

“Let My Candle Shine”

Young Black Women Navigating the UK Voluntary Sector

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Our organisations are passionate about supporting the next generation of researchers and activists, with a focus on young researchers from Black and minoritised communities. Our aim has been to start with an award and then leave the rest – defining the research question, shaping the design and research team – up to the individuals involved. The Award is named in memory and celebration of Jane Hatfield, Trustee and then Chair of IVAR between 2006 and 2021.



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Executive summary

We set out to explore the experiences of young Black women working in the UK voluntary sector. The project began with a review of existing resources and focus groups with the research participants, who collaborated with us to develop insights and recommendations.

Some core themes emerged over the course of our study, which we have grouped into four primary categories: belonging, progression, care, and wider contextual factors. Each section of our report explores one of these themes in depth. Working in the voluntary sector poses challenges for everyone; it is a demanding path at the best of times. We highlight the dichotomous reality of those who face all of these challenges as well as the unique issues of navigating personal and professional struggles as Black women in the UK.

The challenges Black women face in the voluntary sector are real, but not insurmountable. In each section, we provide practical action items and opportunities for voluntary organisations to better meet the needs of and support young Black women in their roles. These range from facilitating access to culturally competent, trauma-informed therapists and coaches, to challenging harmful systems of oppression, and more.

We are also privileged to include words of wisdom shared by young Black women, so that our peers working in the voluntary sector feel seen and validated. Each of us needs to embrace the fullness of who we are and to take the time we need to look after ourselves.

Introduction

The UK voluntary sector has struggled in recent years. The combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing financial precarity for charities and communities has been challenging for many. Third Sector reported that, for the first time in a decade, UK voluntary sector income fell by £1.8 billion in 2020/21 compared to the previous year, with smaller charities being hit the hardest. Additionally, approximately one in 20 voluntary sector staff (4%) have said they plan to seek employment outside of the voluntary sector over the next 12 months.

Alongside these wider financial pressures, voluntary sector organisations have also shifted their focus to combat racism and increase their inclusivity. The Black Lives Matter protests and the murder of George Floyd served as a catalyst prompting the voluntary sector to step up its anti-racism efforts. These have taken many forms; organisational approaches towards dismantling racism have ranged from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust's acknowledgment that the Rowntree Company "benefited from the system of colonial indenture" to Lankelly Chase stating it intends to "wholly redistribute its assets". However, despite similar statements and pledges from many organisations over the past few years, true commitment to change has been mixed. The *Warm Words, Cold Comfort: UK civil society's ongoing racism problem* report, which surveyed racially minoritised communities working for civil society organisations, noted that only 46% of contributors feel that anti-racism and race equity are taken seriously in their organisation.

As researchers who have occupied various roles within the voluntary sector, we have been in the midst of these changes over recent years. Our personal journeys, as well as the wider context, have led us to ask: *what are the ongoing experiences of young Black women working in the UK voluntary sector?* Our research focuses on the intersectional experiences of being young, Black, and a woman working in the UK voluntary sector.

Methods

Participant engagement

This community research project was carried out between January and August 2024. The goal was to encourage Black women aged 18 to 35 to reflect on their experiences working in the voluntary sector in the UK. We utilised a snowball sampling method, distributing a poster within our networks and gathering recommendations for additional participants.

Eligibility for the study was limited to Black women within our target age range with “current or prior experience working in the voluntary sector, including charities, community groups, community interest companies, social clubs, churches and other faith groups, and other voluntary organisations in the UK”. While the definition of “Black woman” is somewhat contested, we encouraged all individuals who resonate with this identity to participate.

Project activities

The study began with a review of relevant literature and resources. This was followed by a focus group, which took place on Zoom on Friday 9 February 2024 for 90 minutes. In the course of the focus group, we did the following:

- Collaboratively mapped out the system affecting young Black women’s wellbeing in the UK voluntary sector.
- Engaged in a collective (re)imagination session to explore the following questions:
 - How do we want to be as young Black women?
 - Do we want to navigate the workplace in the VCS sector? If so, how do we want to do this and which resources would help?
- Agreed on the next steps and the project output.

During this initial workshop, participants expressed a desire to connect more deeply. As a result, we organised a virtual Nourishment Day as the project output, an event where we shared affirmations tailored for Black women and co-developed recommendations derived from the research insights.

Data collection and analysis

The data collection method involved a dual moderator focus group, enabling us to delve into key questions and uncover both common and differing experiences. When necessary, we posed exploratory follow-up questions, such as “can you elaborate on what you mean by...?” to assist us in correctly interpreting the insights.

