

Working in unprecedented times: Intersectionality and women of color in UK higher education in and beyond the pandemic

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Abstract

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and inequities. Injustices within the labor market mean that the lives particularly of women of color have been negatively affected by the crisis in multiple ways. Guided by standpoint epistemology, we take an intersectional approach and use autoethnographic methods in which we draw on our personal experiences within the United Kingdom's higher education institutions during the pandemic. We illustrate how institutional decisions, approaches, and policies enacted in the wake of COVID-19 exacerbate inequalities and inequities. Three themes stand out from our experiences: (1) meritocracy and the problem of cumulative (dis)advantage, (2) the lack of racial awareness in management decisions, and (3) the operations of power and silencing. We show that universities justify decisions by deploying discourses of meritocracy and ignoring context and the ways women of color staff are persistently disadvantaged due to structural racism and sexism. We find that universities are likely to indicate that their response policies treat all staff absolutely equally without candidly assessing the intersectional impacts of the pandemic on minority staff, which consequently prevent the achievement of equity. We also describe the ways in which the pandemic exposes cultures

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of institutional silence and silencing when women of color speak up. We conclude with glimpses of hope for resisting the downward pressures of the pandemic crisis toward cultivating more equitable futures.

KEYWORDS

covid-19, higher education, intersectionality, race, United Kingdom

1 | INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is starkly exposing and sharply exacerbating the multiple underlying structural inequalities and injustices that cut across race, gender, citizen status, class, disability, and precarity in our society. Race has stood out in many analyses, notably in the disproportionately high rates of infections and deaths among Black (Golestaneh et al., 2020) or Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people from COVID-19 (ONS, 2020). This pattern of race-based differences maps onto structural racism historically experienced by BAME communities. Even before the pandemic, for instance, BAME people were already more likely to be working in lower-paid, more precarious jobs, leading to higher chances of unemployment when facing a public health crisis and the resultant economic downturn (Bentley, 2020).

The impacts of the pandemic intersect not just with race but also with other axes of identities. For instance, two of the three million people holding high-exposure risk jobs in the United Kingdom (UK) are women (Women's Budget Group, 2020); migrant women are at the frontline delivering health and social care (Kabeer et al., 2021). Apart from employment deemed essential outside the home, state-level decisions in the UK to close schools and ask vulnerable populations to shield increased concurrent domestic labor and child- and elder-care responsibilities for women, reinforcing gender roles (Krentz et al., 2020). The additional labor and need to juggle work with unpaid caring responsibilities in the domestic space affect women's performance capacities in their paid employment. Mounting evidence demonstrates that gender inequalities and inequities have become more entrenched and that women's labor has been exploited and invisible during this time (Power, 2020). Nonetheless, how the pandemic affects people at the multiple intersections of gender, race, class, and disability needs to be more widely known.

In this article, we focus on structural inequalities and inequities within the UK's Higher Education sector (hereafter UKHE), exacerbated by institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, disproportionately and detrimentally affecting women of color. We differentiate between equality/inequality and equity/inequity in this paper. While both terms are premised on the concept of fairness, are historically and legally intertwined, and both are vital ideas, we understand these to promote fairness in a different way (Minow, 2021). Equality conceptualizes fairness as giving everyone the same treatment and opportunities regardless of need or context. Equity pays attention to differential structurally shaped starting points and contexts and conceptualizes justice¹ on a need basis, for example, the need for resources and access. Equity-based considerations allow for a greater scale of social change as it accounts for barriers because of one's marginalized identities (Archer, 2007; Bowl, 2018). Ensuring how these individuals could have perhaps more access and opportunities leads to a more structurally inclusive UKHE, through which individuals can be lifted and pipelines of minoritized scholars can have a place.

Departing from flattened accounts where women or academics in general appear equally affected or where worse outcomes for some people appear random (Collins, 2017), or worse, deserved, we recognize that women of color are not the only ones negatively influenced by the pandemic and that women of color are a diverse group. In addition to race and gender, we include financial and job precarity in the analyses as precarity is part of the current and ongoing transformation of the dynamic historical process referred to as class (Ivancheva et al., 2019; Lazar & Sanchez, 2019); we emphasize that "[r]ace is the modality in which class is lived" (Hall et al., 1978, p. 394). The set of issues we explore in this article is by no means exhaustive. We realize that not every issue is common to all women of

color and that some issues may also apply to some non-binary people or some white women. We acknowledge that disability is correlated with pandemic-era inequality and inequity, but as we lack personal experience, we are unable to speak autoethnographically to this axis of intersectionality in this paper.

Academia's reticence to acknowledge the relevance of gender has steadily diminished due to the efforts of feminist scholars. Insights into how the higher educational institutions are more than gendered have, however, remained at the margins until much more recently (Gabriel & Tate, 2017). Taking an intersectional approach, we use autoethnography as three women of color by reflecting upon our own experiences with the UKHE's policies during COVID-19. This article thus emerges from sharing our experiences (recorded in the forms of journal entries, email exchanges, and verbal conversations) throughout the pandemic and discovering some patterns from our experiences within different academic spaces. Our discussions were forms of support in the first instance and were as personal, fragmented, and non-linear as our data. We started to conceptualize the paper as it became clear that our experiences were not unique, being instead replicated across UKHE during the pandemic as news coverage showed daily. The themes into which we organized our data represent the issues we thought were most salient in reflecting on our experiences as well as the newer conditions presented by the pandemic, while still drawing on frameworks to which we have always looked from Black and feminist scholarship.

We also conceptualize academic work in terms of labor (increasingly precarious), although in a relatively privileged form, because being academics allows us the means to make our voices heard more easily than most others. This relative privilege and social capital are nonetheless underpinned by our positionalities, not least as privilege becomes a contested and unstable phenomenon when BAME people "bring" race into the (otherwise white) workplace (Atewologun & Sealy, 2014) and women "bring" gender into the (otherwise masculine) workplace (Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Keeping our own positionalities in mind, we show that university decisions have been made in ways that are not always causally linked to pandemic considerations and thus have implications for systemic discrimination based on gender, race, class, citizen status, and more, that resonate both within and without institutional settings. It is our hope that the growing body of knowledge and testimonies we are adding may in turn give rise to more considered and equitable measures in future crises.

