



# Negotiated spaces: black women academics' experiences in UK universities

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## Abstract

A dearth of literature exists on Black women academics' experience in UK universities. This lacunae in research mirrors the lived experiences of many Black women academics: feeling silenced whilst simultaneously experiencing the strain of hypervisibility in their academic roles. Within the global landscape, influencing factors have been highlighted relating to pay disparities between Black women and their white counterparts, experiences of covert gendered racism, microaggressions and the absence of support from universities in relation to progression and development opportunities. The frequency of toxic work cultures and systemic racism within universities is evidenced in the lack of representation of Black women in senior leadership positions in the UK. Where representation is found, this paper presents evidence that Black women academics tend to be working within insecure contracts and/or at universities that do not prioritise and allocate time for research and promotion-rich activity. For Black women academics who do survive and thrive in the sector, there is the identification of the importance of internal and external networks which offer safety, support and solidarity. Nonetheless, these networks alone are not enough, with an analysis of groups outside of Black women able to gain access to these networks, rendering Black women's space to share their experiences unsafe and potentially violent. In recognition of a move from an approach of an analysis of literature being left as a standalone point for reflection, this paper provides a review and several points for action for the higher education sector. These action points can be utilised by universities to develop and implement equitable strategies and policies for Black women academics and racially minoritised staff, more broadly.

**Keywords** Higher education · Social justice · Black women · Race · Racism · Black academics

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## Introduction

Whilst there is a growing body of literature detailing the experiences of Black academics (Bhopal, 2015; Conner, et al., 2023; Hawkins, 2021; Mahabeer et al., 2018), few focus specifically on phenomena among Black women academics within the context of the UK. Similarly, the transnational experiences of Black women academics are infrequently explored, with a smaller collection of studies on these women's intersectional identities. This paper presents scholarly research surrounding the experiences of Black women academics working in universities and, more broadly, within the higher education sector with a particular focus on the UK. The framing of this paper is influenced by the way in which the authors interpret both literature and university spaces. As Black women working within the academy, our intersectional identities present a nuanced understanding of the experiences of others with shared/associated identities. This does not, however, homogenise the experiences and voices of every participant who is referenced within this paper. This paper is not autoethnographic, but rather, our reflexivity shapes how the literature themes are explored and presented. An understanding of this approach can be taken from DeCuir-Gunby (2020), who refers to a researcher's multiple cultural identities and their own racialised positionality and the way in which this collectively impacts how they look at the world. In addition to the perspective in which a researcher's positionality shapes literature themes, this can also provide a shared sense of history and trust. This is supported by Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020), who discuss how their experiences of cultural identity and credibility provided them, as Ghanaian and Malawian collaborators, a recognised trust when conducting research in those countries.

Moreover, Hughes and Giles (2010) discuss critical reflexivity to explore the 'gated communities' of higher education through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Within this work, a discussion on CRT and navigating spaces within the academy is framed around a collective experience and/or understanding. As this paper explores a large population of Black women from across a Diaspora, it would be inaccurate to state we, the authors, have a shared understanding of all their individual identities, as would be the case for any study. Our racial and gendered identities, however, provide us with an 'outsider-within' perspective in turn, offers a lens of analysis that shapes the recommendations and action points within this paper. Our definition of Black women is informed by this reflexivity in the recognition of the varying ways in which individuals identify. This is demonstrated well by Oluo (2020: 41), who discusses her identification as a Black woman. In this text, the author acknowledges her access to light-skinned privilege with reference to her mixed heritage background and the prevalence of colourism in society, but also the connection she has with her Black identity. These sentiments are also reflected in the blog by Alormele (2023), in which she writes about racial descriptors and her relationship with her identity as a mixed heritage woman who identifies as Black. In this, she writes about her connectedness with her Black identity and factors that have influenced this, with a rejection of a descriptor that refers to her proximity to whiteness. As this paper draws on existing literature, our analysis is informed by women who have self-identified as Black, with our understanding of this influenced by our own positionality. We also write with this stance of self-identification in acknowledgement of the varying experiences of Black women dependent on their individual experiences, cultures, geographical location and communities in which they live (Evans & Evans, 2023).