The recording of this focus group was transcribed and analysed using a coding process of first-level codes and subcodes. This process involved iterating the themes, with some input from participants. During the follow-up Nourishment Day event, participants had opportunities to review the resulting draft report and share additional insights.

Evaluation

To evaluate the community research project, we utilised a developmental evaluation approach. As the project leads, we took on the role of project evaluators and selected a project participant to provide additional support in reflecting on the literature review (including identifying key gaps and materials to review), co-developing the focus group, and helping to interpret the data.

At each point of the research project, all project participants completed a reflection form. This helped us consider participants’ feedback, and ensure that they were informing the next steps and key foci of the research project.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study, which are important to acknowledge so we can properly contextualise the findings.

- This was an exploratory small-scale study, so the insights may not be generalisable to all Black women working in the UK voluntary sector.
- The limited quantity of pre-existing research on the experiences of young Black women navigating the voluntary and community sector in the UK hindered our ability to ground the study in further contextual data. Going forward, we anticipate that our study will contribute to the emerging body of knowledge in this field.
- Time and financial constraints limited the time and resources available for each phase of the project, including the literature and resource review and the number of participants we could engage. However, the purpose of the Award is to support small-scale research into topics of interest.
- Exploring experiences of young Black women was a key element of this project. We recognise that participants primarily reflected on their experiences being women and Black. In hindsight, additional questions focused on understanding how being younger influenced their experiences would have been helpful.

Resource reflections

We reviewed 25 resources relevant to the experiences of young Black women navigating the voluntary sector. As most resources mainly focused on the general wellbeing of Black women across sectors or specifically within the private sector, we expanded our search beyond the voluntary sector and the UK. We also found that relying solely on academic literature did not adequately reflect our experiences, due in part to the documented marginalisation of Black women in academia; consequently, in addition to peer-reviewed resources, we also reviewed articles, websites, and podcasts.

It was challenging to find resources offering actionable guidance to support young Black women's wellbeing while navigating the UK voluntary sector. Barger's (2023) article highlights the dual experiences among Black women of burnout and exploitation, observing that, "77% of Black women believe there is a need for more wellbeing resources catered to our specific needs". She suggests naming these experiences to effectively address them. However, limited practical resources are available to support us in addressing deeply embedded systems of exploitation and burnout. Similarly, Asare's (2023) article on addressing pay inequity for Black women offers valuable advice. However, as younger Black female readers, more practical tips on how to advocate for equitable pay and discern organisations that foster flexibility and support our wellbeing would be valued.

Despite the limited range of applicable resources, we did find some articles that offered practical advice. In certain instances, a multi-pronged approach was recommended to support Black women in promoting our mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing. Business in the Community's toolkit, *Self-Care and Wellbeing for Ethnically Diverse Women*, suggests identifying personal values as a form of self-care, reflecting on positive experiences, and talking to trusted

people. This resource also advises that you "practice being yourself by owning your words, ideas and thoughts".

Hill's (2023) post likewise provides useful strategies to prioritise self-care in the workplace, such as establishing boundaries between professional and personal time (a challenge that is universal today, but particularly relevant for Black women). Although generally there are no official policies regarding this issue, in our experiences, employers are more likely to encroach on the personal time of younger workers due to the perception of us having fewer personal responsibilities.

Our analysis found that some of the tips in these resources, while potentially useful, fail to acknowledge the broader racialised context and barriers that young Black women face. This can have detrimental effects on our safety at work. In addition to all the normal issues one finds in a professional environment, we are navigating sensitive intersectional dynamics related to power, gender, race, age, and length of service, just to name a few. As a result, we often resort to minimising our visibility to feel safer. Our *status distance* - the further we are perceived to be demographically from those around us - can also make it more challenging to engage and build authentic relationships with others.

It was disconcerting to find some resources that actually encourage the self-policing of Black women and advise us to conceal parts of ourselves, perpetuating harmful cultural frameworks while claiming to offer ways to counter them. One article on See Girl Work actually says, "don't let them see you cry" and "whatever you do, you must remain kind and pleasant" - an approach which places the burden on us to avoid freely expressing ourselves while navigating the workplace. We need to unlearn many harmful narratives we have internalised on how we ought to navigate the workplace.

Some of the content and statistics we encountered during the review was actually triggering. Writes' (2019) story, *The Black Woman in the Workplace*, notes that "the Black woman ages five years in three months" which refers to the well-documented concept of 'weathering'. A blog posted on Leanne Mair calls for Black women to have a contingency plan, emphasising the constant need to prepare for every eventuality and the reality of often feeling insecure within our positions in the voluntary sector. As the blog starkly advises, "we cannot afford to get comfortable".