As women of color with different identities and backgrounds, our autoethnography offers nuanced theoretical and empirical insights into the situation of women in UKHE, particularly as we cope with COVID-19 as well as its aftermath (Montiel et al., 2022). Specifically, our paper unfolds tensions and contradictions between discursive and actual practices of equality and equity during the pandemic. Our paper also aligns with wider labor movements and points toward considering what this might mean in a context of equality, diversity, and inclusion. Further, the reflections of our experiences demonstrate that equality and equity are not the same and that to achieve social justice,² UKHE needs to implement equity-based measures to mitigate the long-term intersectional impact of COVID-19 on staff. Perhaps most importantly, although our autoethnography reflects our experiences with UKHE, it speaks to academics facing multiple vectors of oppression in various contexts. Thus, we hope our article serves as a stepping stone toward conversations involving academics with different identities and backgrounds in other contexts on how to achieve social justice in the wake of the pandemic.

We begin with an overview to give a sense of the context and conditions of UKHE from within which we speak. We then present our reflections on some common tactics used by institutional management to respond to the pandemic as well as to criticisms regarding their actions. Three themes emerge: (1) meritocracy and the problem of cumulative (dis)advantage, (2) the lack of racial awareness in management decisions, and (3) the operations of power and silencing. We conclude with hope against hope (Bliss, 2015) and call for universities to fully commit to dismantling systemic racism in pandemic conditions and beyond.

2 | RACISM IN UKHE

Universities are increasingly keen to signal a commitment to eradicating racism as demonstrated by several recent open letters stating support for #BlackLivesMatter. Some institutions may have begun to consider incremental plans to improve race relations and representation. However, there remains deep-seated reluctance to candidly address the systemic nature and extent of racism entrenched within institutions, in part as this would require overhauling foundational practices and operations (BBC3 Documentary, 2021), and in part as these ideas and infrastructures are integral to the functioning and logics of these institutions rather than flaws as such. Despite articulations around equality, diversity, and inclusion, inequalities and inequities continue to persist and appear unlikely to change substantially soon, not least given the material and ideological setbacks for equality and equity created by the pandemic.

The pre-pandemic race record for the UK universities makes for grim reading: Institutions have persistently admitted low numbers of Black students every year, creating an often racially homogeneous environment for students both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Khan & Cowell, 2020). The government-created fiasco revolving around A-level students in 2020 further exacerbated the racialized and class-based inequalities of students being admitted to top universities (Bhopal & Myers, 2020). A racialized degree-awarding gap is well-documented across universities (Arday, 2021) and a disjuncture exists between degree classifications and occupational and salary outcomes for BAME graduates even when they attend university and perform well (HESA, 2018).

BAME academic and professional service staff are also significantly under-represented, under-supported, and over-burdened in UKHE. Only 4.7% of Black academic staff are full professors, while 11% of white academic staff have risen to this highest academic rank, indicating that the sector is missing an estimated 300 Black professors (Morgan, 2020). Furthermore, 24% of professors in UK universities are White women, while only 2% are BAME women (Bhopal, 2020). Less than 1% of university professors are Black and fewer than 30 Black women have acquired professorship in the entire country (Adams, 2020). BAME staff are also rarities in senior leadership positions that make important institutional decisions. While such representation is important and current figures are dismal, tokenism, that is, placing one or two people from under-represented groups at the top, does little to change the structural problems throughout institutions (Turner, 2002; Turner and Gonzalez, 2011) and may in fact exacerbate conditions as it can falsely signify achievement of absolute equality.

Even when BAME academics survive and hold a place in the sector, we still suffer from a 9% pay gap compared to our white colleagues (UCU, 2019). Black staff experience the greatest pay gap at 14% (UCU, 2019) with Black women in academia reportedly earning 39% less than White men on average (Croxford, 2018). The largest pay gaps, evidenced by the UK Universities and Colleges Employers Association, were for Black staff compared with White men, although Asian women also face additional penalties in pay for being both non-White and non-male (Hopkins & Salvestrini, 2018). Over and above under-representation and unequal pay in UKHE, precarity is disproportionately faced by women and people of color, particularly in the early career stage (UCU, 2020). For example, almost half of all Asian women academics are casualized workers, whereas only 28% of White men in academia are on such contracts (UCU, 2020). Among those on fixed-term contracts, migrant academics are arguably the most precarious as our job security dictates where we can work and live and limits our recourse to resistance and participation in collective action.

Institutional efforts to address known broken recruitment, promotions, progression, and retention pipelines move at glacial pace. Even where structural solutions exist for clearly identified stress points, the intersections of micro and macro discrimination prove problematic. For example, promotion and hiring panels tend to consist predominantly of White staff. Several explanations exist for such homogeneity of promotion and hiring committees and middle and senior management. First, the pool of women of color academic staff ranked high enough to serve on these committees is simply too small. Second, even when they are senior enough, they are “presumed incompetent” as women of color academics (González, 2014; Rollock, 2007). Such a presumption is discernible from students to colleagues. Third, women of color tend to be invisible or made silent in institutional settings. Black academics are

frequently allocated outsider status (Treitler, 2019), rarely considered a part of the intellectual community and generally excluded from important decision-making processes.

In addition to structural race-based exclusion, BAME students and staff also encounter pervasive racial harassment, microaggression, and bullying. Although the Universities UK (UUK) has acknowledged that the institution is racist and called for action (BBC3 Documentary, 2021; UUK, 2021), few universities recognize the degree to which racism is a systemic problem (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019), couching racism instead as an individualized issue articulated in isolated incidents. Ignored, then, is the fact that structural racism permeates academia from disdain and epistemic reduction of work produced by BAME scholars (Bacevic, 2021; UCU, 2019) to White academics' protest to preserve statues of historical figures that championed racism (Jeffay, 2020). Nonetheless, existing approaches and so-called solutions that flow from this thinking are predictably inadequate (Rollock, 2018). Racist incident reports are treated as localized and one-off with individual prejudices identified as the problem. Unconscious bias training treats everyone as equally prejudiced without considerations of power and has been found ineffective in reducing biases (Atewologun et al., 2018).

