

NONPROFITS

## 71pc of UK fashion companies have D&I strategies, though most are 'underdeveloped': BFC

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*Findings show that while diversity and inclusion are front of mind for many companies, underdeveloped internal strategies hamper potential progress. Image credit: British Fashion Council*

By ZACH JAMES

The British Fashion Council (BFC) is releasing its findings on the apparel industry's handling of a series of ever-important social topics.

Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) have become more prevalent in the minds of fashion executives, but the steps taken internally within organizations must be promoted, as the data shows. The second annual edition of the "[Diversity & Inclusion in Fashion](#)" report spotlights the strides companies have taken to improve in this avenue while displaying just how much further they need to go to achieve a truly inclusive environment.

"Data collection is essential for benchmarking in order to develop strategy and implement change," said Caroline Rush, CEO of the BFC, in a statement.

"Nearly three-quarters of fashion businesses now have coordinated D&I strategies, however now is the time to truly embed these practices," Ms. Rush said. "Deep-rooted challenges persist and we must collectively rally to create real change."

Research for the report was handled by the London-based executive advisory firm MBS Group, which utilized data voluntarily submitted by Europe's top 100 largest fashion companies. Topics span female representation, ethnic minority leaders, LGBTQ+ heads and disabled administrators at the board, executive committee and direct reports levels the company also spoke with various executives to gain their perspectives on the matters at hand.

### First steps

Fashion's road to representation is long, as the report shows that there are five main segments to pay attention to.

Firstly, 71 percent of companies within the industry have some form of a coordinated strategy to bolster D&I, though the BFC claims that most of the plans are "underdeveloped." The fashion industry lags behind the four others listed with set schemes: 91 percent in retail, 89 percent in travel, 77 percent in consumer goods and 76 percent in beauty.

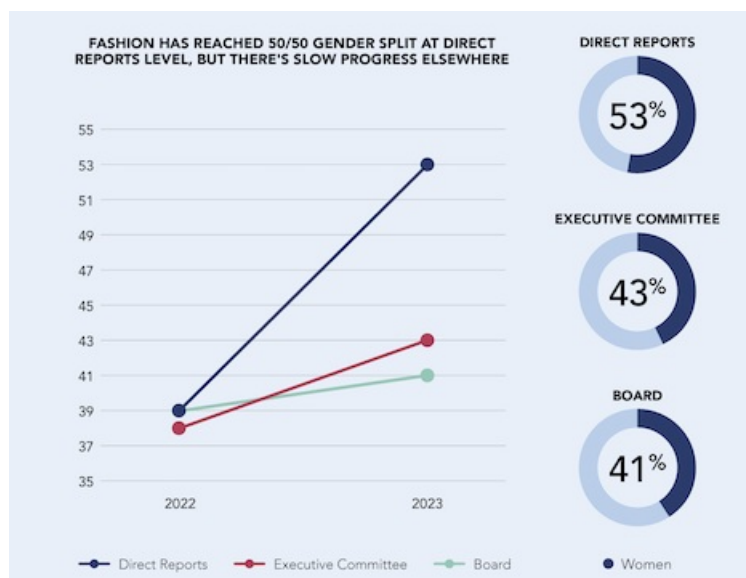
"Data collection is essential for benchmarking in order to develop strategy and implement change. Nearly three-quarters of fashion businesses now have coordinated D&I strategies, however now is the time to truly embed these practices" Caroline Rush, BFC Chief Executive [pic.twitter.com/DALA5e0qFb](https://pic.twitter.com/DALA5e0qFb)

BFC (@BFC) September 13, 2023

This boils down to the fact that while more corporations and labels are on board to drive inclusivity collecting data on the issue, dedicating budget to it and hiring more from diverse communities these blueprints are in their early stages, either not yet leading to tangible change or having not reached the ears of executives, instead delegated human resources (HR) divisions.

Diversity & inclusion have been lumped in with "HR issues" in fashion, only truly serving to kick the proverbial can further down to road to another time, as HR departments often lack the power to institute change at the levels needed to truly make an impact in D&I, leading to the second main segment.