The truth is that harmful work experiences often force young Black women to completely withdraw from the voluntary sector for self-preservation. This precarity is further exacerbated by broader issues such as short-term and inconsistent funding, particularly for smaller charities. The voluntary sector, both to make the most of the incredible potential that Black women have to offer and to live up to the principles of inclusivity that the sector supposedly espouses, needs to do more to address this situation.

We were however validated by Alao's (2022) article on how young Black women between the ages of 22 - 36 in the UK are redefining their own wellness, primarily by limiting their exposure to traumatic content. Biopsychosocial factors disproportionately impact Black women, highlighting the need to centre positive and nourishing narratives and practices as a counterweight to these factors.

We found some exceptional organisations and initiatives working to transform the sector and provide holistic and impactful support to young Black women. For instance, Black Thrive Global is driving community-led change and advocating for systemic change to enhance the wellbeing of Black communities. Mabadiliko CIC is fostering

safer, more inclusive, and anti-racist workplaces through their cultural humility training and wider offering. Other examples include Further, Faster - an anti-racist leadership programme developed by Martha Awojobi and Pari Dhillon, which supports civil society leaders "through a personal, challenging and transformative process of reflecting on power, racism and white supremacy culture". Also, Future Foundations UK strives to bring about positive change through its community of racially minoritised individuals working in the UK philanthropy sector.

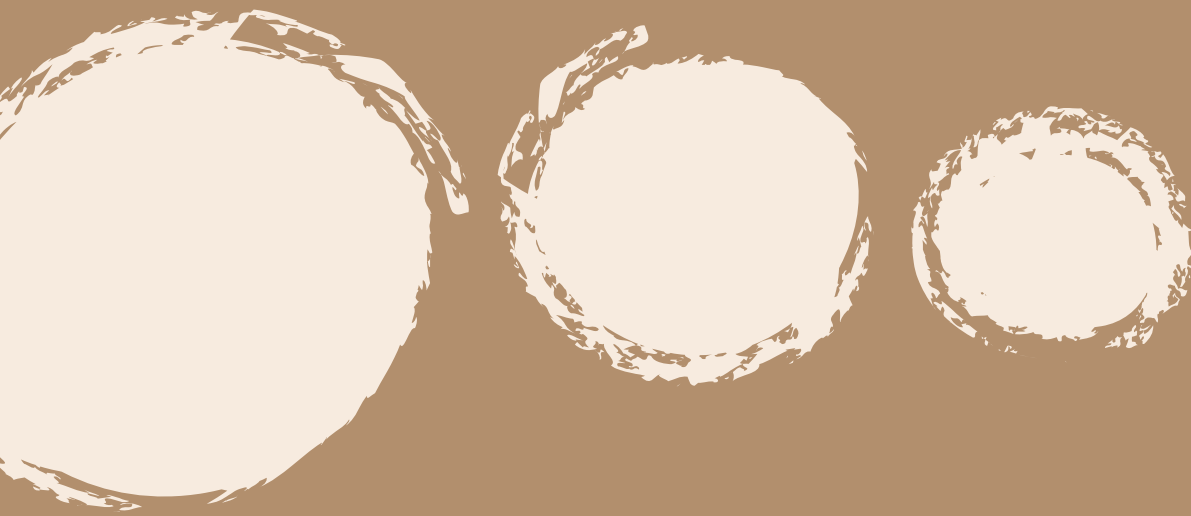
However, despite our deep respect for the sector, we observe a prevailing narrative that individuals in the sector are intrinsically "good people", which often makes it more challenging to recognise and address misogynoir (a term coined by Moya Bailey to describe the specific oppression experienced by Black women, characterised by a combination of racism and sexism), and its underpinning systems. These organisations are crucial in fostering self-reflection, accountability and equity throughout the voluntary sector. To effect cultural change within the voluntary sector, organisations need to take more proactive steps to dismantle systemic racism and discrimination.

While the review was a thought-provoking exercise that provided useful resources and largely affirmed our experiences, it highlighted the need for additional study and more nuanced resources that address young Black women's experiences in navigating the UK voluntary sector.

Key insights

Across our focus groups, four key issues emerged from our study:

- Belonging
- Progression
- Care
- Wider contextual factors



Belonging



Belonging

The voluntary sector is generally characterised by a sense of shared purpose and community. For Black women, who are often marginalised socially and professionally, this community may be more elusive. Participants experienced dichotomous feelings of being an ‘outsider’ in certain areas of the UK voluntary sector; many sought a sense of belonging by seeking out spaces that prioritise the needs and interests of Black women, whether at work, in social movement, or in virtual spaces.