The vulnerabilities experienced by staff with marginalized identities have been exacerbated during the pandemic as UKHE has made decisions requiring them to dispose of "different bodies while protecting others" (Einola et al., 2021). Where universities appear to couch racism as a mindset and matter of personal prejudice rather than an institutional issue, they encourage a lean-in approach that puts the burden of change on individuals (Tate & Page, 2018), which comes with a cost. When women of color do speak up, we often become seen as the problem (Ahmed, 2012). While diversity initiatives do exist, attention to these heightened in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, programmes, such as Athena SWAN, tends to focus on gender and treat race as a lower priority without addressing the multiple axes of oppressions experienced by women of color (Bhopal, 2021). These diversity initiatives are at best ambiguous (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019), not least because they fail to acknowledge that individual women's abilities to cope with the pandemic differ depending on coalescing identities. These approaches are replicated across institutions in the UK, despite some universities' commitment to tackling systematic racism being more robust and convincing than others.

3 | UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT RESPONSES TO COVID-19

Against the backdrop of high-profile #BlackLivesMatter and #StopAsianHate movements in which Blacks, Asians, and other racial and ethnic minorities (Einola et al., 2021) have been mobilizing to resist race-based violence, institutions have made and continue to make pandemic-related decisions amplifying long-standing racial inequalities, including job cuts and making staff redundant and freezing pay, salary increase, and promotion (Wright et al., 2021). Where austerity cuts are applied indiscriminately and often either pre-emptively or opportunistically, institutional decisions threaten to reverse fragile recent equality and equity gains, further entrenching gendered systems and racial homogeneity, that is, making UKHE a space that continues to be attractive primarily to those who can afford to pursue further education. Moreover, changes to national policy, for example, around student loan repayments and employment outcomes (Weale, 2022) are likely to have the effect of reinforcing a system already favoring the most wealthy and secure students.

Staff on fixed-term contracts are most vulnerable to redundancies (Batty, 2020). For example, casualized workers do approximately 39% of the teaching work for only 7% of the wages at Goldsmiths, University of London. In its Subject Area of Art, five out of six non-White academics are casualized workers; in Sociology, all lecturers whose contracts were terminated in the beginning of the pandemic were women of color (Anonymous, 2020). This example suggests that people of color, oftentimes women of color and migrants, undertake essential lower prestige but business-critical labor that keep these institutions functional.

Since the pandemic began, swathes of planned redundancies have also been growing as institutions look to "restructure" in the wake of the pandemic. For example, Goldsmiths, University of London, terminated existing fixed

term contracts and froze Associate Lecturer contracts for the 2020–2021 academic year. The University of East London and Senate House, University of London, fought against job losses, while other universities (e.g., Universities of Liverpool, Leeds, Leicester, Southampton Solent, Brighton, and Dundee) had made plans for redundancies (Fazackerley, 2021). Some redundancy decisions appeared to defy logic, given pandemic-era requirements: For example, the University of Liverpool proposed 47 compulsory redundancies in health and life sciences (Gilbert, 2021). Other redundancies appeared to target scholars who are in critical disciplines or who are active union members (Fazackerley, 2021). For instance, among the approximately 150 staff members at the University of Leicester who were made redundant during the pandemic, two-thirds managed communications for the Leicester branch of the UCU (Gilbert, 2021). A round of job cuts in Goldsmiths targeted Humanities staff; among them are experts in Black British and Caribbean Literature, Queer and Black British History, and Critical Theory. Even when universities do not eventually lay off their staff, declarations of potential redundancies during this stressful and uncertain period can have a chilling effect.

Even when contracts continue or are renewed, staff in public universities still face freezes in salaries, progression, and rewards (Mckie, 2020). These cuts contrast with the remuneration for the heads of the universities, which on average are 7.7 times more than that of all other employees (Office for Students, 2018). Some university chiefs are paid 13 times more than their staff (Richardson, 2019). Decisions regarding pay cuts are also made at the same time when universities push for in-person teaching, adding workload onto others who remain employed. For instance, a Times Higher Education questionnaire showed that 24 of the 200 University administrators surveyed planned to make pay cuts (Bodin, 2020). However, little commensurate, tangible, or transparent evidence remains to justify these redundancies and cuts. Although initial institutional responses were based on potential worst-case scenarios of COVID-19, these expected outcomes have not happened. In fact, student recruitment in 2020 increased by 3.5% compared to 2019; international student recruitment increased by 1.7% to record numbers (Staton, 2020). Some institutions are, nonetheless, proceeding with redundancies and cuts despite pandemic-related finance fears not materializing, suggesting opportunism rather than necessity.

These decisions undoubtedly affect the livelihoods of members of UKHE, particularly those who are not in decision-making positions. While making redundancies and cuts, institutions convey messages and implement decisions strategically, using warm tones to convey goodwill, and rhetoric such as “we are all in this together.” These discursive devices constitute a communicative-performative strategy—a way for universities to be seen to say the right things by articulating progressive ideals of care without making concrete systemic changes, while glossing over the unequal fallout resulting from managerial decisions. This performance has amplified during the pandemic. As autocratic and centralized decisions are made without consulting staff working on the ground (Gilbert, 2021), the “goodwill” narrative provides optics of solidarity and gives university senior management a low-effort opportunity to construct an image of “beneficent employer” (Watermeyer et al., 2021). Such narrative intentions often do not accompany concrete solutions to support marginalized and excluded staff. For example, at home, women struggled with unequal distribution of caring responsibilities, especially during school and nursery closures during the pandemic (Crook, 2020; Miller, 2021). At universities, workers have been deemed essential and expected to carry on their duties as usual.

