

'Talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not': The barriers of being black in Britain

A CEO and barrister share their experiences of the obstacles that black people continue to face in Britain

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Karen Blackett writes about the obstacles to black people in business in the UK | CREDIT: Clara Molden

'I hope this will be our tipping point'

By Karen Blackett, WPP UK Country Manager & CEO GroupM UK

"But why?" This is the question that my 10-year old has repeatedly asked me over the last few days. "But why didn't he take his knee off his neck?"; "Why was his knee on his neck in the first place?"; "Why didn't the police officer listen to everyone shouting at him to stop?"

I have found myself helpless, unable to answer these questions about the appalling death of George Floyd in the US – an incident that has sparked protests the world over.

Add to this trying to explain the senseless deaths of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery, shot while jogging in Georgia in February, and Breonna Taylor, 26, shot eight times by police while sleeping in her Louisville home in March.

My 10-year old is a smart, considerate, sensitive boy. He is also a black boy living in London. He is growing up in a single parent household and I am painfully aware of the challenges that he may face.

Don't get me wrong, his household is very different to my own as a child growing up in Reading. He lives in West London, attends an amazing school and has access to so many things that were beyond my reach; drumming lessons, football academies, swimming classes, international holidays (back when we could travel).

But despite this – despite how hard I have worked to become a CEO and change our circumstances – there will always be some people who apply a stereotype before getting to know who he is. My black boy is more likely to be excluded from school (a number three times higher for Caribbean and mixed Caribbean pupils), statistically more likely to be unemployed (ethnic minority unemployment in the UK is double that of the white population).

If he does gain employment, he is likely to earn on average 23 per cent less than his white counterparts. He is almost ten times more likely to be stopped and searched, and is more likely to die from a stab wound, gunshot or foot on his neck – young black men account for one third of killings in London, despite making up only 1.4 per cent of the population.

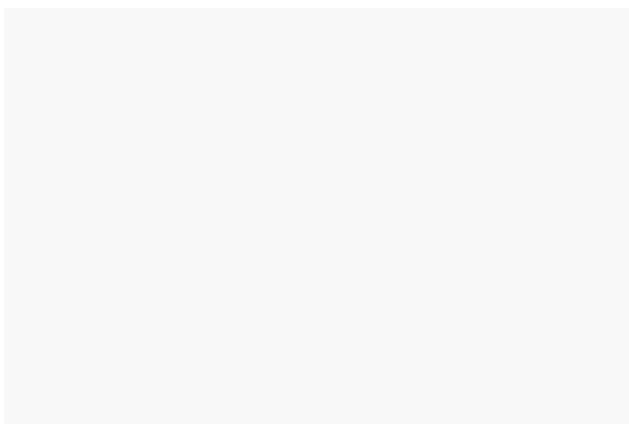
My parents, who grew up in Barbados, always taught me to always celebrate my differences, as they make me who I am. I am trying to instil this belief in my son. He believes that he is not better than anyone else, nor anyone better than him. He believes that whether you are male or female, you should be able to do whatever job you want, and love whoever you want, without judgement or fear. He is a beacon of hope, possibility and optimism – so how do I explain the last few days to him? How much has really changed since I was his age?

When I was 10, the news was awash with reports on the Brixton, Toxteth and Moss Side riots. The pressure cooker of poor housing, high unemployment and racial inequality led to an outburst of built-up resentment. I clearly remember how the name-calling escalated at school; the comments about how prominent my backside was, the size of my lips (apparently you could take shares out in them), and seeing my family's quiet fear and anxiety at home. Skinheads and the rise of the National Front were part of my childhood growing up in the UK.

I heard the comments made in the Commons yesterday, by MP Kemi Badenoch, about Britain being one of the best countries in the world to be a black person. I genuinely don't know what this means. Our focus should be on Britain celebrating supporting and helping every citizen to thrive and strive – regardless of colour. I was appointed the Race Equality Champion for Business in October 2018, as there was a realisation that racial inequality still exists in this country. And the facts speak for themselves: if the UK is one of the best countries to be a black person, why is there just one Black FTSE 100 CEO and only 9.7 per cent directors of colour? As the very wise CEO of Creative England, Caroline Norbury said: Talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not...

So, how much will the events of the last few days really change things? Some people have already called it as our 'MeToo moment' – is it really such a tipping point?

It's true that I'm seeing more calls to action than ever before in my lifetime. There is more collaboration and coming together, too. I felt humbled when more than over 200 people signed an open letter by the organisation Creative Equals, focused on changing our industry. And I am proud to work for an organisation where racism is not tolerated and where, following the horrendous incidents in the US, our leaders promised to play in part in making change.



A Black Lives Matter protest in London in reaction to the murder of George Floyd | CREDIT: Heathcliff O'Malley

But there is much more to do. Less than five per cent of leaders in my industry are from ethnic minority backgrounds. We are creating advertising that should reflect Modern Britain, yet the make-up of our workplaces is far from representative of the world we portray. And as I sit through endless video calls during lockdown, I can't help but notice that mine is still the only black face in the middle of a screen full of (normally) male, grey (or bald), white faces.

I know many of them are empathetic to the fear and pain that I am currently feeling. But it is not the story of their lives, so it is hard for them to truly appreciate what systemic inequality really feels like.

I have seen too many talented black people exit the corporate world, as they do not feel as though they belong. There is a perception that they "don't fit", or heaven forbid, are "difficult", or that all too familiar label, "aggressive" - something my own communication style has been called. I prefer straight-talking.

I cannot count the number of times during meetings, early on in my career, where my voice was not heard; where my ideas were attributed to a white colleague (it couldn't possibly have been me who'd spoken so strategically or logically); where comments were made about my bright clothes. Where my presence was totally ignored.

The times when I have been the only black person in the room and expected to represent an entire race, or only asked to join a meeting because the client happened to be black – not for my expertise.

When I've asked if we have a diverse candidate list for a new role, and been told in all seriousness that surely, we just want the best person for the job? As if the 'best person' couldn't possibly be anything other than privileged or white. Or the times I've been asked to "stop banging on" about inclusion – swiftly followed by a snide comment about how it must be linked to my own self-promotion.

I have seen promotion after promotion of the same type of person that looks like, and thinks like, the past person, without a proper process to allow me to compete. I have found out that a pitch was lost because the client said there was no way they wanted a female business director, let alone a black one.

Things have changed, but the events over the last week show us that systemic inequality is still present. My parents told me that I had to try twice as hard to get half as much; I know that I can never be average. I know that I will not get a second chance, that I will be judged quicker than my white counterparts. But I am determined with the last breath in my body to change the narrative for my son.

I hope the galvanised action that we are witnessing both in the US and the UK will be a tipping point – the moment people turn from being non-racists into active anti-racists. I hope more than anything, for real change.

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