This paper is therefore guided by the following research question: How have researchers discussed the experiences of Black women in UK universities? The sub-questions guiding

this study were: what is the state of representation of Black women academics in Professorial and leadership positions in UK academia? How do Black women academics cope with and navigate their experiences within the academy? This paper provides a review of literature which draws on 60 sources from 41 journals. The sources drawn upon in this paper include conceptual, theoretical, empirical, autobiographical and practice-based studies surrounding the topic of Black women academics in the higher education sector. A range of online databases, including Google Scholar, Web of Science, university databases, and ProQuest Social Science, were used to yield studies that addressed the research question. Literature searches were limited to a twenty-year period between 2004 and 2024, although the paper does include seminal studies that are outside of this period that are significant to understand the intersectional experiences of Black women academics (for example, Crenshaw, 1989).

This review does not intend to be an exhaustive synthesis of research on Black women academics 'experience in university, but instead provide a scholarly overview of dominant themes in research related to Black women academics' experiences in UK universities. Whilst the focus of this paper is the UK higher education sector, comparisons are drawn from US, South African and Canadian studies to contextualise the representation of Black women academics and their experiences in a broader global higher education landscape. It is within this context that the paper can then provide action points and recommendations for higher education senior leadership teams undertaking the work to tackle intersectional inequity and racism within their institutions.

## On terminology

In providing a discussion around the representation and experiences of Black women within the academy, it is necessary to provide an analysis of the terminology commonly used in policy and academic literature to refer to Black people. Black women are frequently lost in the data and placed into homogenous groups with problematic terminology. Within a UK context, the terminology 'BAME' has previously been used to categorise individuals from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. The provision of this acronym was seen in both government reports and academic institutions. The use of this term has since been dismissed by the Office for National Statistics and the UK Cabinet Office (Aspinall, 2020).

Abbreviated terms such as 'BAME' and 'BME' (Black and Minority Ethnic) are problematic because they place individuals from racially minoritised groups into one bracket and centre Eurocentric and white-centric views of racial identities. The use of such acronyms feeds into the notion that whiteness is the norm with reference to white as a racial category and 'BAME' as the "other" category (Parry et al., 2023). Justification for using the term 'BAME' has been provided in reference to how it provides an allowance to unpack quantitative data sets and, therefore, support positive action. This, however, leads to data being diluted with the inability to disaggregate and highlight inequitable strategies across racial groups. The use of the acronyms 'BAME' and 'BME' to analyse data reinforces perceptions of homogeneity where none exist (Khunti et al., 2020).

Reference to a language of difference and negative connotations is also problematic. Both the abbreviations 'BAME' and 'BME' use the term "minority" to place emphasis on the racial group being discussed. Collective terminology of individual racial groups' experiences and the emphasis on the term "minority" can be interpreted by some as a

representation of inferiority (Aspinall, 2021). This feeds into white supremacist ideologies of whiteness as the norm, where anything else is unexpected and/or less than. These cultural norms are based on Eurocentric ideals or identities and do not provide an adequate voice to those who are marginalised. When looking at the experiences of Black women, this lack of recognition of their identities can be seen through the reported cycle of the marginalisation that they face and the psychological trauma they experience (Wilson, 2017).

In recent years, universities have shifted the language used to categorise racially minoritised groups, moving from the tendency to homogenise vast differences with the use of acronyms to encourage the use of terms, such as ‘ethnically diverse’ (Liverpool John Moores) and ‘Global Majority’ (Leeds Beckett). Moreover, many universities now have created dedicated pages on institutional websites highlighting the problems with all-encompassing abbreviations and acronyms proposing the use of specific terms to refer to distinct ethnic identities of individuals (for example, Bristol University). Although this acknowledgement moves the agenda along, there is still much work to be done to progress this critical area.

The use of collective terminology does not provide an adequate space to elevate the voices of marginalised individuals and groups. It is important to centre the voices of individual groups to tell their story effectively. Within these groups, there are intersectional identities that also influence experiences. A narrow view of racial and ethnic identities perpetuates the idea of a single story and feeds racial stereotypes (Adichie-Ngozi, 2009). In looking at the Black women’s experience in silos, there is minimal literature available. There is evidence, however, of the need for a platform to discuss Black women’s experiences. This can be seen in the unemployment rates of Black people in the UK, with unemployment figures being double that of white counterparts, despite the population of Black people in the UK being 4.2% according to the Office for National Statistics (2021).