Some universities offered and recommended furlough as an option for staff members who could not focus on work due to responsibilities at home. While furlough allowed employees to go on paid leave, a scheme partially supported by the UK government during the pandemic, not all were qualified to go on furlough. The suggestion to go on furlough was also problematic as it was as women were more likely to voluntarily pause their careers, which might temporarily alleviate the juggling they had to undertake but leaves gaps on a curriculum vitae, hindering career development and furthering gender disparities (Alon et al., 2020). Another example of “good intentions” is funding incentives for staff to “reboot” their research. Although such incentives were well-meaning, these initiatives ignored the differential (and heavily gendered) burdens faced by staff with caring responsibilities, for example, (Malisch et al., 2020). These examples demonstrate a structural failing of decision-making, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities brought by the pandemic.

In this section, we demonstrate the extent to which racism exists by using examples from the ways in which UKHE has responded to the pandemic. In the following section, we discuss the data and methods we use to extend a constructive critique to these marginalizing university standards.

4 | DATA AND METHODS

Guided by standpoint epistemology³ (Pohlhaus, 2002), we employ an intersectional approach by drawing on the university as a site of institutional pandemic responses to illustrate some of the ways in which inequalities and inequities are being amplified. We draw on our own experiences in the tradition of autoethnographic writing (see, e.g., Humphreys, 2005; Ahmed, 2014), following the footsteps of women of color in academia who have sought to connect the personal to the political and cultural with self-conscious, vulnerable writing (Bhattacharya, 2016) that resists top-down interpretations and eschews the conventions of detached observer scholarship (Ellis & Bochner, 2020; Robinson & Clardy, 2010).

Our experiences are intimately bound up with who we are: the three of us working in two different institutions all identify as women of color and we all are immigrants in the UK separated from much of our families. One of us is Black; one of us is Yellow (Cheng, 2018; Fang & Liu, 2021); one of us is of mixed ethnicity. Two of us are on fixed terms or performance-contingent contracts as research fellows and one of us is on a permanent contract as a lecturer. Two of us received our PhDs in 2016 and one of us received our PhD in 2010. In addition to recognizing our various intersectional oppressions, we also acknowledge that despite our casualized academic roles, we may perhaps be more privileged than others within the same institutions, for example, those in professional services, maintenance, catering, etc., and others in other sectors of the labor market. Our comparative privilege has, nevertheless, failed to protect one of us from repeated periods of homelessness while working in UKHE and another from being trapped in one of the UK's many flammable apartment buildings.

The data for our autoethnographies is composed of individual recollections and collective discussions of recent events. One of us kept personal reflections, some of which are used in this article and filed all relevant correspondence with or from the university. Another gathered emails and notes from meetings to use to reflect on her experiences. Our personal narratives cut across our professional identities and personal lives (Ellis & Bochner, 2020). Critically, the data presented here reflect the range of ways in which we have tried to make sense of our experiences during the pandemic, within the broader, pre-existing task of coping with our own "tedious journeys" (Robinson & Clardy, 2010). The forms of reflection, note-taking, recording, and creative interdependencies (Lorde, 1984) encompassed in our methods may also be familiar to other women of color as part of a suite of strategies for surviving the ivory towers.

5 | COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCES

Through comparing notes and strategies and coming together to make coherent sense of our experiences, we discerned three key themes that spoke most strongly to us across our collective stories: (1) meritocracy and the problem of cumulative (dis)advantage, (2) the lack of racial awareness, and (3) the operations of power and silencing.

5.1 | Performance, meritocracy, and cumulative dis/advantage

An awareness has grown in UKHE of both historic injustices in the system and amplified injustices due to the pandemic. Nevertheless, the will to act and remedies for these problems remain scant. Two discernible reasons for this inadequacy exist: First, legally, any form of "positive discrimination" is unlawful in the UK, meaning processes for hiring, progression, promotion, funding, etc. must be careful not to break the law when acting to reverse the multilevel,

long-term effects of injustice at every stage of education and employment we have described. Actions such as quotas or benchmarking are prohibited (Government Equalities Office, 2011). While voluntary “positive action” to support hiring of candidates with protected characteristics who are demonstrably as qualified as other candidates without protected characteristics became permissible under the UK Equality Act 2010, this creates uncertainty for employers (Johns et al., 2014). Second, this legal impediment to more radical action (Johns et al., 2014) is accepted in no small part because of an enduring attachment to the myth of meritocracy in British society.

As UKHE has not had a systematic remedy to tackling racism, it largely functions upon meritocracy to determine one's worth in the academy, particularly in their responses to COVID-19. Meritocracy is a “form of social order in which individuals are ranked based on their individual merit or worth,” which is also often the basis of how one might be deserving of recognition or reward (Simpson et al., 2019). Although meritocracy rewards those whose merits reflect their worth, it neglects that individual merits can differ depending on the institutional barriers they face. It is perhaps this embrace of meritocracy that leads many academics to reflect more poignantly on the idea of holding back “greatness” in the usual suspects (White, middle-class men) than to reflect on how greatness comes to be so rarely expressed by others due to manifold manifestations of injustice and inequities in their midst. A reward system based on meritocracy exacerbates the disadvantages of women, attributing the absence of women holding senior or powerful positions (e.g., full professorship or senior manager) to their lack of hard work, competency, skills, and leadership (Lewis & Simpson, 2010). Indeed, it may be easier for institutions to twist their collective thought processes, even in cases of serious and intentional misconduct, into shielding “geniuses” who must be allowed to work, even if they commit and benefit from harms to others, both inside (Mansfield et al., 2019) and outside of academia (Ford, 2018), rather to consider the lives and careers of those, particularly the women, they harm. Nonetheless, the overt focus on individual merits while ignoring the structural elements comes at a cost—at the expense of women of color.

