is a drain on energy and resilience.

Decision fatigue also related to having to **choose when to be authentic** and when to wear a mask in order to manage organisational politics or interpersonal work relationships.

2.11 Exhaustion

The overall theme shared by nearly all the women we spoke to was of **being exhausted, undervalued and lonely**. Some women had children, and given their own experiences, worried about how to equip their sons and daughters for the world of work.

The career women of colour we spoke with craved:

- The **community** of other career women of colour with whom they could feel safe and with whom they could belong
- Being able to tap into the **wisdom of other women** who have had similar experiences or have found solutions to the challenge of navigating the workplace
- To grow their **networks**



2.12 In conclusion

The complexity and stress of being a career woman of colour can be intense. The **commonality in issues they face is striking, whichever sector they work in.**

Many development programmes targeted at them assume there is something lacking in these women. The evidence of these conversations is that **what they lack is knowledge and support on how to navigate workplaces designed for others and not for them.**

3 Actions employers can take

3.1 Examine and respond to the data

The key is to collect the **right** data and take **action** to address issues surfaced. Examples include:

- Tracking diversity in recruitment at three stages: who applies, who gets shortlisted, who gets appointed
- Progression data: who applies for promotion and who gets appointed
- Exit rates, e.g. do minoritised colleagues stay with you for less time than others? If yes, what qualitative work can you do to find out why?
- Staff engagement data broken down by demographic. Are minoritised people reporting poorer experiences or satisfaction? If yes, what qualitative work can you do to find out why?
 - **Caution:** If you have low numbers of minoritised people you may not be able to protect confidentiality in breaking data down by demographics. If this is the case, this solution is unlikely to be right for you
- Anonymising exit interviews to collect aggregate data on the experiences of minoritised staff. E.g. outsourcing exit interview processes
- Tracking issues raised by minoritised colleagues through employee assistance schemes and addressing themes

3.2 Develop leaders and managers

Most leaders and managers do not set out intentionally to disadvantage women of colour they are there to support. However, they often **lack the competencies needed to lead and manage diverse teams**. Organisations could do much to equip leaders and managers to:

- Understand the practical and systemic barriers career women of colour face
- Surface and understand their own biases and develop practical actions to counter them
- Understand what equity and inclusion look like in practice and how to apply this understanding to how they lead and manage
- Learn practical competencies such as ways to create psychological safety, how to analyse and address team culture issues, how to diagnose and address the tangible and intangible ways power works in their teams to remove unnecessary blocks

3.3 Focus solutions on the real problem

Several organisations have created development programmes for women and people of colour to support them to progress in their careers. These initiatives are welcome, however, they can miss the mark in two ways:

- They fail to equip women and people of colour with the skills needed to navigate the biases of others or systems that were not created with them in mind
- They avoid the real issue, which is addressing the barriers faced by women and people of colour, barriers which they did not create.

It is critical that employers address the biases of colleagues with “majoritised” characteristics in ways which go beyond bland unconscious bias training. Colleagues need to be supported in non-judgmental ways to surface their biases and identify practical actions to counter them.

3.4 Listen to women of colour and support efforts to build community

Many large organisations have employee networks related to particular minoritised characteristics. How can leaders:

- Ensure they regularly attend and listen, when invited to do so
- When they cannot attend, ask for feedback on key issues being raised
- Act on issues identified by these groups in ways that are resourced where necessary
- Feedback what they have done in response to issues raised

For organisations which are not large enough to have employee networks what can leaders do to:

- Find out what communities and sources of support exist for minoritised people and introduce colleagues to what is out there
- Connect career women of colour in their own networks to each other

With any of these solutions, it is important that leaders listen first and shape their actions around what career women of colour say matters to them.

4 About Full Colour

Full Colour was founded and is led by Srabani Sen. Passionate about equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), she established Full Colour to apply strategic and systemic approaches to drive deep, sustainable change.

Full Colour's work includes sector-wide and organisation specific projects to create transformational change. These projects include:

- Designing and delivering bespoke leadership development programmes on EDI for senior executives and Boards
- Auditing, research and diagnostic work
- Developing route maps of change with practical action plans

Srabani also coaches CEOs, C-suite leaders and emerging women leaders of colour.

Full Colour has worked with numerous high-profile brands.



4.1 About Srabani Sen OBE



Srabani marries her deep knowledge of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) with extensive leadership experience. She has served on Boards for nearly 30 years, chaired four and held several CEO roles. Srabani is regularly invited to speak on EDI at conferences, on podcasts and webinars across a range of sectors, has written for *Management Today* and is a regular columnist for *Charity Times Magazine*. Srabani is a judge for the *Charity Times Annual Awards*. Srabani was awarded an OBE for her services to children and families.



5 About the Together We Rise Network

The Together We Rise Network is a group of career women of colour, largely in middle or senior leadership positions. We aim to:

- Be a community of support for women like us
- Build relationships and networks that will support us in current and future roles
- Create ways for women to tap into each others' wisdom and learning as career women of colour

We know large networking events can be sometimes intimidating and not conducive to forming connections with others. Therefore, we keep our gatherings small to allow deeper connection and conversations.

The Together We Rise Network is facilitated by Srabani Sen, CEO of Full Colour. We:

- Organise small social gatherings of up to ten career women of colour
- Facilitate discussions so women can share their wisdom and solutions to common workplace experiences
- Create informal ways career women of colour can connect outside of gatherings

If you are a career woman of colour and want to join our community, contact Srabani Sen on srabani.sen@fullclr.com or Izzy Taylor on info@fullclr.com. If you know women of colour who might like to join us, please share this report and these contact details with them.