## **Black women academics in UK universities**

Within a global higher education landscape, existing studies highlight prevalent concerns in universities regarding the experience and representation of staff from racially minoritised groups (y Muhs et al., 2012). Black staff have reported being ignored by white colleagues when entering rooms and being excluded from conversations (Lander & Santoro, 2017). Conversely, staff from racially minoritised groups report feeling hyper-visible in university spaces with an experience of a heightened focus on what they are doing, their performance and their mere existence within the academy. Black women frequently report feeling as though they are under a magnifying glass, especially if they have moved into a senior position in universities. On occasions where racially minoritised staff are sought after for help, this is often in relation to the assumption that it is their duty to complete a particular task outside of their contractual roles (Stockfelt, 2018). With a spotlight on performance, Black women academics report the experience of “penalties” because of their intersectional identities, with specific reference to gender and ethnicity (Stockfelt, 2018: 1023). With experiences of covert racism and microaggressions being hard to identify, it is further highlighted how acts of omission and exclusion of Black women academics perpetuate feelings of invisibility.

The dearth of representation of Black people in senior leadership positions, and, indeed, at all levels in universities in the UK continues to remain a prominent issue for the higher education sector (Rollock, 2019; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Universities UK, 2019). For

university staff employed on academic contracts in managerial, director or senior official posts, Black people are severely under-represented compared to their white peers. Only 5 Black staff were in positions of manager, director and senior official in 2020/2021. This dismal figure compares with 480 white, 20 Asian, 10 staff from Mixed ethnic backgrounds and 5 staff from the Other ethnic group (HESA, 2023). Figures are improved for Black staff employed on non-academic contracts in managerial, director and senior official roles. For the period of 2021/2022, there were 165 Black staff occupying such roles, compared with 8340 white staff, 395 Asian staff, 165 staff from the Mixed ethnic group and 55 staff from Other ethnic backgrounds (Ibid.).

Relatedly, the lack of Black staff in senior leadership and managerial positions in universities in the UK undoubtedly has a considerable impact on how decisions are made within universities, including the development and implementation of policies, strategies and institutional commitments. There are also implications for staff promotion and progression priorities. Critically, this lack of representation in decision-making roles affects the voices that are heard (or silenced) and the issues that are made visible and intelligible relating to issues impacting Black women in universities in the UK.

Variation exists across gender lines for all ethnic groups in senior leadership roles in UK universities. Data provided by HESA (2023) showed that there were just 30 Black women staff employed in the 'other senior' academic job category compared with 2330 white women, 110 Asian women, 45 women from the Mixed ethnic group and 25 women from Other ethnic backgrounds. The implications of this are particularly striking for the sector given the growing hyper scrutiny of targets relating to Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) or Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) as termed in the UK. In its most general sense, EDI refers to fair treatment of all, and that opportunities are made available to everyone on an equal basis. As many universities in the UK are public bodies, they have a legal obligation to ensure equality of opportunity for all and are many are subject to external regulators. Broader equality commitments and pledges within higher education can be grouped across eight themes: working practices; teaching and learning; self-development; marketing/imagery/admissions; decolonisation; Equality charters (such as, Athena SWAN); accessibility and academic/professional support (Watson, et al., 2023). This growing scrutiny on equality, in addition to, the growing prominence in tackling racial inequality through self-assessment measures within higher education globally, with the use of such as frameworks like the Race Equality Charter (UK), which aims to support universities to identify and tackle barriers facing racially minoritised staff and students, such as awarding gaps and barriers to promotion, at the same time as providing a framework for action and improvement (Advance, 2024). A similar framework has been adopted and rolled out in Australia called the SAGE-Athena SWAN, SEA-Change in the US, and DIMENSIONS Awards and the Scarborough Charter in Canada. The implications of universities' subscribing to such frameworks or Awards are the requirements to publicise diversity efforts more publicly leading to greater accountability for race equality actions institutionally.

For Black women academics, their progression within universities to Professorial positions has garnered attention in the UK media (e.g. Financial Times, 2020) and by higher education organisations (e.g. 100 Black Women Professors Now — WHEN, 2023). Data provided by HESA (2023) points to dismal figures for Black women occupying Professorial positions, with only 45 Black women holding the position of Professor in the UK in 2020/21. This figure compares with 5865 white women professors during the same period. Figures for other racially minoritised groups paint a comparatively brighter picture, with 425 Asian women Professors, 145 women Professors from

the Mixed ethnic group and 110 women Professors from the Other ethnic background (HESA, 2023).