UKHE's focus on individual merits also means that privilege matters for how one succeeds or survives the academia. Privilege in this case includes the benefits of whiteness and masculinities on how one's work is perceived, for example, the likelihood of having a permanent job or being a project primary investigator, as well as the ability to push low-prestige labor onto others or to side-line the contributions of the minoritized (Cummins, 2005). Privileged people can accrue more recognizable prestige, both because of the greater willingness of others to see them and their work as respect worthy, regardless of its content (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2013; Steinpreis et al., 1999), and because of the support they receive along the way up their career paths (Milkman et al., 2015). Their privileges allow them to attain more credit for work with which others help them (Sarsons, 2017) and to devote more time to prestigious work than others, leading them into a “virtuous cycle of the attainment of prestige factors,” while others experience “a cumulative cycle of disadvantage” (Coate & Howson, 2016, p. 583). This privilege also allows them to engage in research and teaching activities fully with the protection of academic freedom without having to censor themselves or worry about the consequences of some government restrictions, such as the UK government targets critical race theory (Blell et al., 2022).

Without privilege entitled to mostly cis-gender, White men, this difficulty in having the idea of excellence stick to women has been called “the Teflon effect” (Simpson & Kumra, 2016, p. 562). Mavin and Yusupova (2020, p. 742) have noted “[t]he pandemic is adding numerous ‘Teflon’ coats for women, ensuring merit sticks elsewhere.” Those who lack privilege cannot push low-prestige labor away from themselves and often have nobody to rely on for invisible reproductive labor. We assert that academics must directly confront the widespread unwillingness to address rampant (and for some people, entirely voluntary) overwork and its relation to the destructive “ratchet effect” on expectations of grants and publications, an effect we currently allow to proceed unhindered.

However, the way cumulative cycles of disadvantage operate is more complex than those not suffering them seem to realise. As Coate and Howson (2016, p. 582) state, “the idea that women's childcare responsibilities hold them back is a convenient way for the institution to avoid doing much about gender inequality.” It has also been noted that “[e]lder care seems to be ignored as significant work for single women in academe” (Cummins, 2005, p. 227), leaving the focus unjustifiably on childcare, which in turn both excludes childless people and ignores the double burdens of those who shoulder any form of care. We argue, based on our own data and prior research presented

above, that having caring responsibilities in addition to a lower salary, higher student loan debt, immigration-related costs, and less inherited wealth affect one's ability to accrue prestige and perform academic excellence.

Even one or two of these struggles can have an impact. For example, when one of us started a new fixed-term research post in a new institution after maternity leave, she realized that performing well in her job to remain employed was particularly difficult. To fulfill expectations of the research grants on which she was working and accruing markers of esteem to secure a future, hopefully a permanent contract, it was necessary to travel both domestically and internationally for meetings and conferences. Participation at international conferences was expected; invited talks were a key to both demonstrating international recognition of her work for promotion and to raising her profile for future searches for permanent positions. In addition, prestigious international collaborations are more likely to be established by meeting other scholars via these remote meetings. While she is lucky to hold a foreign passport that does not represent a major barrier to attendance at international conferences, she is aware that other non-EU, non-British passport holders might struggle to attend international conferences.

However, as a mother of a young, breastfed baby and a Black woman aware of the over-policing of Black motherhood (Roberts & Marrast, 1999), she was not willing to be away from her child overnight, much less for a week at a time. After paying out of pocket for a few months to bring her child and a family member to look after her child during the day on these trips, she calculated how much of her salary would end up going on such expenses in the coming years if she continued at the same rate—it would cost tens of thousands of pounds. She raised the issue with the university's human resources team that was exploring ways to make the university better for staff and students with families but found the process uncomfortable. The conversations proved humiliating as she had to explain repeatedly not only that travel was part of her job as a researcher but that she was a sole breadwinner. As part of this difficult process, she was expected to explain why other staff members had never raised the issue before. In an email to further clarify issues discussed with several individuals already, she wrote:

It's just not clear to me how I would be able to do [it] and stay afloat financially... If I will have to limit my travel quite a lot then that will affect judgements of my "excellence" as a researcher within the university's various performance review processes...leaving aside the impact on my visibility as a researcher in the field and my ability to participate in international collaborative research I've already signed up to do. If I were a wealthier person (or a man), I can't see that this would be such an issue so it's not a pleasant thing to talk about and, if I hadn't come across [the team in the university looking to support people with families], I would not have brought it up. Even just having someone to talk to in terms of strategising for dealing with this would be a help.

The additional burden of explaining to people, especially those more senior than her, why she struggles in ways universities believe others is not unique to this example, as she has had to do it many times before to explain, for example, why she was facing homelessness rather than having a secure tenancy or a mortgage like others in her position. While COVID-19 has temporarily paused the expectation of travel, this example helps illustrate one way that different forms of disadvantage can have a substantial cumulative impact if no measures of redress are taken. Moreover, it helps to indicate the effects of the current temporary pause of this expectation to travel. While such a pause may appear to affect all equally or even to offer advantages to those with multiple responsibilities, in fact it is more likely to result in such academics being even further behind than privileged counterparts. This is because those without caring responsibilities or external pressures have been able to take advantage of the COVID-19 pause on in-person events to maximize time spent on publications (Squazzoni et al., 2020).

Furthermore, as indicated, universities might implement incentives to boost research activities. Such a “good intention” only benefits those who are already advantaged. We may consider Kenny's (2021) self-reflection on gender, COVID-19, and academia:

I remember vividly... crying my way through an online staff meeting... as some colleagues talked about a productive research event they'd had that morning, workshoping new projects. For me, a daily win at that point was getting through half of my emails (and—maybe—brushing my hair)—and people were discussing books.

Kenny's account resonates strongly with us, particularly for one of us, for whom the emotional difficulty of appearing normal in front of colleagues and superiors on Zoom meetings felt overwhelming, especially when she lost loved ones during the pandemic and struggled to keep going at work. Feeling alien, not least while facing the starkness of homophily, and exhausted, she felt unable to do the emotional labor required for being constantly on camera. Consequently, she sometimes resorted to switching off her camera. Yet, this basic strategy for relief was fraught as colleagues made comments implying that switching off cameras during meetings was rude, mapping onto stereotypes about Black women being rude. Also, one of us who struggled with traveling with her child is now struggling to work full time with a small child in her cramped, rented flat, wrestling with the difficulties of new online teaching and falling behind schedule in terms of publishing. While senior staff in universities acknowledge that some staff face more challenges than others, few plans have emerged that would stop greater inequalities brought by the pandemic.

