

# Dis-included and distorted: the plight of racialised women in both the news and in newsrooms

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## Abstract:

Newsrooms, especially in the global West, are largely white male-centrist. Migration in the last few generations means people from different ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds are part of a potential workforce in the West. In the last few decades, the ease of geographical movement has made it easier for people to get an education outside of where they were born. Often, they seek positions that are advertised globally. However, biased hiring means they often do not get these opportunities. Women of colour are particularly susceptible to this. On the occasion that they are recruited, HR policies and newsroom staff are not trained in addressing their specific needs. Journalism schools, which are formative building grounds for journalists and where many define their core journalistic values and professional models, are a great place to start gender sensitisation with a focus on race and migration. While access to this kind of sensitisation and awareness should be made available in newsrooms across the West, journalism schools are a way to ensure that young professionals come equipped

with that mindset even before they start their careers. While the conversation about gender is picking up force, women of colour are not often included. Often, to get opportunities, journalists of colour who identify as women exoticise their narratives instead of doing what they were skilled or qualified to do. Helping students during the journalism school phase develop the skills and sensitivities of hiring and managing a diverse staff, including women of colour, is an essential in today's climate. Only then will global news benefit from the full scope of the possibilities and potential of hiring racialised women journalists.

**A note on terminology:** I have used the terms racialised women, minority women and women of colour interchangeably because those have been the terms I use most comfortably. The women I have interviewed for the article identify with these and other terms. BAME and 'Minority Background,' are among others suggested. All these terms are used interchangeably in the article.

## Introduction

**As conversations on workplace diversity gains foothold across the West, newsrooms are continuing to ignore the particular need and importance of including, specifically, racialised women. The problem with this is not least the lack of representation in newsrooms but also an editorial bent that is not sensitised in that direction.**

Where there is a need for gender sensitisation across the board, there is also the need for conversations around racial and gender sensitivity within editorial decision-making and during the commissioning process. The solution is not just in increasing recruitment, though necessary and overdue, of racialised women but also in equipping future editors, copyeditors, reporters, commissioning editors and all other newsroom staff in gender and race sensitisation. While the intersection of gender and race sensitisation needs to be adopted across existing newsrooms, J schools can provide the necessary insurance that a future generation of newsrooms leaders come already equipped with that knowledge. This article aims to address why this is necessary and suggests ideas as to how to begin its implementation.

## HERStory: On disinclusion of racialised women in the conversation about gender rights.

About a year ago, Brent Staples of the New York Times published an editorial with the headline 'How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women.' The piece, which became a part of his Pulitzer-winning portfolio this year, naturally divided but resonated with many as they realized that echoes of this betrayal continue today. In the article, Staples refers to the Suffrage movement's hero Elizabeth Stanton (1915-2002) as 'a classic liberal racist who embraced fairness in the abstract while publicly enunciating bigoted views of

African-American men, whom she characterized as “Sambos” and incipient rapists in the period just after the war. The suffrage struggle itself took on a similar flavor, acquiescing to white supremacy — and selling out the interests of African-American women — when it became politically expedient to do so.’ (Staples, 2018)

This Otherization (Taylor 2009) of black women in pre-civil rights United States by white women in the era before the women’s movement, continues to be felt by minority women living in white western societies today. The narrative of the “coloured” man as aggressive, predatory and rapist has echoes all over the western world even today. This was seen on a large scale in recent times after the New Year’s Eve incident at the Cologne Cathedral (2015-16). After this, an alleged mass racial profiling of men of seemingly North African appearance took place, an event that was denied by the Cologne Police (Schmidt and Said-Moorhouse, 2017). German feminist Alice Schwarzer came under fire for saying that this behaviour was ‘expected.’ This demonizing of Muslim men, and branding them as rapists, informs the perception around Muslim women as oppressed, controlled, conservative and the Other (Considine, 2017, 165-183; Tosuner, date unknown). In the United States and Spain, in the wake of mass Latin American immigration, the stereotype of the jealous, possessive and impulsive Latino prevails (Klein, 2008). This systemic labelling of non-white men as rapists and machos causes the systemic labelling of non-white women as oppressed, controlled and in need of being saved (Tosuner, date unknown).