As of April 2024, the number of Black women professors in the UK stands at 66. Although this figure is slowly increasing, Black women professors are the smallest group numerically for any group of professors (Paperwhispers, 2023). In plain numbers, and to put an emphasis on this disparity, there are 66 Black women Professors out of a total of approximately 23,000 professors in the UK. Importantly, research shows that one in five professors in the UK were promoted to the post based on their teaching achievements (NCUP, 2023). This is important to note, as the career trajectory to becoming a Professor, although lacking in linearity and predictability, depends upon a candidate's research output, a record of accomplishment of successful grant submissions, engagement and impact record and PhD supervision alongside other criteria. If the criteria were to be ranked in order of importance, teaching would not be ranked near the top of variables influencing promotion to a Professor. This is a salient point, as Black academics tend to be employed in lower-ranked universities, often post-1992 universities where the focus on a working day basis is on teaching and student contact hours.

Within the context of the UK, higher education operates a stratified system of higher education provision structured by former polytechnics and older (pre-1992) universities. One tier, the former polytechnics, consists of institutions and colleges that delivered higher education and were granted university status in 1992. Typically, former polytechnics in the UK are called “post-1992”, “newer” or ‘modern’ universities (examples of such universities are the University of Westminster and the University of East London). These universities tend to be more teaching-intensive for staff, tend to generate less income from prestigious funders, such as UK Research and Innovation and are less research-intensive compared to their Russell Group counterparts (Boeren, 2023; Boliver, 2015). Occupying the other tier are Russell Group universities, which is a membership organisation of 24 UK universities deemed as “world-class”. The Russell Group, collectively, are research-intensive universities and produce “world-leading research”. Examples of Russell Group universities include the University of Oxford and University College London (UCL). As most Russell Group universities occupy the top positions in UK university league tables, they are deemed as more prestigious than lower-ranking post-1992 universities, and positioned as providing world-class education (Russell Group, 2024; Shields, 2023).

Within teaching-intensive institutions, a focus is therefore skewed towards teaching and scholarship, with research activity relegated towards being a desired activity which is disproportionately factored into workloads. This lack of scheduled time within the contractual working hours leaves it challenging to create research networks to partner with on research projects and papers, attend and present at research conferences and engage in institutional research opportunities. As a result of this, Black women academics have the cards stacked against them if they aspire to become Professor when employed in lower-ranked post-1992 universities.

Rollock (2019) found that Black women professors experienced a “messy” path to achieving the position of Professor. This unclear trajectory leads to Black women experiencing unfairness in the process and a lack of transparency in what factors contribute towards promotion, such as being asked for further evidence to support applications for promotion. Further studies have pointed to the discriminatory and racist experiences that Black women experience in the universities in the UK, highlighting white supremacist brutalisation and sexism (Wright et al., 2018), systemic racism and bullying (Rollock, 2019) and gendered and racialised exclusion (Mirza, 2006).

Whilst possessing the insider credentials for their place as academics within their universities, via their experience, qualifications and skills, Black women experience exclusionary practices because of their race (Wright et al., 2007). Black women academics experience intersectional disadvantage, double marginalisation (Stockfelt, 2018), feelings of space invasion (Puwar, 2004), identity taxation (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2011) and invisibility (Ogbe, 2022). Supporting this, in providing space, voice and affirmation for Black and racially minoritised women academics, Muhs et al. (2012) influential collection of essays and chapters sheds light onto the experiences of academics routinely 'othered' in the US academy. Collectively, these chapters support themes of the isolation of racially minoritised women academics at the same time as white colleagues, arguing that they lack the spirit of collegiality and questioning their competence, qualifications and experience (Easton, 2012). Black women academics also experienced intersectional discrimination in teaching evaluations by students often siding with racism and sexism and experienced devaluation of their research by white academics (Lazos, 2012). Drawing upon the work of Douglas (2012), she shines a light onto the multiple forms of disadvantages experienced by Black women academics, not only from the broader non-Black faculty but also from white students, who, she argues, hold resentment and resistance, particularly when a Black woman teaches a course focusing on race and its connection to gender and power.

Academic and non-academic leadership teams are not representative of the student body in many universities in the UK, particularly in London, where there is a growing diverse undergraduate student population (London Higher, 2022). Arguments have pointed to the lack of racially minoritised academics in leadership positions as negatively impacting upon the already leaky pipeline of Black postgraduate students and, therefore, threatening the future of Black academics (Higher London, 2022, Coelho et al., 2022). This is important, as visibility and inclusion, through the visible authority of Black women in leadership and in Professorial roles, as well as their broader presence in teaching through engaging in student-facing activities, can act as ways to disrupt and decentre Whiteness (Arday, 2018).