5.2 | The lack of racial awareness in decision-making

Universities may acknowledge challenges to academics during the pandemic, but they have not acknowledged these obstacles contextually, resulting in many color-blind decisions (Bonilla-Silva, 2020) they have made, such as a freeze on all promotions processes and salary increases. We use Bonilla-Silva's (2020) definition of color-blind racism in academia,⁴ which he explains as “racial matters as the outcomes of nonracial dynamics” (p. 1). Lacking racial awareness in the decision-making means that racial matters are ignored and decontextualized. Racial differences in outcomes are considered a product of naturalization (rather than structural injustices), thereby minimizing racism. In the specific case of UKHE responses to COVID-19, universities are being racially incognizant by not taking individual differences into account to the detriment of those who have fewer resources and opportunities due to their marginalized identities and minoritized statuses. Absolute inequality may thus be achieved, while inequity and injustice remain unaddressed.

Although these decisions appear absolutely equal, given that blanket freezes applied to all university staff, overlooked is how these decisions interact with and map onto existing injustices. Top-down institutional decisions have been justified through recourse to absolute equality in which all staff members are assumed to face the same challenges. Such an approach is, in reality, acontextual, neglecting differential starting points, cumulative institutional disadvantages, and stratified policy effects on people of color, holding back particularly for women of color who have been historically blocked from resources, access, and opportunities. This section draws on our first-hand experiences, illustrated by the narratives we encountered on decisions (or considerations) of cuts (Jack & Bately, 2020).

When the UK went into its first lockdown in the spring of 2020, it was also about the time when staff in many universities were preparing to apply for promotions. Yet, staff anxiety was only met by a public announcement to pause promotion altogether months after the application process should have begun. When one of us first heard about the freeze on promotion, she was shocked that the university did not consult with any staff working on the ground and did not conduct an equality impact assessment (EIA).⁵ She was terrified, coming from a previous post in which she was paid 16% less than her White male counterpart who held the same post with similar qualifications, immediately thinking that it would take longer for her to catch up on pay now.

This reaction connects with the experience of another one of us, who had been stuck on a starting pay grade for several years despite holding a prestigious grant and who had also been getting paid less than male colleagues who were hired on higher starting salaries years before, despite similar starting qualifications. The threat of non-increase in salary, despite promotion, would have thus translated into substantial wage disparity atop an already existing gap unrelated to qualifications or merit, creating long-term gaps in pensions upon retirement as well. When the latter one of us inquired about the potential impacts such a freeze would have on women of color who, even as internal reports by universities show, experience both gender and racial pay gaps, she received the following university justification, paraphrased here for confidentiality:

It has been important to ensure that this decision is applied fairly and consistently across all our colleague groups and all of our reward and promotion processes... It is hugely disappointing for us that our excellent work to date to reduce pay gaps will not progress at the pace we had originally planned... However, this does not mean we are not fully committed to the plans we have set out. We must recognise that in such unprecedented times and the unexpected financial impact for the University, we must proceed with caution and protect the University's long-term future.

This response glosses over the fact that women of color experience racial and gender pay gaps and hold low ranks or fixed-term contracts at a university. Moreover, promotion and reward processes are, in theory, one of the few formal procedures available to women of color academics to move up the salary scales, to potentially achieve wage parity, and to catch up on their academic status. Black women academics must make repeated attempts to overcome barriers and to gain promotion, even at higher levels of performance than White colleagues, facing multiple rejections along the way (Rollock, 2018, 2019). Thus, applying the same pause on promotion and salary increase takes away one of the few avenues for women of color to advance their careers and to gain earnings lost to gender and racial injustices.

Although these pauses were a common response to COVID-19, not all universities have taken the same approach to cuts during the pandemic. Some froze promotions completely; some deferred salary increases; some allowed promotion-in-title only. While policies varied, the changes made universally lacked evidence of robust environment or EIAs. Few institutions we knew presented concrete financial and budgetary evidence to justify decisions, basing these instead on speculative management models. One of us reflected on the lack of forthcoming evidence from senior management in support of their decision:

There is an insistence that a blanket policy is somehow equal and fair without a full factoring in of how it compounds existing inequalities that has already been acknowledged as a failing, without providing concrete Equality Impact Assessment figures or transparent scenario modelling. The measures appear as being based on conservative financial speculation, without consideration for jobs and people who have no job security, and without providing specifics for detriment mitigation.

Furthermore, where some universities based cuts on particular managerial forms of scenario modeling (e.g., best case, central case, and worst case) based on opaque criteria, they often chose to act on the most pessimistic estimates rather than realistic assessments. Such a choice consequently led to decisions to proceed with redundancies amid a global pandemic, pauses on incremental pay progression, and halting of contribution rewards and academic promotions. The decisions, nonetheless, were also not reversed when international student enrollment actually increased, suggesting a stable (if not additional) income (Mittelmeier et al., 2020) when the autumn semester began in 2020.

These decisions made centrally at universities without BAME staff's input result in racially incognizant decisions that may cause long-term racialized harm. Academic promotion to higher ranks can open up vital opportunities necessary for progression. For example, some institutions require or prefer academic staff to be at a certain grade or rank to engage in some activities that are considered essential to promotions, such as PhD student supervisions and

viva examinations. The lack of access to these opportunities due to a pause on promotion only means that the most junior staff—more likely to be women of color—face greater barriers to progressing through the ranks besides catching up on pay gaps. Having her migrant status in the back of her mind, one of us contemplated on whether to raise her concerns because she was worried that speaking up would lead her employer to think of her as a troublemaker. When she eventually overcame her fears and asked her employer why they had not considered promotion-in-title only as titles particularly matter for early career researchers, the senior management responded:

We would not support promotion in-title-only as this could deepen inequalities with colleagues asked to undertake upgraded work without the pay.