“You do not belong in spaces where you exist”

Participants grappled with feelings of exclusion and not belonging in the UK voluntary sector. These feelings were compounded by experiences of not being recognised and respected, resulting in their work feeling challenging and isolating.

“This sense of feeling like you do not belong in spaces where you exist, which makes it feel really difficult to navigate because you have that sense of, I’m not supposed to be here because maybe you’re the only person that looks like you there or it’s made really clear to you that your experience and your authentic self are not like welcome in that space.”

“You’re not respected, and your voice isn’t heard... and that makes it hard to find safe sort of spaces.”

“There is a kind of thing of not fitting into one box because as a Black woman, people will expect you to have had a certain life, but actually when you deviate from the expectation, it’s like people can’t really grasp who you are, or where it is that you fit.”

This is hardly unique to the voluntary sector, of course; Black women have parallel experiences in private corporations as well.

However, ironically, the corporate sector often makes more proactive efforts to promote the inclusion of Black women than the voluntary sector from our participants’ experiences.

“I worked in the corporate sector for a year, and it was quite different in that there was clear evidence and attempts to integrate Black women. And it just feels like the private sector is way ahead... [although] I’m sure if we speak to someone who works in the private sector, like a Black woman, they’ll have similar concerns to us but I still think there has been more progress [in the corporate sector].”

Movement spaces

Despite experiencing feelings of not belonging, some participants shared that they were nonetheless able to find a sense of community, which played a crucial role in their decision to remain in the voluntary sector. The significance of movement and activist spaces was emphasised. There was an acknowledgement that such spaces can foster meaningful connections, a sense of community, and even protect individuals from certain negative experiences within the voluntary sector.

“It [movement spaces] created a network of protection and advocacy. So, there’s always an expectation that stuff will arise in the [voluntary] sector that is visceral but having that kind of advocacy or hidden advocacy... it just feels safer, even though you know that harm might tend to come your way. There’s just something about knowing that you know this person that you used to hang out with that have now become X, Y, Z role. And there’s just a way that you can kind of manoeuvre, but not everyone has... I think it’s [movement infrastructure] done a lot of good.”

Virtual spaces

Online resources can be highly valuable for Black women who cannot find the community they are looking for in their workspaces. The deep yearning to find community and a sense of belonging with other Black women led many participants to engage with archival online content that responded to their specific needs. Most women listened to Black female content creators, who provide support with navigating the voluntary sector and life. For instance, *Toya Talks* by Toya Washington, a Nigerian Igbo woman based in the UK, runs a sector-agnostic podcast that teaches Black women “how to navigate the world of work”. Other podcasts participants engaged with included Dr Thema’s *The Homecoming Podcast*, and Dr Joy Harden Bradford’s *Therapy for Black Girls*. These resources play a key role in supporting us to feel seen and supported, through relating to the parallel experiences of other Black women.

“There’s another lady called Dr Joy Bradford, and she has a podcast called ‘Therapy for Black Girls’ and archival content around health and wellbeing for Black women. So, dipping in and out of content that relates to Black women’s experiences and what that means.”

What next?

Feeling a sense of belonging is an important part of keeping Black women actively engaged and personally invested in our work environments. The voluntary sector should strive to create spaces where young Black women feel included. Voluntary sector organisation leaders should, where possible, provide or facilitate access to culturally competent, trauma-informed therapists, counsellors, and coaches, anonymously and confidentially, including those from Black backgrounds.



Progression



Progression

In the voluntary sector, as everywhere else, it is important for people to feel that they are making progress and that they are able to grow, develop, and work towards achievable goals. When people feel stuck, they tend to disengage from their work environment and seek more rewarding paths. Hence the number of people who indicated they planned to leave the voluntary sector in the coming year. For Black women, who are often marginalised in general, it can be particularly difficult to feel a sense of progression and professional validation.

In one exercise, participants in our study were encouraged to depict how they envision their existence as Black women in the world and within the voluntary sector. The overarching theme focused on progression, with a shared desire to thrive at work. A lack of progress, stress and exhaustion were common experiences that led to conflicted feelings about remaining in the sector.

Thriving

Participants were determined to thrive and progress within or beyond the sector, despite the obstacles. Some sought exposure to opportunities that would build their confidence while also aiming to support other Black women and the networks they belong to.

“I just thought about the fruit that I want my career and presence in the workplace to have and be able to enrich others’ experiences”

“I want to feel like my rootedness means I can support others. So, whether that’s like my family and my friends, things like that.”

