



BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Race Between the Lines: Actors' Experience of Race and Racism in Britain's Audition and Casting Process and On Set.

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Diversity Group with support from the Casting
Directors' Guild

Sir Lenny Henry Centre
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Foreword

Casting is one of the most important aspects of achieving true and accurate diversity, inclusion and equity in the acting profession. It is literally the foundation that everything else is built upon, and yet too often it is overlooked in discussions around race, gender and under representation.

After more than forty years in the industry there is no doubt in my mind that it is one of the greatest challenges facing the industry. Every time we see a great actor like Thandiwe Newton, Idris Elba or David Harewood leave these shores to find opportunities denied to them in the UK, it is a painful reminder of why casting is so important.

This report finally brings into the open what many of us talk about, and suffer, in private.

I know from personal experience the powerlessness that far too many actors feel to be able to speak out when we witness or experience racist stereotypes - the report illustrates this by the finding that three fifths of us “never”, “rarely”, or only “sometimes” feel able to turn down auditions with stereotypes.

And the fact that the majority of respondents had directly experienced racism in the workplace should be a stain against the entire industry.

We all work in this industry because we love it, but we must do better.

I hope this report will be an important contribution to us all doing better.

Sir Lenny Henry

Executive Summary

A survey has revealed the institutional racism performers of colour continue to face in the pursuit of their careers. With nearly 1300 respondents, the survey was collected between March and April 2021. It is believed to be the largest survey of British actors on diversity and the auditioning process. Key findings are:

- 79% of respondents feel roles continue to stereotype their ethnicities
- 64% of respondents have experienced racist stereotyping in an audition
- 55% of respondents have experienced racist behaviour in the workplace

Also revealed are specific issues around hair and make-up and the inability to speak up against the racist practices encountered while working:

- 71% of respondents have experience with hair and make-up departments unable to cater to their heritage, hair or skin tone
- 61% of respondents feel “largely” unable to turn down an audition for a stereotypical character
- 66% of respondents feel “generally” unable to discuss issues openly with a director

The quantitative results of the survey, combined with the qualitative nature of the range of comments by actors collected for the report, demonstrate that the problems are not “isolated incidents”, or a “few bad apples”, but are systemic and far reaching. For this reason we believe that the solutions must be structural in nature.

Our policy recommendations include:

The need for an independent third party reporting body, such as the CallIt app or as suggested by Bectu in ‘Race to be Heard’, that actors can access confidentially and anonymously if needed

The active involvement and input from people of colour in substantive roles with the power to actively engage in anti-racist practices, including the avoidance of stereotypes in writing and casting. This would effectively mean substantially increasing the number of people of colour in senior casting roles, to change not just individual decisions but in enough numbers to change the general culture.

Why Look At Casting?

The experiences of performers of colour at the audition stage speak to a process that is riddled with stereotyping. The survey would support the idea for some groups that the audition is one of the most pernicious sites of institutional racism in the industry, where decisions about casting are made before any performer is even invited in the room.

The collective experience of performers of colour, exposed by their comments, shows the level of prejudice they encounter by simply seeking a job. Stereotyping begins with the writing of characters for which performers of colour are considered. These roles are often smaller parts that conform to cultural prejudices along racial and/or religious lines.

Stereotyping continues in the casting breakdowns sent to agents, which embed the stereotype in the casting process.

The audition itself can also become problematic, with directors and casting directors asking for performers to play a stereotype and not a person, which further dehumanizes characters of colour in scripted drama and perpetuates damaging stereotypes.

The workplace environment has also been found to be problematic by the majority of respondents to this survey. Knowledge of non-white physical characteristics by hair and make-up artists has been revealed as deeply problematic for performers of colour, with actors from African-Caribbean heritages at a particular disadvantage.

The majority of respondents have also encountered racially insensitive language in the workplace. Micro-aggressions in the workplace are also revealed to be particularly difficult to counter, as the performers' white peers lack the training and knowledge to recognise potentially racist behaviour and comments.

Many studies have focused solely on representation measured by on-screen talent, but this survey – and the comments within it – illustrates the need to research and address roles that directly impact on-screen talent at great personal cost to performers of colour in pursuing a career in what is often a hostile environment. The volume of comments exposes on-going prejudices in an industry that outwardly prides itself on its inclusivity.

