

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

British fashion lacks inclusivity, diversity: report

July 26, 2021



The U.K. fashion industry has a long road ahead towards diversity and inclusion. Image credit: British Fashion Council

By NORA HOWE

Diversity within the British fashion industry remains scarce, as 88 percent of fashion consumers and creatives believe the industry does not represent a spectrum of different bodies and identities.

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In its "Representation and Inclusion in the Fashion Industry" report, the [All-Party Parliamentary Group for Textile and Fashion](#) (T&F APPG) examines the issues of exclusion, as well as the opportunities for economic, cultural and social inclusion for people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ communities within the fashion industry. By addressing these issues and offering solutions, T&F APPG hopes to encourage constructive conversations between the U.K. government and the fashion industry.

"After 40 years in fashion, observing business leaders entrusted with self-regulation, yet choosing to abdicate all moral responsibility in pursuit of quarterly profit return, I conclude that vital pro-social advance must be embedded within corporate governance by stakeholders with vision," said Caryn Franklin MBE, T&F APPG representation and inclusion advisory committee member, in a statement.

"As this report makes clear, there are new and untapped sources for business expansion requiring a wider variety of perspectives," she said. "Attention to progress and intention to swiftly engage, involves transformational leadership from the highest level."

The T&F APPG's Advisory Committee alongside the Fashion Roundtable, conducted five parliamentary evidence sessions, which included submissions from designers and creative directors, models and model agents and fashion educators. Written submissions were also collected as part of the evidence gathering, as well as an online survey with 337 respondents.

Key findings

Discrimination and underrepresentation in the fashion industry is extensive, mirroring wider society in its impacts. This is frequently structural and presents obstacles to people both entering and progressing through the industry.

Institutionalized racism persists across the industry, from recruitment and progression to the provision for Black,

ESEA, Asian or mixed-race models working on shoots or in shows and in creative and managerial roles.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents stated that they had experienced or witnessed discrimination in the fashion industry based on appearance or beliefs.

People with disabilities are underrepresented throughout fashion, with an employment rate 28.8 percent lower than that of people without disabilities. Ableism was reported in the lack of training and sense of tokenism when people with disabilities were employed, such as only being cast for special campaigns.



Prada became the first luxury fashion company to join The Valuable 500, a global community dedicated to transforming the business system for the benefit of people with disabilities. Image credit: Prada Group

Forms of gender discrimination were also recorded, such as size and body shaming, as well as prejudice against expressions of gender identity other than the gender binary, such as trans or non-binary.

An overwhelming majority, 94.4 percent, think it is important to see bodies like their own reflected in media images.

Additionally, Islamophobia was reported in relation to dress practices and how markets identified as Muslim.

T&F APPG discovered examples of everyday objectifying, unethical and damaging treatment of staff that were all linked to their minority status within business or educational relationships.

Eighty-three percent stated that if a fashion brand is shown to be non-inclusive, this would impact their decision to shop with them.

A recurrent and striking theme that emerged from all levels of the industry is that many companies are ignoring the opportunities for greater revenue streams from marginalized groups.

The collective spending power of ethnic minorities in the U.K. is estimated to be worth 300 billion pounds, or more than \$412 billion at current exchange. The spending power of people living with disabilities is 249 billion pounds, or \$342 billion at current exchange.

The fashion industry does not utilize the talent from marginalized professionals, both at entry-level and more experienced roles. As research suggests that diverse teams are more profitable, a varied workforce would offer a significant economic contribution to the industry.

Attempts at widening inclusion and countering discrimination are present across the industry, and there has been some success in this area.

Selfridges employees share how the company has implemented change and what it can still do

While many initiatives are celebrated, data suggests that many people in marginalized groups see the "diversity industry" as being superficial.

Despite diversity initiatives and unconscious bias training, participants in T&F APPG's research noted that decision-making structures and staffing at strategic levels of management ultimately remain unchanged.

Change for the future

The [U.K. Government Equalities Office](#) aims to address specific inequalities affecting the underrepresented in the fashion industry by moving away from the categorization system of BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) to one that recognizes the social and economic structures that reproduce and enforce discrimination linked to race and

ethnic background.

It wants to act and create clear legislation to recognize discrimination against ethnicity, especially in relation to appearance in the workplace or within educational institutions.

Additionally, it aims to create clear legislation to recognize non-binary and gender-expansive identities through amendments to the Gender Recognition Act.

Finally, it suggests developing separate legislation to protect people with disabilities from discrimination, rather than being reliant on the combined Equality Act. T&F APPG suggests the act of merging the original Disability Discrimination Act into a single Equality Act has led to a loss of focus on disability discrimination and a widespread feeling of a loss of rights for people with disabilities.

Overall, leadership teams must accept how racism and discrimination operate within the fashion industry and make changes accordingly.

Last year, Scottish fashion label Christopher Kane gave a platform to BAME students from the eponymous designer's alma mater.

BAME students from the Fashion Journalism and Fashion Communication and Promotion program at Central Saint Martins have launched a monthly digital zine on Christopher Kane's official Instagram account. Called Platform, the project amplifies the voices of those students who often face barriers to entry in the fashion industry (see story).

This applies within the global scale, as well.

Global publishing company Cond Nast is holding itself accountable with new goals founded on creating an equitable and inclusive recruitment, retention and talent development approach.

In regards to expanding diversity efforts across its employee base, Cond Nast has committed to seeing the ethnic and racial diversity of its new hires increase each year and plans to place its primary focus on recruitment and retention. To achieve diversity and inclusion in leadership, the company has pledged to elevate and promote underrepresented employees and help with growing their careers ([see story](#)).

Alongside key findings, the report offers a series of policy recommendations for sector and governmental implementation with the aim to serve as a roadmap towards a more inclusive British fashion industry.

"It is my hope that this paper is read widely, both by industry and government, and that our recommendations serve as a roadmap towards a more inclusive, representative and successful U.K. fashion industry," said Dr. Lisa Cameron MP, chair of the T&F APPG, in a statement.