“Basically, it’s [a drawing of] a sun, and a very horrible, horrible, horrible depiction of a candle... I often think about this Bible verse that says men don’t light candles and hide it under a bushel.

That is basically the line that I’m trying to remember this year, is to let my candle shine and put it on a hill and let it radiate and not to melt into the background as I usually do. Since coming into this voluntary and charity space, I’ve just felt very overwhelmed and just let the wind of change blow out my candle. So, we’re running with this metaphor now, but [I’m] just trying to shine brighter and [recognise] that I have something to give. And I bring worth to things, you know, and light up spaces because people say that’s what my personality is often like. So, it’s like actually bringing that into professional spaces and not just hide in the background. So, it’s putting my candle on a hill.”

“I want to feel able to succeed and I don’t mind it feeling like a challenge, which is why I drew a bit of an uphill, because I think you have to feel challenged and be in a tough space to grow. But I don’t want it to feel impossible. So that’s why I drew a bit of wind, which is just helping me get up the ladder because there’s support there. So that’s how I want it to feel in work, like I can succeed, like that is an option and an opportunity for me.”

The desire to constantly progress can have negative repercussions as well, however. Many participants expressed a sense of pressure to meet expectations of ‘Black excellence’ – the idea that in order to validate their presence they must exceed expectations by sometimes unreasonable degrees.

“This idea that you must want to be a CEO or this really shiny, slick version of you, that you have to keep chasing after... but I feel like that’s something also to be addressed that we don’t get the chance to just be mediocre... but also, I think part of what can hinder us is this sense that you have to want to be perfect otherwise don’t even bother.”

Stress and exhaustion

There are many positive aspects of working in the voluntary sector, but there are also unique difficulties that stem from the work as well. The cumulative impact of stressors within the sector took a toll on all participants, who mentioned exposure to traumatic events, the pressure to serve as a spokesperson on certain issues, and being perceived to hold institutional power that does not align with reality. Managing these expectations proved to be challenging and tiring, leading some individuals to feel indifferent towards their work.

“I drew birds and clouds and kind of like a swirl, which represented the wind and I suppose mine was [a longing] around feeling light. I can only speak for myself, but this sector has been the heaviest I’ve ever been in... my mind and body and energy, everything is tired.”

“[We often face] having to be the spokesperson for your whole community, even when you don’t have the power people perceive you to have. So both kind of internally, feeling like you’re often called upon for anything Black and it’s assumed that you’ll understand or have something to say about that experience. Also, from friends, family and other people, they have expectations that you can make certain things happen because you’re within the institutions, but actually you don’t have the power that they think you have.”

“[There is a] lack of understanding of having the option to be yourself, so often your lived experience is kind of taken out of your hands because people will be like, oh I’m sure you understand this really harrowing thing that has just happened. You’re suddenly like, oh, like, I have to have to speak to this, whereas other people don’t have that same sense.”

“I think I’ve gotten to a space where I just have a level of indifference. And I feel quite disempowered by previous experiences I’ve had. So now I’m just like, I don’t care - just do whatever.”

The stress and exhaustion in the voluntary sector are not unique to Black women. However, the existing burden placed on Black women of representing our peers and exceeding expectations adds to the stress. Few organisations have systems in place to address the underlying and organisational issues that contribute to this additive phenomenon.

“I recognise that sometimes institutions place a problem on the individual... Managers are not giving any support, they’re still doing their harmful behaviour and getting away with it... Nor is there acknowledgement that our Black female staff are having a bad time, and here is what we do to address that. There is none of that!... So they leave and they go onto something else, but the issue in the organisation is never really addressed, nor is it addressed at a sector level. So we have unfulfilled dreams and hopes because nobody really wants to understand how pervasive the issue of race, racism, and all the isms are, and how they are built into all the systems we engage with... This is a historical pervasive thing that has been happening with our mothers, our grandmothers, great grandmothers, anyone who is a Black or a woman who is engaged in the system, and not having a good time. And that’s awful, it’s such an awful reality.”

Stay or leave

These experiences left participants uncertain about whether they should stay in the voluntary sector. Many individuals experienced some degree of ambivalence, neither ready to leave nor fully committed to the voluntary sector. Most were deeply contemplating their employment options and questioning the long-term sustainability of remaining in the sector.

“Something that I haven’t really sat with for a long time, I think, is me figuring out what exiting this space looks like. I suppose a reality is that there is a consequence of showing up as myself here, and I want to be somewhere where I can just be myself. I think letting go of this space, whether it be now or in a year’s time or a couple of years’ time, reminds me of what my auntie, who is a social worker, says to me that with jobs like this, you have five to ten years max because of the toll it takes. I finally understand what she means by that. So, for me, I think it’s feeling light and being somewhere where I can just be, even if it’s not working.”