Women of colour are seen as inherently different from their white women counterparts, as possessions of male members of their community, operating in relation to, as opposed to against, global patriarchy, and more particularly, patriarchy in their own communities. In that sense, women of colour, unlike white women, are often cast as helpless to the patriarchy in their society and without the ability to change it. This casts them as inferior to white women and lower down in the hierarchy of gendered suffering and higher up in the hierarchy of oppression. Oftentimes, it is expected that racialised women be more tolerant of sexual misdemeanours because of a widespread and often unsubstantiated assumption of early indoctrination in their own communities (Buchanan and West, 2009). Hence, perceived as the more oppressed, women of colour take second place in the struggle for workplace equity to their white counterparts (Gender Pay Gap Statistics for 2020). Women of colour are hence, expected to be grateful, and uncomplaining, recipients of work assigned to them in western workplaces, rather than capable, skilled individuals hired for their qualifications rather than their ethnic background. They also end up bearing more office ‘housework’ than their white colleagues bear. (Williams and Multhaupt, 2018) and are expected to be less vocal about workplace biases than their white western counterparts. This puts skilled women of colour, despite being backed up by their diplomas, at a disadvantage as they continue to be perceived as objects of their communities and not independent freethinking and free-acting individuals capable of performing tasks related to the modern workforce.

These issues can only be rightfully addressed at the formative stage. In the case of potential journalists, this is at the journalism school stage where, along with other biases, this bias against racialised women can also be addressed. Methods used could be, but are certainly not limited to, statistical analysis, research both on the field and through the existing work of researchers and also through enhancing journalism school recruitment of diverse women. Courses on gender and race in journalism must be incorporated into the core journalism curriculum and offered to journalism students at both mandatory beginner levels and as elective advanced classes.

## **Women of colour working in media: Some stereotypes and assumptions**

As workplaces scramble to improve diversity, recruiting officers focus on expanding their HR to women and minorities. The focus is less on incorporating women who belong to communities in the minority, instead improving their ratios of women AND minorities (Tulshyan, 2019). In most cases, in improving diversity quotas, they incorporate just white women. The intersection of race and gender is rarely spoken of when discussing greater inclusion in workplaces. Studies done in the US in 2018 reveal that women of colour in print media amounts to 7.95 percent, 6.2 percent in local radio and 12.6 percent in local television. In an industry where women run at only 32 percent, the situation for women of colour is even lower. In the UK, a 2016 study conducted by City University, revealed journalism to be 94 percent white and 54 percent male. Moreover, where included, women of colour are often marginalized. (Thurman et al., 2016, 8-13; Williams, 2016) Colleagues across Europe and North America will speak of exclusion from certain topics (Internation-

tional Journalism Festival, 2018). Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, a renowned UK-based journalist and popular race commentator said, during an email interview I conducted for the study, which editors assumed she would

‘... always do “ethnic” stories. That I knew nothing about western culture or politics in spite of being raised in the colonies and educated about and, some of the time, in the west, at Oxford no less. At that time, there were few brown faces there. I had a row with one section editor when I offered to interview a British author- McEwan- a writer I love. And she refused saying “we need a literature person”. I have two degrees in English literature. It never happened. Politics was the same until I kicked up and was ‘allowed’ to go to political events and write on them.’