Report Structure And Survey Methodology

The report is divided into two broad sections: “the audition” and “the work” following any successful audition.

The report demonstrates the issues faced by actors before they even get a job, and then how these issues are compounded and built upon in the event of an actor successfully landing the role.

The survey was designed and commissioned by a collective of diverse agents from the Personal Managers’ Association (PMA), an organisation comprising 180 member agencies, representing actors, writers and directors working in film, television, theatre and radio. The seven members of the PMA’s Racial Diversity Group are Ikki El-Amriti and Julianna Bautista (Identity Agency Group), Dawn Green (Creative Artists Management), Sharon Henry (Sharon Henry Management), Sara Sehdev (Core MGMT), Keana-Marie Senior (Victoria Lepper Associates) and Mildred Yuan (United Agents). With the support of the Casting Directors’ Guild (CDG), they developed this survey to explore the challenges non-white actors continue to have in the industry in 2021.

The respondents came from a variety of backgrounds and career stages. The demographic composition of the respondents was:

Black - African	18%
Black - Caribbean	12%
Black African and White	6%
Black Caribbean and White	10%
Indian	10%
Pakistani	2%
Bangladeshi	1%
Asian and White	8%
Chinese	3%
Japanese	1%
MENA (Middle Eastern North African)	3%
Latinx	3%
Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background	9%
Jewish	0%
Any other ethnicity	11%
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	2%
Any other White background	1%
White - Gypsy or Irish Traveller	0%
White - Irish	0%

Half the respondents were at a career stage identified as “developing” with 8% who consider themselves to be “established” and 3% “very well established”.

Developing	50%
Established	8%
In training	5%
Just getting started	20%
Stable	14%
Very well established	3%





I. AUDITIONS

I. Auditions

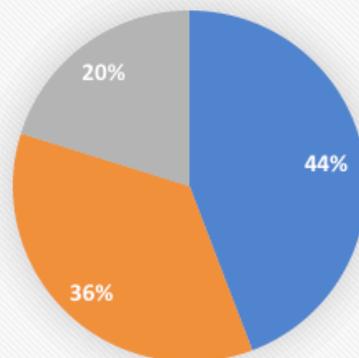
- 79% of respondents felt they had been asked to audition for a role that potentially stereotyped their ethnicity.
- 64% of respondents recorded they had been asked to audition by reading in a stereotypical or exaggerated accent during a casting.
- The majority of respondents of colour felt the casting opportunities they were offered were inferior in quality to those of their white peers.

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN INVITED TO AUDITION FOR A ROLE WHERE YOU FELT THE BRIEF LEANT TOWARDS POTENTIALLY STEREOTYPING FOR YOUR ETHNICITY?



■ I'm not sure ■ No ■ Yes

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ASKED TO PERFORM IN A MORE STEREOTYPICAL OR EXAGGERATED ACCENT DURING A CASTING?



■ More than once ■ Never ■ Once

These statistics illustrate the ethnic stereotyping that performers of colour continue to encounter within the industry, as early as the casting process. The respondents' comments further reveal the complex ways systemic prejudice operates within the life cycle of the audition process, from stereotyped roles to overt racism by the panel.

Life cycle of the audition stereotype

Recent studies of the industry have built a picture of a system that effectively runs on stereotypes. The BFI's 2016 "Black Star" report, which showed that when actors of African-Caribbean heritage are cast, they are more likely to appear in stereotypical parts or in stories that revolve around topics associated with the African-Caribbean experience: slavery, racism, apartheid, colonialism, crime and gangs.

Similarly, a 2020 report on peak scripted television broadcast drama in 2018, commissioned by Equity's Race Equality Committee and undertaken by the author of this report, found a high level of segregation of performers of colour into genres such as continuing dramas and those with location settings outside the United Kingdom. The Equity report also found severe under-representation of actors from east Asian, south east Asian and Middle Eastern and North African [MENA] backgrounds. The representation of African-Caribbeans and south Asians was found to be higher than that of the severely under-represented communities, but was prone to stereotyping. Only 8% of leading roles were found to be played by actors of African-Caribbean, south Asian, east Asian, south east Asian or MENA heritages.

