
Critical consciousness: black female academics tell their stories

Accounts of discrimination in Hollywood show value of 'lived experience', says editor of new collection

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By [Matthew Reisz](/content/matthew-reisz) (</content/matthew-reisz>)

Twitter: [@MatthewReiszTHE](https://twitter.com/MatthewReiszTHE) (<https://twitter.com/MatthewReiszTHE>)



At a time when the female voice is being heard speaking out about many forms of abuse, Deborah Gabriel insists that the experiences of black women also need to be given a platform.

“Hollywood is rampant with stories about the lived experiences of sexual abuse,” she told *Times Higher Education*, “and Westminster is rampant with the same things. For a very long time, none of this was captured. Lived experience wasn’t validated or seen as legitimate.”

But, she continued, “because women have spoken out, it has shifted the pendulum, and some people have begun to recognise that what has been happening was very wrong”.



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This shift, Dr Gabriel highlighted, is “not based on data collection or quantitative research”. In light of this, the senior lecturer in marketing communications at Bournemouth University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/bournemouth-university>), hopes to make an impact with the book she has edited with Shirley Anne Tate, *Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia*, published by

the UCL Institute of Education Press. The introduction describes it as “a collective act of resistance” that explores themes such as “invisibility, hyper-visibility, exclusion and belonging, highlighting intersectional experiences”.

In the chapter that she contributed, Dr Gabriel tells of an occasion when she “became the object of racist and sexist discourse exchanged between a group of white students on Facebook”, who used “animalistic and graphic sexual terms”, despite the fact that she had “willingly gone to great lengths to support some of those very students”.

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Heidi Safia Mirza, professor of race, faith and culture at Goldsmiths, University of London (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/goldsmiths-university-london>), reflects on her experiences of being treated as “an exotic token, an institutional symbol, a mentor and confidante, and a ‘natural expert’ on ‘all things to do with ‘race’”. She recalls having been “mistaken for the coffee lady”, being told that “they are giving chairs to anyone for anything these days” and being “subjected to endemic and sustained sexual harassment”, in a climate where “the normalcy of your non-personhood meant that you were no more than a tasty piece of exotic brown meat – to be sampled and discarded”.

Others describe the surprise on people’s faces when they introduce themselves as academics.

“Cultural change doesn’t come just from gathering data,” in Dr Gabriel’s view, “because the data don’t tell you those kinds of stories, which give an understanding of the very subtle ways racial and gender discrimination are experienced...Because there isn’t enough openness about white privilege, people don’t see it. The only way people will see it is if we share our experiences.”

Even discussions and initiatives around gender equality, argued Dr Gabriel, often fail to understand “how gender impacts different types of women, which needs to be explicit in any framework. Because that’s not an explicit focus, it always defaults to the experience of white women.”

Despite the many disturbing stories in her book, Dr Gabriel remains convinced of the power of information to break down barriers. As an example, she cited a final-year unit on race, ethnicity and culture that she teaches as part of a degree in communications. Many of her (largely white) students reported that it was the first time they had learned about these issues and told her, “My eyes have been opened.” What was needed was to “develop a critical consciousness, which they take beyond their degree into employment and society”.