Other colleagues reported that they were discouraged from pursuing topics of their choice and, conversely, persuaded to pursue stories that pertain to their gender and ethnic minority, writing personal, as opposed to reported, essays. Furthermore they were asked to report on ‘soft issues,’ act as an ‘authentic voice’ to explain the issues of their perceived ‘homeland’, assumed to be working from a bias and considered unable to objectively report on issues that do not have anything to do with their perceived background (Hussen, 2019). Meanwhile, white women reporters are not expected only to report only on their specific community although, of course, dealing with other kinds of stereotypes and having their abilities and competence negated and questioned. (Irvin, 2013).

In a report on PRI’s *The World*, journalists of colour explore the perception of bias. In the report, Maria Hijosa of Latino USA says, ‘As journalists we never want to be part of the story.’... Yet ‘as journalists of colour, we are part of the story.’ (Shenoy, 2016). For women-identifying journalists of colour, racialised and stereotyped as objects of their story and not in control of it, the situation is even worse. In addition, not much research is done on that intersection of race and gender, where women of colour serve as ‘authentic voices’ to further existing narratives about their community that form part of the Western Imagination rather than as actual narrators, and controllers, of their own stories.

Cigdem Toprak, a German woman journalist who self-identifies as the granddaughter of guest workers from Anatolia and who I also interviewed for this article, said, ‘I do not like to be the ‘voice’ of Turkish women, as a woman, as a migrant, as a German with migration background.’ In the email she also wrote,

‘I also want to write about topics that are on a bigger scale, to interpret things, to observe them closely and to give my opinion or to evaluate things from my professional (not personal) perspective.’

On the subject of being differentiated from white colleagues, she wrote:

‘I had the impression that I am treated like someone who is rather a voice than a thinker with competence for this job. A voice of Turkish migrants, voice of young female German with Turkish background and so on. But I have to be honest. This also opened a door for me. Because I could give first-hand insights as a journalist. It took long (almost 10 years) to convince my colleagues and editors that I write as a professional based on competence rather than on identity. But I am not sure if this is a normal process of establishing yourself in journalism, especially in times in which the market is so bad, the competition is so high and in Germany, where young journalists are seen as not competent enough to write on big topics.’

Often when it comes to actual on-ground reporting and traveling to conflict zones, white men get the assignments, even if women and minority journalists express the inclination and display the qualifications for it. Women, white and non-white, have traditionally been excluded from the field, but journalists that are women of colour are deemed particularly incapable of the task, even if they possess the interest, languages and knowledge of a particular geo-political region. They are used instead, generally, for reasserting narratives that already exist in the media and as explainers for what is assumed to be their experience. In that sense, women journalists of colour are expected to know only about their assumed region and background but only to the extent of writing personal essays, while the hard news and actual reporting is left mostly to white men. Newsroom expectations of working only on beats that are informed by their culture, religion, nationality or ethnicity is not necessarily a difficulty experienced by white women journalists.

As a reporter living in Berlin, I reported on the status of women in German workplaces. I often experienced that my reporting and analysis was met with the question of why I was not working to help the oppressed women in my own country. In a women journalists’ support group, I often overheard my colleagues speak about how German workplaces were terrible ‘EVEN for a Pakistani woman.’ Another editor told me she did not need my ‘Outsider perspective,’ on German issues but would welcome stories from Pakistan, especially of the personal kind. German journalism is particularly opposed to what they call the ‘Ich Geschichte,’ translated as the ‘I, Story,’ or personal essay, but when it came to my work from Pakistan, a country that is neither intellectually, academically nor journalistically interesting to me, they insisted I work with the personal pronoun. Often, they wanted to attach a photograph with my pieces, an honour not bestowed

on my other colleagues. While colleagues of colour were fewer and further between in Germany and not many shared my expat status but were Germans themselves, I recently read a piece by Berlin-based Iranian academic, Sadaf Javdani that resonated with my experience.

The opening of her *Guardian* piece read as follows, ‘If you decide to stay in Europe and enjoy your freedom here instead of going back, nothing will change. So why don’t you consider going back to your country?’ These were not the racist remarks of a stranger or acquaintance, but an anthropology program director at a German university whom I was meeting to discuss my postdoctoral proposal. I wanted to research material and sensory perceptions of home, in a way that was unrelated to immigration or asylum.