The findings of these and other studies aligns with the lived experience of the performers of colour who responded to this survey. The responses to the survey illustrate an audition process that has a life cycle that often compounds inequality with each step.

Discrimination often begins with the role as written, with all ethnic groups subject to stereotyping that is specific to their ethnicities:



All the audition that I receive as a MENA artist are STEREOTYPES.



All the roles that were specific to my heritage [Middle Eastern] that I auditioned for, were all stereotypical ex. [terrorist] daughter, immigrant, scripts written with broken English etc.



Most roles I have auditioned for are stereotypes which is frustrating.



EA [East Asian] or SEA [South East Asian] roles for women can be highly sexualised or fetishized.



I am honestly sick of being asked [to] stereotype, like Geisha or just another immigrant. I am a human being with heights and flaws just like anyone on the street. Abundance of personality is definitely lacking in East Asian roles.



Non-white actors still rarely get [seen] for roles in which race is not a talking point.

The first stage of the casting process compounds these stereotypes, which are embedded in the documents sent to agents:

- Casting briefs that stereotype make the whole audition process problematic.
- Majority of the lead or supporting roles are almost always on the breakdown as “white/Caucasian”.
- Castings/Auditions for non-white actors are almost always based on ethnicity rather than the role or talent. Castings are usually seeking non-white people for their ethnicity specifically e.g. “Indian girl mid-twenties needed for role” as opposed to just “girl mid-twenties”.
- The main thing that bothers me is that because of my skin colour I always have to play stereotypical ‘ethnic’ parts. I’m British and I would love to just play a “British” character who has complex issues that are ‘human’ rather than revolving around an “ethnic” issue.
- For my age group (above fifty) it has been about 8 out of ten castings wanting a stereotypical Indian mother/aunt etc with accent. Basically the mentality is always “just got off the boat” “oh my god my son is gay” “ram ram my daughter wants to marry a white man”...[It’s] like my generation of British asian has been completely forgotten, but we are the ones that left home and defied convention etc etc, we studied Shakespeare and Ibsen and went to Uni in the UK...yet we just don’t exist...If you are under 35 scripts allow you to be British, if you are over you start been bombarded with the stereotype cliches... I have noticed a change since the BLM movement, I have more castings coming in that don’t ask for an accent...interesting - more recently I would say it’s been about 2 out of ten...



The language of stereotypes that pervades the casting brief can also manifest in discriminatory behaviour at the audition itself, with code words often used in conjunction with stereotypes of African-Caribbeans:

- Being told to play it more “sassy”, “urban”, and “street” is always problematic
- Being asked to be “more street” or “more worldly” are really rubbish notes that we *all* know are euphemisms for “give me more of the stereotypical Black person that I’ve seen before”. It’s lazy and it’s disrespectful to our work.
- I have been asked on more than one occasion, “could you do the black thing” or “can you make it more street or urban” “could you black it up a bit more”
- [B]eing told to act a stereotype to appear more “genuine”
- I have had industry professionals assume that I have a “Lewisham version” of myself that is different to my “Oxford University” self that I should tap into for “street, tough” roles.

Requests by a casting panel for an actor of colour to speak in an exaggerated or stereotypical accent are common experiences for performers from all communities of colour:

- I had one experience been told my accent isn’t Chinese enough that’s was so offensive. I am Chinese so my accent is definitely Chinese. It’s just rude to say that as a comment.
- After booking a job in my own accent I was asked on the first day to rehearse in a ‘Rafiki accent’ when I asked for explanation was asked to do it in my ‘native accent’ or whichever one I can do. Coded wording and dog whistles are also used too often such as ‘urban’ ‘street-wise’ for Black characters or ‘secretive’ ‘intimidating’ for ME characters or ‘exotic’ ‘shy’ ‘intelligent’ for Asian characters - be specific if you know what you want without being offensive, if you don’t be quiet.
- The general ‘wash’ of the Middle Eastern region is very ‘othering’ - eg ‘do a Middle Eastern accent- well what country?’ and The stereotype that Middle Eastern means Arab.



I was told to sound “more Asian”. Asia is a continent. I think casting have such a lack of understanding and education towards Anti Asian micro aggressions. Possibly because there is a lack of representation; thus lack of experience with what’s appropriate or not.