Again, this response indicated that decisions were made to achieve absolute equality without considering alternative solutions to minimize the injustices faced by marginalized staff. Several alternatives could have taken place, some of which we proposed. For example, universities could ensure that promoted in-title-only staff do not perform extra labor before they are financially compensated as promotions processes within institutions are post-priori rewards for work already demonstrably undertaken. Freezing promotions and pay increases for those who are above a certain threshold in terms of salary or title could mitigate the differential impacts on precarity of those at the bottom pay scale. Neither was explored to our knowledge. Senior management told one of us to consider that senior staff had different lifestyles commensurate with the incomes they had come to expect. Therefore, they would not be able to afford pay adjustments needed to prevent redundancies and redistribute income to staff on lower grades to mitigate projected worst-case effects of the pandemic. It was also suggested to another of us that the emphasis on equity might risk discriminating against White men who form the bulk of staff who would have otherwise been promoted. In all, when alternatives were presented to university managements, the focus turned to how universities would strive to treat all staff absolutely equally.

When universities claim absolute equality, they refer narrowly to specific decisions and immediate outcomes within a vacuum, operating in a racially incognizant way that fails to recognize pre-existing gaps and historical structural constraints. Given the under-representation of women of color in the most senior ranks in academia, this conception of absolute equality means that it is the women of color, many holding junior positions and on precarious contracts, who are the most affected and yet least involved in the decision-making. In reality, too, where the pandemic has been misrepresented as a leveler, the cumulative and compounded disadvantages faced by some groups are easily obscured by “in-the-same-boat” discourses (Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005).

5.3 | The operations of power and silencing

As established, blanket policies that do not pay attention to structural inequalities and inequities are particularly detrimental to BAME staff (Rollock, 2019). Nevertheless, engaging with institutional decisions proved to be particularly trying but simultaneously revealing for all of us. Doing so bared relations and operations of power that are otherwise more effectively managed or hidden from wider knowledge and scrutiny in times of normalcy—complaints expose institutional cultures (Ahmed et al., 2017). Going through a “complaint” (as it quickly becomes perceived and labeled as such) in a time of crisis holds the capacity to pinpoint precisely and quickly where power is actually concentrated, operated, and otherwise disguised, as well as how the ordinary maintenance and extraordinary justifications for an unequal and inequitable system are undertaken. This section draws on the first-hand experience of one of us in questioning and challenging the institution's policies on grounds of gender and race inequalities.

When one of us began trying to grapple with institutional COVID-19 policies, she experienced a lack of knowledge of where to go for clarification or resolution, produced by built-in complexity and fragmentation of the university and compounded by a lack of confidence to go higher up chains of responsibility. Where Ahmed et al. (2017) writes of complaint pride as “expressions of willingness to listen and learn from complaint”—a performance to indicate an open

door that actually does not exist—the first hurdle emerged when she was trying to figure out who is listening and to whom the query should be directed—a barrier created by multiple pressures. For a start, she had to carefully consider who had expressed the willingness to listen and what her relationship was to this person.

When she attempted to work through chains to seek clarification and possible resolutions, she then experienced fragmentation of responsibility and apparent lack of accountable centers. This inability to pinpoint nodes of accountability may be considered in relation to the increasingly ubiquitous claim of institutions to “flat” hierarchies, which are neither flat nor that dissipate responsibility, disguise power differences, and distract from accountability (Freeman, 1972). This form of “flattening”—heightened by neoliberal models of organization and management—can be read in the first instance in the expressions by higher management's willingness to listen. Yet, masked behind the “willingness to listen” is the lack of clear mechanisms for response or guaranteeing safety and sincerity to those engaging. The contradictions of producing the appearance of flatness in traditionally hierarchical institutions may be further discerned in a time of crisis by the general lack of knowledge throughout the system of “where and how to press institutionally,” as one of us reflected in her journal:

A supportive colleague told me: “knowing how and where to press institutionally is challenging for us all at this time”. The onus within this system is on affected individuals to signal effectively the opposition that senior management frequently allege does not exist (or at least in any critical mass—though why should mass matter?). Noise and dissidence are outsourced to representatives, to somehow pursue, collate, and represent collective mutterings at a ground level.

The second experience is related to how university responses to one of us were (re)framed, exposing the processes of who and what gets heard, as well as how we are heard. Even when the initial queries were made informally, she was re-directed to formal complaint processes and her queries were thus reframed as complaint. When examining her experience, she discerned distinct phases: She initially set out to seek an understanding of the decision to freeze pay through queries and clarification. Some of the questions asked in initial emails included but were not limited to: Would a title-only promotion mean work appraisal will be at the level of the newly promoted title or at the title of the lower wage? How would the institution therefore reconcile the unequal situation where some colleagues with the same status are performing at the same level but paid differently? How would new recruitment be approached on this basis? While there are promises to correct the situation in the coming year, what happens to fixed-term staff who will likely be made redundant long before their wages are corrected? While inquiring, she also made a simultaneous effort to urge “soft resolution,” taking the form of appeals, such as “this move does not morally align with claims to support race equality” or “there should be a robust and contextualized EIA.”

Such queries and feedback were either met with pre-determined responses or ultimately reached points of trickiness and further reframed as complaints. For instance, the senior management's reply contained both the phrases “address your concerns” and “no one else has complained,” suggesting (among other things) that concerns are heard as complaints. The senior management also tended to redirect her to avenues for escalating or formalizing what is heard as the complaint, indicating a lack of capacity within the system to have dialogue, to confront contradictory outcomes, and to achieve a resolution that has not been pre-determined within the language and framework of complaints. Such exchanges expose or amplify for us the strategies of counting and discounting, that is, whose opinion counts or is made to count and what is actively or passively excluded. The choice of how to listen, over and above who and what is listened to, is indicated by institutional strategies to explain and justify or more frequently obfuscate and deflect from policy decisions. For example, one of us noted her conversation with senior management:

It is strange to hear what sounds like a purely anecdotal claim from senior management that the “overwhelming majority of feedback from colleagues who have been impacted has been incredibly understanding and accepting of the situation”. There had been no consultative process or staff survey to weigh up opinions with regards to the pay freeze policy. Conversely, the branch union overwhelmingly

voted to oppose the university's proposals on pay award freezes and national pay deferral. This is the only concrete evidence and extended discussion I have seen of the sentiment held by staff on this particular policy—it looks nothing like senior management insistently describes. The [senior management personnel] points out repeatedly that this policy decision was never a point of consultation. I am frustrated by the contradictions between boasting about the positive feedback and discounting the vote—if the decision was made regardless

These strategies are not unfamiliar to women of color across predominantly White institutions and cannot simply be reduced to the default excuse of poor communications (which in turn result in solutions that center on improving communications rather than making critical structural changes). Rather, the persistence of such tactics amplified in crisis conditions not only reveals and deepens systemic racism, but it also helps to pinpoint autocratic concentrations of decision-making and power within institutions.