Further compounding the lack of Black women in academic, non-academic leadership and Professorial positions in UK universities is the prevalence of Black staff experiencing further disadvantage as a result of workplace casualisation. Data published by UCU (2021) revealed that the conditions of employment for Black staff were less favourable compared with their white peers. Black staff (40%) were more likely to be employed on fixed-term contracts than their white counterparts (32%). They were also 50% more likely than white staff and three times more likely than Asian staff to be employed on zero-hour contracts.

Examining the disparities in employment contracts by race from an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989), Black women are disproportionately employed on precarious hourly paid contracts compared to other groups (UCU, 2021). A sizable proportion of Black academic staff (37%) are employed on a part time basis. Under the casualisation of academic labour, Black women academics experience increasing workloads, marginality, feelings of exploitation, gendered and structural racism (Arday, 2022; Pennant, 2022; Sang, 2016; Wright et al., 2007).

Intersectional disadvantage continues for Black scholars, more broadly, with research showing that Black staff are paid less than their white counterparts. This is unsurprising given the disparities between Black and white staff occupying Professorial and leadership positions in UK universities. Data published by the UCEA (2018) showed that the ethnicity pay gap is pronounced for Black staff with 'pay penalties' for both Black women and men (UCEA, 2018). It was also found that pay penalties attributed to Black and racially minoritised women were associated more with ethnicity than with their gender (UCEA, 2018). Given the below-inflation pay offers in the higher education sector, the financial value of

staff pay has fallen, which means that already marginalised groups such as Black women are hit even harder financially (UCU, 2022).

Despite the unequal and hostile environments experienced by Black women scholars in UK universities (Wright et al., 2018), research points to strength, the need for resilience and strategies to negotiate the impact of gendered racism and under-representation. Research relating to Black women in the higher education sector tends to coalesce around themes on Black women's qualitative experiences in UK universities (Wright et al., 2018, Stockfelt, 2018), their career trajectory, the coping mechanisms used to navigate promotion and progression (Rollock, 2019, Rollock, 2021) and narratives of thriving, pain, resilience and power through forms of networks and support (Gabriel & Tate, 2017).

This use of various forms of networks is not a new phenomenon. Black women, historically, have created spaces for themselves by creating racially homogenous enclaves powered by the need to combat gendered racism, segregation and intersectional disadvantage. The issue of space and belonging is relevant, as Black women have needed safe spaces where they are able to interrogate issues that matter and concern them, create a sense of empowerment through community and build in forms of resilience (Hill Collins, 2000). Social support and collective coping strategies, historically, beyond a university context, have taken place within Black community organisations, religious institutions, extended family networks and within the broader Black community (Del Priore, 2022). Another example of such networks, borne of sisterhood ties, is discussed in Thorsson (2023) important publication, which tells the story of how Black women writers in the USA impacted and transformed academic and literary cultures in the 1970s by forming 'The Sisterhood'. 'The Sisterhood' — a community of writers, which consisted of influential Black writers, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, would meet as a group for a period of time to advocate for Black writers in academia and within the publishing industry. In drawing out the organising and community-building logic involved in these networks, Thorsson highlights the sense of urgency in fostering structures and opportunities for Black writers, intellectuals and educators. 'The Sisterhood' network offered vital forms of mentorship and support in environments where there was, and arguably still is, pushback and resistance in valuing and centring Black women's voices.

Moving back towards the academic context, networks of support for Black women academics take several forms, consisting of informal and formal structures that can be external or internal to the university structure. Some of these networks have been created and initiated by Black academics (e.g. GEMWA — Global Ethnic Majority Women in Academia Support Network) or developed by universities or higher education organisations (e.g. 100 Black Professors by WHEN — Women in Higher Education Network). Examples of external networks include, GEMWA and the Society of Black Academics (SBA), Black European Academic Network and African American Academic Network. Collectively, these types of networks offer spaces to celebrate and support Black women academics from the institutional pressures and barriers they experience. Relatedly, Wright et al. (2018) argue that Black women academics gain empowerment through the support gained from such networks and the broader community. Black networks formed outside of the university can help to provide a space to reflect upon critical incidents and foster opportunities to 'reality check' scenarios. Networks can also be seen to aid the retention of staff and facilitate opportunities to co-create, gain peer support, network, and build various forms of institutional and social capital (Niemann, 2012; Ogbe, 2022; Wright et al., 2007).