“I constantly think about how I can use what is available to me to support those around me and get out ASAP to build what we truly need.”

“It’s quite concerning that there’s not much incentive to stay in a sector that actually needs us. There is also a lack of sustainability that was also referenced and the fact that oftentimes, job security is not even necessarily there. So there is an anxiety that even comes with a willingness to contribute to the sector... It does not feel like there is a clear sense of direction all the time and does not necessarily feel like there is a lot of cohesion. And so where do you fit in? And how does this fit into the plans you make in terms of your career?”

What next?

The voluntary sector cannot afford to ignore organisational issues that disproportionately impact Black women. Our decision to stay or leave our organisations or the voluntary sector is largely driven by the degree to which those organisations address, or fail to address, these issues. Leadership in the voluntary sector should take responsibility for bringing about internal change to improve employee experience and increase feelings of psychological safety. Practical interventions include promoting positive action initiatives, embedding intersectional race and gender equity into organisational objectives that are shared externally, and working with other organisations that effectively support young Black women.

Voluntary sector organisations should be deeply committed to the progression of young Black women, seek to understand their career aspirations, and co-develop progression plans, even if they aim to progress outside of their current organisation. As a leader, ask yourself, ‘Do I want young Black women to succeed?’ Investing in support for young Black women to thrive should be a decision that aligns with both the pragmatic and ethical principles of the voluntary sector.

Care



Care

Care may seem like an unusual subject upon which to focus, but it is actually a reflection on wellness strategies that improve personal and professional resilience. We consciously wove care into the fabric of the research project in response to our daily experiences of harm. Participants discussed multiple facets of this topic, including community care, self-care, embracing holistic wellbeing, and the recognition that some of our needs are simply unknown.

Community care

The notion of 'community care' is seen as a somewhat radical shift in approach. While self-care has become recognised as a necessity, it is generally understood as individualistic. There was an acknowledgement that self-care and community care are intrinsically linked and need to be promoted simultaneously.

“Self-care - that’s really individualistic, but if all of us are doing this self-care thing, it is not an individual act.”

“Self-care is a collective action and, in doing so, is an anti-racist action.”

Multiple participants praised resources that helped promote wellness for their communities, challenging the notion that this is a strictly personal idea.

“My team, which is an all-Black team, is working with a Black psychologist, which our employer has paid for. So we have a session each month as a team and then we have sessions individually... To have that is actually a safe space and working with someone who is a professional to be able to help us though some of these things has been quite a radical act of self-care that we have really pushed for as a team.”

Embracing holistic wellbeing

Given the multiple stressors that Black women experience in the workplace, conversations about self-care among participants recurred frequently in discussion. They often related to ways we promote our holistic wellbeing as Black women, including our mental, physical, and psychological health. The comfort of food, making space for rest and joy, and the holistic benefits of physical activities were discussed and conveyed as being key to our survival.

“We just spoke about familial relationships, the ways in which we pull resources, and grounding. In terms of health and wellbeing, running, walking, and peer-to-peer support, and basically how that’s kept most of us here alive to a degree.”

One participant specifically connected her wellbeing with taking care of her hair and retaining its length, recognising that growing out and maintaining her afro was a way of looking after herself.

“Although I rock my short hair, part of just taking care of myself and putting myself first is also about just growing out my hair and letting it flourish.”

Unknown needs

While some of our participants clearly recognised their needs, which informed their self-care and wellbeing practices, this was not the case for all participants. One participant shared that she was unable to articulate what she currently needed while navigating the voluntary sector because she did not know herself.

“I feel like I don’t even know what I need. I don’t know.”

This is not uncommon, due in part to the fact that Black women have long been encouraged, if not required, to minimise our needs both in and out of the workplace. This is an intergenerational experience that is unfortunately still relevant.

“In so many circumstances, we are made to shrink small and made to feel like our needs do not matter or our needs are trivial. So, for me, that is probably why we have so many unknown needs. So, from my own experience of doing this work with this psychologist, initially, when we had our first session she was like, “So what do you guys want to do? What do you guys want to explore?” We were like, “everything is fine.” She was like well obviously not, everything is not fine. She really had to pull it out of us that the circumstances and the things that we were going through are not okay. Like the way we have been made to feel small and subdued means that we do not even know ourselves enough to know what we need.”

“It [unknown needs] also reminded me of the nature of intergenerational conversations I have had, like my mum’s generation where we are just going to get on with it. You do not raise your voice. You do not say there is a problem. I think that there is still so much of that culture where all the Black women that I have spoken to have just been like, well, that’s just how working life is. I think there is a sense that needs are not needed; they are just fluffy desires.”