6 | CONCLUSION

Twenty-three months on, from the start of the pandemic and over a year after, we first started this sharing space, three key things have occurred. First, some small wins have been achieved in part due to collective action to which we have contributed, for example, resumption of promotions processes; pressure on institutions to produce timely and honest EIAs; a growing urgency at a grassroots level to address the injustices of neo-managerial workplaces; impending strike action in parts of the sector in response to pension disputes, wage erosion, and inequalities. At the same time, however, there has been an onslaught of increased and unsustainable workloads, redundancies, performance-based threats reflecting the state of the wider sector, cuts to humanities and social science programs, and a constructed crisis of free speech enabling racism (Blell et al., 2022) and transphobia across universities. Second, we have demonstrated that where academia is inherently unequal in various regards, its managerial practices and under-evidenced pandemic responses particularly hurt women of color, especially those who are at the early stages of their career.

Nevertheless, multiple converging crises and continued uncertainty are now being suppressed by a stubborn drive to return to “normal.” The thorny issues, particularly race-related, around institutional pandemic responses have been forced down the agenda by an apparent resumption of business-as-usual. The two preceding things also mean that third: All three of us are exhausted, although that is not to say we are exhausted without hope. While injustices exist within as well as across institutions, there have, as always, been well-documented and extensive ways for universities to take inequalities and inequities seriously and to remove these (see, e.g., Nyoni, 2019). There are people who are genuinely committed to fighting for anti-racist, labor-oriented institutional social change and social justice.

While we identify in this paper the ways in which university managements appear to sideline the experiences that women of color academics experience, it is vital to note that our own experiences do not even remotely encompass the collective struggle of women of color academics. Ongoing redundancies, threats of mass cuts, and threats to health and safety, for example, from refusals to issue institutional mask mandates, are far more detrimental, particularly for disabled staff, and the discrimination and prejudices faced daily by women of color in the academy are intimately related to but beyond the precise scope of this article. By drawing on our experiences, centered on our race, gender, citizenship, and financial and job precarity, we highlight how our identities intersect in shaping part of our labor-related experiences of the pandemic. We also call for more research on the labor and strategies of women of color across various sectors during the pandemic (Cohen and Rodgers, 2021), not least writing that speaks to how current grassroots anti- and post-work movements may speak to more equitable and sustainable futures (Weeks, 2011). We acknowledge too that other minoritized identities lead to marginalized experiences in a myriad of ways, leaving plenty of room to add to (re)conceptualisations of inequalities and inequities at this critical historical juncture.

Using autoethnography and reflecting upon our own experiences as three women of color in the UKHE, our paper adds nuanced insights into how academics with marginalized identities are affected by not just the pandemic (Bonilla-Silva, 2020) but also by the university responses to the pandemic (Watermeyer et al., 2021). Through our discussion of the theoretical and empirical insights, we bring forward a feminist understanding of the way UKHE operates in exacerbating inequalities and inequities when responding to the pandemic (Kabeer et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2021). Where we have demonstrated that these responses have exacerbated existing inequalities, our findings also offer important implications for moving toward an equity-based measure when tackling systematic biases and discriminations. Specifically, we show that contextual differences must be taken into account as academics' multiple marginalized identities shape their experiences and achievements in the UKHE. While ideal-type meritocracy is valued, we point to the need for UKHE to move away from an undifferentiated system of performance evaluation. Treating everyone with absolute equality superficially does not mitigate structural barriers but instead advance them. Finally, our findings indicate that women of color are often silenced; thus, the UKHE must ensure that women of color have a voice that can be heard—an action that requires not just performance but actual changes. While these considerations could be some effective solutions to these structural issues, they are also merely the starting point as the UKHE requires a systematic overhaul to ensure social justice for all. Therefore, our article serves to add testimonies that show the negative consequences of ignoring the structural challenges faced by women of color (Montiel et al., 2022; Pennant, 2022), in this case, in relation to the obstacles to equity created by universities in their responses to COVID-19.

We hope that our critique of institutional responses to the pandemic through a “view from the ground” gives pause for reflections for colleagues and decision-makers in the sector as they declare their commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion evermore vociferously.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ We refer to “social justice” when we discuss justice in this paper. We define social justice on the basis that everyone is deserving of and should receive equitable economic, political, and social rights and opportunities.
- ² While we believe that achieving social justice should be the goal of all actors in academia, we understand that it is not the case in many instances. This distinction is crucial as it reflects the power structure within UKHE: Those who seek social justice are often the less privileged and the minoritized; while those who benefit from the unequal system often fail to do the work and make the changes required for movement toward social justice.
- ³ Standpoint epistemology builds on Harding's (1986) standpoint theory, which gives insight into oppressions experienced by the members of a certain collective standpoint. It analyzes inter-subjective discourses and proposes that individuals have the knowledge and agency in describing and sharing their perspectives.

- ⁴ While we draw heavily on Bonilla-Silva's definition of color-blind racism in academia, we recognize the ableism associated with this language. We use instead "the lack of racial awareness" or "racially incognizant" (Reason & Evans, 2007) in our work.
- ⁵ While the Equality Act 2010 is binding in the UK, no specification on evidencing compliance exists. EIAs (equality impact assessments) are not a legal requirement, although a good practice to evidence reflection and assessment before and during consideration of policies. Where some institutions undertake retrospective EIAs, we argue that these contradict the principles and spirit underpinning the Act and the various equality charters.

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