‘Instead of working on your current topic,’ the professor continued, ‘why don’t you base your research on why Iranians remain in Germany in search of freedom and safety? Some 50 years ago, our women fought for their rights – and if we had escaped our country then, like you did, we wouldn’t be here right now.’ (Sadaf Javdani, 2019)

Saoussen Ben Cheikh, a London-based project manager at the media development organization, Internews, is French of North African origins. She moved a few years ago to London because, despite her qualifications, she found it hard to be employed in France. When I asked her to connect me to other French journalists of colour, she said she did not know anyone and, she said, ‘that was telling.’ As part of a set of emailed questions, she wrote:

‘It occurs I am passionate about the Middle East and North Africa region and I report, research and work on Human rights issues/media. I like international affairs in general and follow all the news. But probably because I know the region so well, language, history and culture, I feel being more useful there than in other parts of the world. But sometimes I felt that my ‘white’ colleagues did not trust my judgement and analysis because I am from the region. They thought I must be biased. Instead of valuing this unique insight and expertise I am able to bring, they side-lined me when taking decisions. This is discrediting the professionalism and integrity of the staff and is unfair as it applies only to minorities. If journalists can’t report on the regions they are originally from or have personal connection, we should apply it to all. So, for example, British journalists should not be able to report on Brexit, American journalists on all the wars they have caused in the world etc. [...] So, we are patronized and always a bit suspected to be with the ‘others’ (whoever the group they associate us with) when it fits their interests. We have to show we work better and are the good guys.’

Colleagues reported that the same standards did not apply to their white women colleagues. While they suffered from other prejudices and were often sidelined when it came to the most prestigious reporting jobs, the ones that won prizes and accolades, they were not told not to report on a region. While living in Pakistan, I have met countless white women, from the US and all over Europe, who report on issues about Pakistani women. Oftentimes, they do not speak the language and have not researched the culture. In contrast, women journalists that have an affiliation to those communities are often not given those jobs. I am often asked about women in Pakistan in radios and talk shows, despite repeatedly refusing such requests because I have not worked on those issues but nevertheless, on occasion I have caved, just so I can nuance the one-sided and under-nuanced picture presented by reporters from the west, often male and white. On those occasions, I have often been labelled dishonest. This editorial and journalistic gaslighting and denial of one’s perspective is something that Dr Minelle Mahtani, mixed race scholar and journalist and senior advisor to the Provost for Racialised Faculty at the University of British Columbia, iterated in her email to me.

‘I was stuck in an interesting and complicit double bind as a young mixed-race woman. They wanted women who could represent their so-called commitment to equity and diversity, which meant racialisation. They wanted people who looked a little different. But they did not want journalists who had a different point of view than the status quo. When I diverged from their message, I was met with quizzical looks at best and pernicious results at worst.’

Ben Cheikh had similar thoughts about having a different perspective and getting invalidated for it. She wrote:

‘Maybe sometimes people assume, when you are a woman from a minority, that you are more conservative than the ‘white’ women. It is often from good faith; they don’t want to take the risk to offend or hurt your feelings. So, there are certain codes they would not use with you. Or they patronize you when you bring another perspective.’

At the International Journalism Festival in 2018, held annually in Perugia, Italy, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Minelle Mahtani, Cigdem Toprak and I were on one of two women-only panels and the only panel that was composed of racialised women only. Predictably, the topic we spoke about was on women of colour in white newsrooms. Our focus during that panel was the way each of us, of different ethnic, socio-economic

and even educational backgrounds had to scramble to tell the stories we wanted to tell. The panel was aptly titled HERStory and contributes to some of the only data available on this phenomenon. (International Journalism Festival, 2018)