Asking for an Indian accent when I’m not Indian, or “can it be more exaggerated?”



I really don’t like when casting directors assume I can do a certain accent just because of the way I look. Like stereotyping Latin Americans thinking we all sounds the same. I have had auditions in which I was told I sounded Italian. I am Argentinian. It’s insulting.



Asking us to sound more white in vocal auditions and remove the soul.

Stereotyping goes beyond accent and requests by audition panels can be overtly racist:



I was once told to “riff the fuck out of it and shout Jesus” during an audition for a role that had nothing to do with my race, singing a song which was not in any way linked to the gospel tradition. The power dynamic in the audition room at that time (having only recently graduated from drama school) meant that I felt as though if I didn’t do as they asked I would be seen to be difficult/unable to take offers and respond to direction so I did as I was asked. I secured the role, but unfortunately this experience in the audition was indicative of the racist attitudes that informed assumptions about my personality throughout the rehearsal process and subsequent tour. 4 years on I would have immediately questioned why I was being asked to riff and shout Jesus and not cared whether that impacted my job prospects or not, but as a graduate I had no idea that I deserved better.



If the role is specifically Black or African, I will often have words like ‘sassy’, ‘fierce’ or ‘attitude’ thrown at me, in lieu of any actual directives.



Asked to make my accent and gestures more Indian or even Urban it up, Things like I’m sure [you’re] used [to] it.



It’s very difficult to explain how you feel when you are given direction that isn’t explicit, but implies stereotyping. For example: “more sassy”, “give it attitude”. It’s often a unwritten way of saying “play into your stereotype”, but because it is done in this way, you don’t always feel like you can defend yourself or even humanise your character. Which leaves you feeling defeated and humiliated. Which seeps into other work-you second guess yourself with new tapes and auditions, wondering “do they want a stereotype too? Is it worth it?”

The problems that occur within the casting and audition process are partly the result of the lack of people of colour in decision-making roles, such as casting director, producer and director:

 I have done hundreds of auditions in my career so far and I have only ever been in the room once maybe twice with a casting directors who was not white. That always shocks me.

 I've sat on both sides of the audition panel, and my observation has been that some white members of the audition panel often "just can't help" undermining actors with their prejudice, which bleeds out either in attitude, offhand comments, questions or actual redirection. I also have to admit that I breathe a sigh of relief when a BIPOC person is on the panel because, if the prejudice flares up, a shared look acknowledges that we both know what's going on. Generally speaking, when a BIPOC person is on the panel, I am treated better. Obviously, this is not to suggest that across the board, every white person who auditions does this. But it does happen quite often, though rarely with a white person whose identity crosses over with a marginalised group (women, LGBTQ+, Muslim, etc.).

 A panel comprised of only white people cannot and should not offer their opinion on how a non-white role should be played in regards to race and racial stereotypes.

 I feel CDs can often visualise white actors in multiple roles more easily than ethnic actors. Ethnic actors (particularly in Britain) are rarely considered for roles where their outward identity isn't central to the character.

 All white casting panels make me uncomfortable.

 As often the only person of colour, in a room of white directors or casting directors or producers; It's hard to feel like you have a voice to question choices/"styles" they want which feel racially driven, when you don't see someone who looks like you.

 I've had a person of colour on an audition panel once in my three years since leaving drama school. When you're faced with a light-skinned panel across the board, that informs you how to adapt your behaviour in the audition room immediately. Ultimately, in most cases we would rather have the job than not have the job. It's part of our job as auditionees in an audition room to pull out those parts of our human experience that appeal to the human experiences of the panel. Because that way they will connect with you, and you're more likely to get the job. When the panel is always white, the auditionees' non-whiteness is dampened or hidden completely.

Perhaps most importantly, stereotypes are pervasive in auditions and casting because of the continued lack of awareness about communities outside the white, English norm:

-  Casting directors and (particularly) directors often do not know what they're looking for other than (e.g.) "Indian". When neither they nor I have expert knowledge of the heritage they want the character to be, there is a danger of reverting to stereotypes.
-  In my case what bothers me is when the person deciding whether I'm believable as for example in my case being Mexican has no idea what that is or means. So until there is more diversity in casting, production, writing, directing etc we will continue to be ghettoised marginalised and stereotyped.
-  I hate it when casting directors, directors and producers use a limited "black" experience as a version of all black experiences. That the "black community" have singular frames of reference.