Issues such as those included in D&I must reach the executive and board level to be effective, according to the report



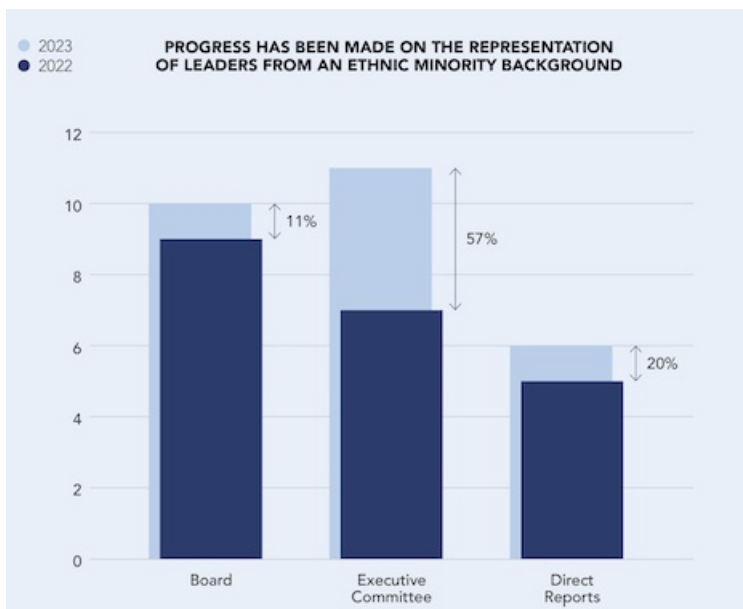
While gender parity has been met in some areas, there's still room for improvement in others. Image credit: BFC

Thirdly, women are now just as likely to report to executives as men, but are still lagging behind when it comes to board seats and executive committee appointments as 53 percent of "direct reports" are female, alongside 45 percent for the "executive committee" and 41 percent of "board" members. With this, women are present among leaders at higher rates than in the retail, travel, consumer goods and beauty industries; in some cases by significant margins.

Ethnic minorities are rising up as well, with double-digit percentage gains in each of the above areas. Despite this, high-ranking positions are still predominantly white.

Disabled communities also find themselves on the outside looking in, as only 11 percent of businesses included in the report could identify a leader in their organization living with a disability. While this may seem like a large amount, in the U.K. where the majority of the included brands reside 18 percent of England and Wales residents have some form of disability, according to 2021 census data.

LGBTQ+ leaders are also present on 70 percent of the labels' respective staffs, an increase from 62 percent in last year's report.



Ethnic minorities now account for more than 10 percent of all board members and executive committee assignments, but only represent 6 percent of direct reports. Image credit: BFC

Fourth on the agenda is that a cultural reset within the fashion industry seems to be in the cards in the not-so-distant future. While systemic issues such as hiring practices and internal behaviors are seen as holding back the progression of D&I, a wave is starting to form that has the potential to create the change necessary for gender, ethnic and identity equity.

Exclusivity, a key tenant of luxury and fashion, is seen as the main driver of harmful patterns of behavior holding back diversity from taking hold, but attitudes are shifting as internships, mentorship programs and academic pipelines open up new pathways for those that might have otherwise been left on the outside with no way into the market.

#### Shifting priorities

The fifth and final point made by the report is that other matters are ranking as more urgent in the eyes of labels than those of diversity and inclusion.

The first "Diversity & Inclusion in Fashion" report was released in 2022 not long after many countries around the world received a startling wake-up call on the importance of diversity following the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed leading to more action in the realm of D&I, but tides are shifting towards other hot-button issues.

According to the report, "deliberate, focused action is needed to drive change," but with topics such as sustainability gaining the limelight for consumers, companies are forced to concentrate on ESG reports ([see story](#)), fruit leather ([see story](#)) and reducing water consumption ([see story](#)) for the sake of their bottom lines.

At the launch of the Circular Fashion Innovation Network (CFIN), an industry-led programme in partnership with [@UKFTorg](#) and [@UKRI\\_News](#) to accelerate the UK towards a Circular Fashion Ecosystem, [pic.twitter.com/DwzymbuJGg](https://pic.twitter.com/DwzymbuJGg)

BFC (@BFC) [September 8, 2023](#)

The BFC itself is also split between D&I ([see story](#)) and circularity ([see story](#)) with its recent actions. Despite this, the nonprofit states that it is imperative that actions amongst all social and environmental avenues should be balanced.

"I think the industry probably needs to shift its mindset," said Geoffrey O. Williams, global vice president of diversity, equity and inclusion at Burberry, in a statement.

"Diversity, equity and inclusion is a culture and business enabler, not something that sits on the side," Mr. Williams said. "Diversity and inclusion is fundamentally just good business."

"In fashion today, we need ideas and ideas come from people feeling safe, included and empowered."

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