## Sisterhood? Ally? The well-intentioned betrayal of the white woman.

There is a widespread assumption that white women are the normative and all women experience discrimination according to that normative (Deliovsky, 2008). Meanwhile, in misestimating their own tendencies to discriminate, based on colour, ethnicity, religion and other differentials, white women colleagues can sometimes subject their non-white female colleagues to oppression. (Center for Gender in Organizations, 2008; Cargle, 2018). Additionally, in the hierarchy of suppression white women colleagues can often behave in a paternalistic manner (Reid, 2019). I have often been subject to ignorant and offhand remarks about my assumed status as a Pakistani, Muslim woman (Yousuf, 2012). I have often been compelled to refute the assumption that I am not possibly as advanced in my understanding of women's rights as my white counterparts.

Of course, the support of white women is essential in the struggle for rights for women of colour in newsrooms all over the US and Europe, because the struggle has similar overtones and is defined by many of the same tropes. While race is the intersecting overtone that white women are not subject to, there is much to understand there.

Mahtani, whose scholarly work has fundamentally been about race and gender and the intersection of these, particularly in the media, emailed the following:

*'There's a culture of what I call the grammar of good intentions among white senior management. A lot of senior level journalists who hold management positions are convinced they are objective, open-minded and liberal - in the worst sense of that word. What they don't have is an analytic towards understanding systemic oppression. The focus on individual experiences, and supporting their one woman of colour, or their one disabled journalist, means they don't see how their actions are focused on singular, personal experiences rather than addressing systemic patterns of discrimination. We will only see change when they commit to systemic responses to racism, sexism, ableism and ongoing forms of oppression.'* (Dr Minelle Mahtani, over email)

She writes further about her fraught experience in the newsroom where the majority of the staff were white women:

*I was young and intrepid, so I knew how to navigate senior white women to make it – give them whatever they wanted, be on time, be precise, careful and turn out my best work. But there was still an assumption I was stupid, or didn't have the chops to do the job. I also noticed that if I had a different perspective from them, I would have to be very careful about when to voice that, if at all. I was also patronized. I remember one painful moment when a senior white woman producer sat me down when we were working on a story about a playwright, and she said to me, "Please remember that playwright is spelled w-r-i-g-h-t" as if I couldn't spell or as if I didn't know the difference between 'wright' and 'right'. The assumption before I even make a mistake about my lack of knowledge was astounding and upsetting to me.'*

She adds that white women have been the biggest benefactors of employment equity for many years. 'They are the ones who have benefitted. Not women of colour. And because of white benevolence and white femininity, the relationship is even more fraught.'

Many colleagues who were women of colour, who I spoke to extensively about the topic, had the impression that, despite their qualifications and experiences, they were not considered qualified enough. In some cases, like Yasmin Alibhai-Brown when she wanted to interview Ian McEwan, no amount of convincing and 'proving your own chops' helped. I wanted to report on the opera and was repeatedly told, 'anyone could do that.' I understand now that this means a white person and, probably a white man, is more suitable. The problem within the system is that a racialised woman cannot be that 'anyone,' and pursue stories of her own interest. Equality, however, means that anyone should be able to be that anyone, not least a white man or woman. Minelle Mahtani, echoes this in her email.

*'Initially, I assumed it was my lack of journalism experience. And then I realized I was gaslighting myself. I was working on a PhD and had published in The Toronto Star: I had the requisite credentials. But many around me - including my peers - felt that I didn't deserve my job. At one point, I was threatened verbally in the cafeteria where I worked. I was told, you don't deserve your job. That was very painful and shocking.'*

I often experienced the pain of being labelled a 'privileged' Pakistani woman, a moniker that is an attempt

to explain anyone who challenges the common stereotype of a suppressed South Asian woman and a Muslim one at that. At least that has been my experience of it, and I noticed it often came from those colleagues who did not ask questions and relied on assumptions. I met many other women colleagues who tried to be the best allies they could and one such set of women was a group of journalists that were asking for a 40 percent quota for women in the newsroom. I was their keynote speaker at the inauguration of their launch in 2012 and I spent the evening listening to pained conversations about being sexually harassed, not promoted and discriminated against by their male colleagues. This was an evening of great camaraderie when we realized that our experiences as women journalists of different backgrounds had so much in common.