Institutional networks for Black people are broadly in the form of race and ethnic-based networks or societies, with some universities making these networks or societies exclusive to Black and racially minoritised staff. Other universities create these networks as open



structures including non-Black and non-racially minoritised colleagues who broadly identify as allies. This open construction can be problematic as it fails to offer a safe space for Black women academics to heal from the institutional pressures and racism and could, in effect, silence those who feel unprotected and exposed by the inclusion of staff who do not share their own lived experience. Indeed, those allies or supporters could be the very source of oppression that the Black women academics seek to shelter from within the networks and societies.

Outside of these protected spaces, authentic allyship may be effective if this is not performative. Reid (2021) discusses in her book, “The Good Ally” what this should and should not look like. A real ally is a white person who works alongside the Black community and completes all of their work with a drive to dismantle systemic racism. In this approach, someone who is an ally should not work with the intent to save and rescue others in the absence of adequate education and consent. In relation to consent, Reid makes reference to white allies working alongside not on behalf of Black people.

Despite, or in spite of the gendered and racial logic of universities in the UK, Black women academics are defying institutional barriers and building sources of solidarity and support with other Black women academics. Hills (2019) found that support groups and networking provided Black women scholars with social and personal protection that can lessen the impact of intersectional disadvantage. Williams and Packer-Williams (2019) argue that Black women can be good supporters of one another because of their shared racial and gender identities and may seek out support from other Black women in academic workplaces.

Black women academics experience a consistent battle in navigating the higher education spaces they enter. Reference to the term navigation provides a discussion around the way in which individuals move within a particular space and the freedom of this movement. The way in which a Black woman feels her body does not belong in a particular space is influenced by the structures that enhance feelings of fear and danger. This sense of hyper-visibility (Puwar, 2004; Lander & Santoro, 2017) reflects the lack of representation of Black woman within the academy, as evidenced by HESA (2023).

## Navigating/negotiated spaces

To develop an understanding of how Black women navigate and negotiate higher education spaces, a review is needed of the terminology used. Descriptors surrounding the navigation and negotiation of spaces frequently centre around comfort and discomfort. The minimisation of the way in which oppressive white supremacist institutions scar Black women within them is also a central concern. Previously it was discussed how terminology and the way in which language is used in reference to collective groups, can empower or suppress the voices of Black women. The same power, in terms of reference, can be used in relation to how a Black woman’s inability to navigate spaces within university spaces evidences the violence she experiences within its walls. Strength can be taken from the use of words such as “violence” and “danger” in recognition of the psychological impact that direct and indirect experiences of racism can have on Black women. This impact can have an adverse effect on women’s day-to-day interactions within their workplace (Kinouani, 2021). A sense of belonging within a particular space can be influenced by relationships with the environment and a sense of safety and danger because of racial trauma. There can be an association of fear even in the absence of the oppressor. Hooks (2009) discusses

how witnessing and/or experiencing racism can lead to heightened experiences of post-traumatic stress. This, in turn, can lead to a fear of victimisation and racial abuse, resulting in reluctance for racial integration and impacting upon the way in which Black women see and interact with the world.

In parallel to this, there is also the need to reflect on terminology that empowers marginalised groups and elevates the voices within them. This is demonstrated well by Lobo (2022) in a discussion around “breathing spaces of fearlessness” and how the presence of this fearlessness within the neoliberal university fights against white supremacy. There is recognition here, however, on the difficulty of this notion being applied, with the risk and exhaustion this may bring with it for racially minoritised staff.

With a high proportion of an individual’s life spent in the workplace, there is a need to reflect on what influences a sense of community and home. Focusing on communities, it can be analysed how the perception of geographical space and those within it influences an individual’s perceptions of belonging to a particular group. This has been referred to as “imagined communities” in relation to this community being socially constructed (Valentine, 2015). Identities of groups change over time and are influenced by a range of varied factors. With a discussion of the notion of imagined communities and individuals having to conform to certain expectations within these communities, this, however, creates a negative perception of the empowering role communities have on individual experiences. Within the academy, the sense of community for Black women is often lost and/or diluted, with an assumption that their presence alone is enough. When a Black woman is present, they have reported feeling the need to “perform,” with a heightened focus on their contributions and validating their contributions to a particular space (Doharty et al., 2021).

