Broken Ladders:

The myth of meritocracy
for women of colour
in the workplace

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Equality. It's about time.

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Key findings

- **Racism and systemic barriers are holding women of colour back** at every stage of the career pipeline: 75% of women of colour have experienced racism at work
- **Loss of identity:** 61% of women of colour report changing aspects of themselves to 'fit in'.
- **Navigating these workplace cultures comes at a high cost:** 39% reported their well-being is impacted and 43% reported loss of motivation
- **Institutions must take action:** Government, employers, universities, trade unions across sectors

Chapter 1: Getting a foot in the door

"Well, it's basically that at every stage of my career, I've been encouraged to take a lesser path than the one I wanted to take and that I thought was the right one for me."

Getting a foot in the door

- Poor quality advice and being told to lower their ambitions.
- Application processes involve additional 'mental gymnastics' and 52% experience recruitment discrimination.
- Women of colour were significantly more likely than white women to search for information about the organisation's ethnic diversity (18% vs 7%), gender balance (14% vs 10%), ethnicity pay gap data (11% vs 6%), policies (22% vs 11%), and to have read employee reviews online (38% vs 26%).

Chapter 2: Hard road of progression

"I asked for and almost demanded, to be sent on a leadership development course…I didn't get support from my manager, I sort of insisted on it. They allowed me to go but there was no other support for me back in the workplace…absolutely no opportunity to take that further."

Hard road of progression

- Women of colour are more likely than white women to report being passed over for promotion (42% versus 27%).
- Yet they are more likely to agree that progression is important to them (64% vs 49% for white women).

Chapter 3: the other invisible workload

"But I have always felt working in the organisation that I had to work twice as hard as my counterparts. Because when I was in that team, I was one Asian person in a team of about 15 white British colleagues. And I always felt that I had to prove myself, I had to work the hardest."

The other invisible workload

- 75% of women of colour experience racism at work, with 27% facing racial slurs.

- There is a loss of identity, with 61% of women of colour changing themselves to 'fit-in'.

Chapter 4: I'm in leadership and my face still doesn't fit

"There are zero people of colour in the top 50 companies in this country. Where am I going to go? ...I can't whiten myself... I can't hide myself. I can't integrate. I walk into a room you know I'm Black. I've got a nice English accent that's really you know, "Oh, you're so well-spoken." Oh yeah. You're so educated. I did as much as I can to fit in but it was still never going to be enough."

I'm in leadership and my face still doesn't fit

- Women of colour in senior roles **mistaken** for hospitality or admin staff.

- Adaptations and **'mental gymnastics'** continues even in senior leadership.

- 34% of women of colour **needed** to have their colleagues to vouch for them to have their decisions accepted.

Chapter 5: the cumulative impact on mental health

"It's been absolutely exhausting when you think about the burden.
There are days that you're just saying to yourself, if I thought about it properly, I wouldn't even get out of bed, when you think about just what you have to face on that day-to-day basis."

The impact on mental health

- Over three quarters of women of colour reported that racism at work had impacted feelings about work and well-being.
- 39% of women of colour agreed their well-being had been impacted by a lack of progression compared to 28% of white women.
- Senior women experience burden of 'ambassadorship'.
- Many women of colour leave the workplace for self-employment, but similar challenges are experienced there too.

Chapter 6: Exit into self-employment

"I didn't even contemplate self-employment as an option. I was literally pushed into it. I left without a job. I left without a notion of what self-employment could be."

Exit into self-employment: findings

- The UK's ethnic minority population makes up 14% of the UK population, but only 1.7% of venture capital investments were provided to ethnic minority businesses at seed, early and late stage between 2009 and 2019.

- 33% of employees in the venture capital industry in the UK have graduated from Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Stanford or a business school.

- The expectation of free labour or charging lowers fees for their work is an obstacle for self-employed women of colour.
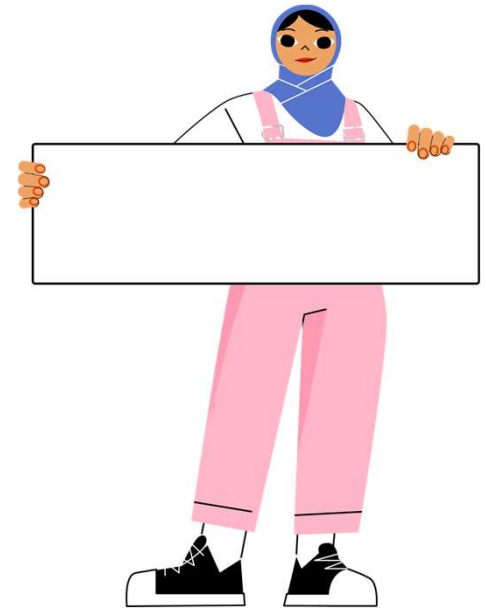
Our
Recommendations

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Recommendations

Government to:
- Introduce mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting
- Legislate to improve pay transparency
- Set up a government-backed, business-led initiative to tackle ethnicity and gender pay gap
- Investigate how experiences of racism impact on the mental health and careers of women of colour.

Recommendations

- Employers to:
  - Minimise bias in recruitment
  - Minimise bias in progression
  - Support women of colour to progress
  - Address racism in organisation's culture and monitor it

- Unions to:
  - Develop and implement anti-racism action plans for themselves
  - Negotiate with employers to introduce our recommendations

- Universities to:
  - Create and implement Anti-Racism Action Plans
  - Review their careers service approach, to reduce the gap in career support experienced by women of colour

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