What next?

The voluntary sector needs to understand that both self-care and community care are vital to effectively supporting employees, especially Black women. By striving to adopt culturally nuanced understandings of holistic wellbeing and care, they can take important and positive steps towards anti-racism. Wellbeing stipends that cater to the self-care needs of young Black women, such as paying for essential bills or braiding our hair, are one strategy that they could consider. They should also create internal systems that ensure young Black women are effectively supported, physically and emotionally.

Wider contextual factors



Wider contextual factors

The voluntary sector is a distinct working environment, but it does not exist in a vacuum. Wider contextual factors affect Black women's experiences here, just as in any other work environment. Both the supportive and oppressive systems prevalent in society overall are reflected in the voluntary sector.

Value of supportive relationships

Most participants recognised that access to support systems impacts how we navigate the UK voluntary sector. These networks include familial, friend, and professional networks, particularly those with other Black women, where we feel a sense of belonging.

“My relationship with my mum has been a really big thing. I'm her only child. My dad doesn't live in this country, and so she's been the rock throughout my life.”

“How I want to be as a Black woman in the voluntary and community sector... [I would like to be] connected with other people and I want to have that community and that support system.”

“Work relationships have been most pivotal for me. Definitely, if I didn't have these relationships, I think I would have quit a long time ago and I will not be in the sector... I really did struggle when I first started [working in the sector], when I started to make connections with other Black people was when things started to turn around for me, and where I had a real sense of belonging.”

Even if someone decides not to actively participate in these support systems, our study participants felt that access to them was important. Such spaces were seen as enabling people to connect with others and empathise with each other's unique experiences. Especially within the voluntary sector, their very existence validated the presence of Black women.

One of the things I've been thinking about recently is just like an outlet. I feel like there's a lot going on in our minds, whether that's a result of our experiences, whatever it is. I think a space, and I feel like it's cliché about spaces and creating spaces all the time, but I think knowing that there's a space that exists where you can meet people who are potentially experiencing similar things to you and have navigated similar things to you can be like a ray of hope. Even if you don't use it, even if it's just there, it is a place you can sort of run to and talk to people.”

Navigating precarious and oppressive systems

For Black women, psychological safety in the voluntary sector – the belief that they can participate and express themselves freely without backlash – is important, and often missing. This hinders our ability to show up authentically and bring our ‘full selves’ to work. Our lack of psychological safety generally stem from intersecting systems of capitalism and misogyny. Sector-specific challenges related to securing sustainable funding also play a role in this.

“Recently I've been feeling a bit uneasy about the state of the sector in terms of funding, just like the money, and the lack of security. So, that's one thing I can say that I'm battling with. It does lead me even closer to get out [of the voluntary sector] simply because it just doesn't ever feel like there's stability.”

One participant mentioned that as Black women, we work within a sector that thrives on our oppression. This is reflected in having to change parts of ourselves when occupying spaces within the voluntary sector, which sometimes feels insincere. This adds to the ongoing dilemma of whether to remain in the sector at all.

“I’m not sure how long I can stay in a system that needs my oppression in order to thrive.”

“I don’t know about you guys, but I spend so much time in spaces where the formality overrides the sincerity.”

“I immediately thought of birds - that’s what came to mind. I think it’s just a representation of freedom and just being able to show up as your full self, you know. Not having to change any part of yourself at all.”

The impact of navigating these oppressive systems is sometimes described as ‘weathering,’ a term which participants found encompassed the overall nature of their experiences.

“Weathering is a term that is used to describe the cumulative nature of several kinds of stresses and events that then ultimately lead to ill health and poor outcomes. This has been shown as a particular problem for Black women.”

To counter the effects of weathering and the overall stressors inherent in the voluntary sector, the ability to imagine alternative futures was seen as pivotal. Hope, envisioning, and realising a more equitable and supportive environment, is key to supporting Black women to thrive.

“The scope and the space to reimagine what things could be like [is important], and it almost feels like we are just trapped in this very small, narrow bubble that makes us feel like this is how it is always going to be. A huge part of navigating these systems is about having the hope to know that one day we won’t have to live like this, like be in these spaces and shrink small or we won’t need some of these spaces at all. For me, there was just something there about giving Black women the space to think and dream big, beyond anything that they have seen and know that actually different possibilities are possible.”

What next?