While I often felt cast as an outsider, a colleague from Pakistan, as opposed to an expat colleague who lived in Berlin, I felt that their support was real, and their language came from not having understood my position. At the time, however, I was tired of the comments coming from other, unsupportive female colleagues, one of whom suggested that my complaints about sexual harassment had come from my 'conservative upbringing.' In Germany, she said, men and women mingle freely. In that patronizing tone, she forgot that I had lived in several western cities, and assumed that her version of the gendered Pakistani experience might not be true for me. In this sense, she did what I spoke about earlier in the article. She assumed something about the men I have had the opportunity to interact with, imagined me incapable of fighting against the patriarchy of the culture I grew up in and reduced my experiences to what she ASSUMED was true, as opposed to what she (as a colleague who knew my background and thought-process over numerous conversations) KNEW to be true.

## Conclusion

Human Resource (HR) departments will benefit from immigration that is resulting from enhanced policies for "qualified", usually university-educated migrants in the West. Increased geographical mobility and technology has facilitated young people moving away from their homelands and families. This socio-cultural change can be tapped into by HR in Western newsroom by beginning to actively prioritise recruitment across national and cultural borders. This could allow for a more diverse newsroom HR and, in turn, attract more people globally to seek out employment in western newsrooms. These newsrooms will then have a chance to benefit from a wide range of skills and perspectives brought in by the diverse recruitment. This is not only needed to nurture an intelligent, sensitive and responsible global media but also needed in this globalising world, where digital platforms allow news consumers to access media from everywhere. That way journalism will truly become a borderless profession.

Additionally, HR policies must be compliant to include the specific needs of women of colour. In that regard, there is a need for platforms that sensitise both white women and men on the challenges and needs of, specifically, women of colour in predominantly white workspaces. Starting these programmes at Journalism school, as students prepare themselves for lives as journalists and editors, is most beneficial and comes with the added insurance of a new generation of journalism professionals come into their careers equipped with the skill and sensitivity towards their women colleagues of colour. Some suggestions are listed below.

## Suggestions for Journalism Schools and other journalism programmes

As these experiences are mainly harvested from women journalists of colour working in some large countries in the Global West, the recommendations below are especially tailored for institutions in these countries. However, they are worth considering elsewhere, too. Universities educating journalists might ameliorate the situation by considering the following suggestions:

- Courses devoted to a greater awareness and understanding of the racialised gendered experience are imperative in this climate. These courses should be designed at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels, with the beginning level mandatory for journalism students.
- Journalism schools must enhance their recruitment efforts and policies towards admitting more students who identify as women of colour. This means enhancing international recruitment for women students and recruiting within their own countries and regions for racialised women students. The distinction must be made and the journalism schools must ensure that administration is sensitive to

the needs of these students, including their self-identification and commit to being vigilant about the differences within each group.

- Racial-Gender sensitivity should be practiced across courses, whether pertaining to journalistic ethics, history, business or other core courses and used as an analytical tool across the fields that compose a journalism programme.
- Classrooms can be used as safe spaces for discussions and a way to lay students' cards on the table and ask questions that they may not feel are appropriate outside.
- Guest speakers who are racialised women journalists and researchers and writers who have worked on white fragility, race, gender, stereotyping etc., should be included as part of the curriculum.
- Courses should have a healthy division between statistical analysis, field research and discussion.
- Students should be encouraged to confront their own biases rather than shamed for them.
- Essential reading lists should include books about race, both works of nonfiction and research.
- Cross-curricular collaborations from a racial-gendered perspective should be encouraged.

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