The perception of vibrant communities in which there is tokenistic representation but no education on how white staff can eradicate the violence towards the Black community within it further perpetuates the prevalence of racial battle fatigue and trauma. Racial battle fatigue can be defined as the toll which fighting racial attacks has on individuals from racially minoritised groups. This often results in Black women who are the victims of oppression and white fragility having to justify what is happening to them and fight a case for recognition (Pizarro & Kohli, 2018). White fragility, a term coined by DiAngelo (2019), refers to the discomfort and sensitivity white people feel when discussing race, which then triggers a range of defensive actions and behaviours, such as resistance, fear, anger and silence.

On occasions where Black women raise issues against white perpetrators, they are pushed out, with reference to them being “threatening.” There is also evidence presented where the experiences of Black women academics are minimised, with reference to them not being a “people person” or being forced to apologise to their oppressors (Hamad, 2021).

There is, however, clear evidence towards collective trauma and racial violence Black women experience across the globe. Zerai (2023) presents evidence across both the USA and South Africa, “Black women’s agentic responses to marginalising experiences in higher education”. In her work, she speaks about gendered, racial and intersectional microaggressions Black women experience working in the higher education sector. A South African participant discussed how she was infantilised by colleagues, with communication framed as compliments. Her receipt of praise for doing “so well as a Black woman” is evidence towards the way in which Black women are perceived and treated within higher education roles. Another participant spoke about feeling “depleted after meetings”, with experiences of being questioned and labelled as “incompetent”.

A participant from the USA discussed how her experiences within her employed roles have frequently been influenced by her intersectional identity as a Black woman.

Khunou (2023) references the gendered experiences of Black academics within South African universities. Where Black women are represented in senior roles, they are compared to men who have come before them. The provision of this comparison by staff minimises the contribution Black women bring to the academy. When Black women are represented in leadership roles, they frequently experience vilification, and their contributions are “generally minimised or completely erased”. The vilification and minimisation received from the neoliberal academy results in low numbers of representation and early exit from the academy (Magoqwana et al., 2019; Rabe & Rugunanan, 2012).

Black women also discussed being silenced in institutions, with those who report racism being labelled as “troublemakers” by white staff (Quaye et al., 2019). White supremacy feeds this narrative of silencing Black staff, labelling them as being “combative” or “overly sensitive”. Contributing factors to experiences of racial battle fatigue can be seen in the stereotypes placed on racially minoritised staff, in particular, Black women with statements such as, “the angry Black woman”. Building and connecting with community and networks has been discussed as a coping strategy for racial battle fatigue. In a study where 35 Black faculty members were interviewed across the USA, reference was made to the provision of sister circles and Black staff disconnecting from spaces that contributed to racial battle fatigue. There is also mention of “unplugging” in reference to the way in which participants in this study felt a constant pressure to be accessible and aware of workplace issues. Participants also discussed avoidance of the news, in reference to “putting their blinders on” to reduce the burden and weight of the oppressive society in which they live (Quaye et al., 2019).

Racial battle fatigue also occurs when individuals experience constant scrutiny and assessment because of their racialised identities (Rollock, 2021). The underrepresentation of racially minoritised groups in UK Russell Group universities has been discussed as having an impact on the progression of and opportunities for Black women academics. It has been highlighted how a lack of understanding and recognition of racial micro-aggressions reinforces the prevalence of racial hierarchies within universities. Bhopal (2018) discusses how a Black academic reported a white colleague, who was voicing Islamophobic statements towards students and ignoring her all together. When concerns were reported, this was dismissed by her white manager as being a “clash of personalities” with a rejection of a racially motivated attack.

Racial battle fatigue has an impact on the individuals’ experiences within their institution, leading to emotional/behavioural, psychological and physiological stress responses. As a result of these experiences, self-preservation tactics often occur in the form of individuals shielding themselves through withdrawal of emotional responses. This is referred to as “wearing a mask” in order to hide the pain experienced from racism. The need to wear a mask has been referred to as a self-care mechanism used to help individuals survive within their environments. Strategies in relation to masking emotional responses are also demonstrated when an individual is the only person from a racially minoritised group within a department. Individuals have reported often feeling the pressure to represent others and shield responses to racial attacks as a result of this. This instinctive response raises the question as to whether the masking of reactions to oppression further centres whiteness. Masking of experiences of racism can further enhance experiences of racial battle fatigue and have a detrimental impact on long-term mental health, further strengthening symptoms of racial battle fatigue, such as difficulty sleeping (Okello et al., 2020:428).