Voluntary organisations need to acknowledge how larger systems and contextual factors can impact our experiences as young Black women. They should also consider how they leverage their spheres of power and influence to effect positive change. For instance, some voluntary sector organisations and foundations have the financial capacity to radically challenge the status quo and disrupt oppressive systems. This is most apparent in foundations that have challenged traditional ideas of philanthropy by dissolving their organisations and redistributing their assets. Voluntary organisations generally exist to make a difference. They should be asking themselves: what radical action can we take to challenge harmful and oppressive systems affecting Black women?



Concluding remarks

Black women often experience marginalisation, unrealistic expectations, and the results of longstanding oppressive systems, resulting in both intentional and unintentional discrimination. Our experience in the UK voluntary sector, despite the progressive impetus behind many organisations, is often no different. Black women navigating the UK voluntary sector continue to feel like outsiders, yearning for spaces that meet our needs and interests that often do not exist or are insufficient. The combined weight of our ambitions to advance professionally despite enduring stress and uncertainty in the sector, responsibility of caring for our communities and ourselves, and the impact of broader contextual factors exerts a cumulative effect that often causes Black women to struggle and even leave the voluntary sector.

This report confirms that these are current realities for young Black women and that they are not fixed. Voluntary organisations must play an essential role in changing these realities for the better. The opportunities for action outlined in the report aim to ensure that young Black women have access to culturally appropriate support, are enabled to progress, and that organisations are continually reflecting on their ability to disrupt oppressive systems and take appropriate action.

We wanted to honour the primary vision of this study by sharing input and wisdom from young Black women working in this sector. Therefore, we conclude with some words of wisdom shared by the young Black women who participated in this project. We hope that this will be a valuable starting point for future resources which may be developed, and that the voluntary sector will recognise its obligations to the Black women serving in its workforce.



Words of wisdom

for young Black women, by young Black women

We should all strive to be as audacious as our peers in the workplace, especially those who have more gender and racial privilege.

We should embrace the fullness of who we are.

Our workplace is a tool. It can be used to achieve 'Black excellence' or we can simply get the job done to pay the bills. Either way, the choice is ours.

If we are striving for excellence, we should not allow the spirit of competition to come between us as Black women. We need to value community over competition and help each other to thrive.

Just as we benefit from our workplace, our workplace also benefits from us. It should be a mutually beneficial exchange. If the relationship is unable to work for us, despite our best efforts, we can leave situations which do not serve us and create other opportunities.

If we decide to leave, we should not always see this as our failure. Oftentimes, the reality is that our workplace has failed to retain us.

We may not always be the strongest person, and that is okay. We do not have to be scared to take time out to look after ourselves because life gets overwhelming.

We should nurture options and opportunities that align with our aspirations, within or beyond the voluntary sector. We live in a big world, and we can create our own definitions of impact.



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Appendix one: focus group signposting resource

If you need additional support, the following resources may be useful as you engage with our research project on Black women navigating the world of work.

If you are in an emergency, call 999.

If you think you need medical help now, and you are not sure what to do go to 111.nhs.uk or call 111.

Acas (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) – <https://www.acas.org.uk/>

This is a governmental public body for England, Wales and Scotland which provides free impartial advice and tools for employers and employees, and help to resolve workplace disputes.

Bayo - <https://www.bayo.uk/other>

This is a space to find collectives, organisations, and services across the UK to support the mental health of Black communities – it is run by The Ubele Initiative.

Every Mind Matters - <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/>

This is a campaign run by NHS England – their online platform provides expert advice to help improve your wellbeing, and provide practical tips on sleep, coping with money worries, and self-care.

Good Thinking - <https://www.good-thinking.uk/>

Approved by the NHS, this digital platform supports Londoners to look after their health and wellbeing, helping people to tackle anxiety, stress, low mood, sleep problems and other concerns.

NHS Health Services - <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-health-services#F>

This is a directory of services provided by the NHS.

Samaritans - <https://www.samaritans.org/>

This is helpline and listening service which supports people experiencing emotional distress – they are available 24 hours a day, 365 a year. Call 116 123 (free from any phone).

The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network - <https://www.baatn.org.uk/find-a-psychotherapist/#!directory/ord=rnd>

This has an extensive directory of Black, African, Caribbean, and Asian heritage counsellors, and psychotherapists.

Therapy for Black Girls - <https://therapyforblackgirls.com/podcast/>

This is a podcast by Dr. Jay Harden Bradford, a licensed psychologist and speaker, which focuses on Black women's mental health.

Toya Talks - <https://toyatalks.com/>

This is a podcast by Toya Washington, a Nigerian British woman who shares her experiences of work and advises people on their workplace dilemmas in the hope of supporting us to “navigate the world of work safely, and in turn light the path of our success”.