Racially minoritised staff are made to feel like a “ballerina in a musical jewellery box” with requests to come out and perform in any matter that requires race-related work or cultural representation. This can be seen in examples where white colleagues put in requests for racially minoritised staff to help them to decolonise their modules or state they would be better suited/ “placed” to deliver race-related modules. The assumption is that individuals from racially minoritised backgrounds should be expected to represent their entire racial group but, however, should not place a microscope on the topic of institutional racism within the academy (Doharty et al., 2021). It is important to note how the microscope is an acceptable strategy when framed under white comfort but not when the prevalence of institutional racism is in question.

## Conclusions and action points for the HE sector

This paper presented a range of points for reflection in relation to Black women academics’ experiences within UK universities. The power of terminology and how this provides a voice for Black women or, in turn, suppresses their voices is an important aspect for consideration when advocating for racially minoritised groups. Although this paper has pointedly focused on phenomena among Black women academics in the UK, with an extension more widely geographically, it is important to further draw attention to the role that intersectionality plays in impacting the differing experiences of marginalised groups. For instance, a Black woman academic with a disability may experience higher education spaces differently in comparison to a Black woman academic with no disability. There will also be variation between seemingly homogenous groups, such as Black African women academics, for instance, in the context of Black African Nigerian and Black African Ghanaian scholars. The shifting tides in terms of reference to marginalised groups of people, such as ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities, arguably do not modify the lived experiences of these groups within institutional cultures. What does change are the ways in which these groups of people are framed within institutional cultures.

A critique was presented here in relation to the way in which minimalised terminology and problematic abbreviations, such as ‘BAME’, place Black women into homogenous groups. In turn, this presents a Eurocentric view, with whiteness being the point of reference in racial identities and markers. This paper poses a move from a language of difference, with a shift to empowering terms of reference, where racially minoritised groups are elevated. In doing this, recognition is provided for the nuanced experience of Black women within the higher education sector, with a shift away from a single-story narrative of experiences. In moving the needle for Black women academics, there is growing urgency for an agreed common understanding of terms together with a change in policies, strategies and institutional commitments, which can start to tackle the differential outcomes experienced by underserved and marginalised groupings. The following action points are recommended for universities and their leadership teams in addressing the issues discussed in this paper:

1. It is imperative that universities uniformly relinquish the use of the term ‘BAME’ when referring to racially minoritised groups. It is evident that the outcomes and experiences relating to ‘BAME’ groups vary widely and cannot be reduced to this catch all term. Universities must make this effort to disaggregate the experiences of racially minoritised groups and not conflate differences. Under the rubrics of ‘BAME’, there is also a failure

- to address and acknowledge the anti-Blackness evident within the academy (Sobande & Wells, 2021), which heavily impacts upon the experiences of Black women academics.
2. Safe and exclusive spaces should be created within universities structures where Black women academics can network and gain peer support. These spaces are crucial in fostering opportunities for these scholars to pursue co-ethnic collaborations and leverage resources within their institutions through a critical mass.
  3. Training and development opportunities which are not readily available to Black women academics because of their employment status (for instance, because of their propensity to be employed on fixed term or hourly-paid contracts), should be extended to all staff members irrespective of their contractual basis.
  4. Universities must actively seek out initiatives and forms of support which meaningfully, robustly, and purposefully support Black women academics. This means that Organisational Development departments should take time to identify initiatives that have been specifically designed for Black women academics by those who have lived experience in the issues that Black scholars face within universities.
  5. Bottom-up approaches should be adopted using co-creation initiatives where the voices of Black women academics are heard, and their feedback is critically acted upon in terms of their lived experiences. For instance, the centring of their thoughts and voices on improving their career progression and advancement is central. Alongside this, strategies for navigating the discrimination and racism experienced by Black women academics through the design of localised activities and initiatives should be rolled out across universities as part of Race Equality Charter action plans and broader EDI initiatives.
  6. Universities must leverage the skills, knowledge and expertise of external networks run and founded by Black academics, such as GEMWA, and the SBA, and commission such agencies to design activities and initiatives to help tackle the issues raised in this paper.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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