Responses from performers from mixed heritages also illustrate the narrow ways in which the majority white decision makers view people of colour:

-  I am half Pakistani & half Irish with slightly tanned skin. In seven years I have auditioned for one Irish role (that was last week) and the rest have been Indian - which I am not. But I have had to adjust to not limit my opportunities.
-  I find that I'm too ethnic for British. And too British for ethnic roles. Catch 22.
-  As a light skinned black actress, I have had MANY scripts come though where the characters were clearly described as having long blonde hair and blue eyes. I lost out in all of those roles to people who fit the brief - a white woman. I've also had scripts wanting a black female - I've always lost out to a dark skinned woman (rightly so most of the time). Then come the scripts that call for mixed actresses - always losing out to actresses who are actually mixed (not light skinned black) who have luscious loose curls and softer, white features. As an actor just starting out, it's difficult to have faith in an industry that doesn't see you for what you are... looks like I'll be following many UK black actors, and relocating to the US market...

💡 I've been asked to "be blacker" in an audition before, especially during a vocal one. As a mixed-race person, I do identify as a black person. As black person, standing in front of a panel and performing, I am performing as a black person. To be told to be "blacker" highlights how white people have such strong caricatures of "how" a black person should speak/sing. Yes we have cultural and heritage differences to white people, and also dialects depending on where someone's from/brought up, but the ONLY difference really is the colour of our skin and that should not factor in an image of "how" a black person "should" sound. Has a white person ever been told to be whiter?

💡 As a light skinned, mixed race White / Hispanic, I am often not "Latina" enough.

💡 I've spent most of my career playing Londoners, Africans or Americans. I'm from the North of England.

💡 Being mixed raced I have been told before I'm not "black" enough, and don't pass as white. Or not "mixed raced" looking enough.

💡 I graduated from THE GUILDHALL SCHOOL of MUSIC & DRAMA in 1996. I have been represented by top level agents for almost 20 years. In all this time the only leading ethnic role I was offered was from an Irish Producer/ Director/ Writer. Almost all my auditions have been for tertiary low level characters, like Policeman 5 or FBI agent #2. Almost an extras role. After the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter uproar, I received an audition for HEAD OF THE FBI and then for a leading member of PARLIAMENT. The fact that this hardly / never happened before SADLY proved to me that there has been a racial ceiling in the industry especially if you are of mixed heritage and of ethnic ambiguity.



Stereotypes used by the industry are pervasive, as some white respondents to the survey have stated:

 I am categorized as “white other” because I’m not from central Europe. However, I don’t look like the stereotype the UK has for my country. This is causing a lot of problems for everyone. I’d rather get a more informed room than one that tries to fit me into a box I don’t fit.

 I am so happy castings finally embrace different colours but what about different accents? I have to!! Play racism stereotypes from bbc to small productions OR I WOULD HAVE NO ROLES - try being British but having 100s castings for a variations of prostitute because I was born in Eastern Europe & as we all know all women there are whores & all men are plumbers.. you find it funny? Welcome to my life /:) why is it ok to only cast me in my stereotype casting most of the time as my accent is not 100 % RP (even though my students from 37 countries around the world do take me for a Brit) and yet in eg Killing Eve all Russians are played by (mostly privately educated) Brits & all Poles are played by the Irish who CANNOT SPEAK POLISH? There were no Polish speaking actors? I have no words..& this show won awards for diversity.

There is also further anecdotal evidence within respondents’ comments that some communities continue to be excluded from audition opportunities:

 Gypsy actors don’t get auditions as no agencies will represent us.

 As Latinx... I feel a bit invisible in the UK/European context.

 As an Indian I rarely see Indian characters into a story or show but in real life they are everywhere from highest corporate positions to every next block but when it comes to reflect into any popular platform they are invisible ... they are invisible from shows, awards everywhere but we are the biggest film industry in the world & have the legacy of one of the oldest film industry and drama history.

 East and South East Asians are hugely left out of the diversity and inclusion movement. There are barely presence of us being cast in meaningful roles, both on stage and on screen.

 Hispanic is not a recognised ethnicity here in England. We are not usually on any diversity forms and I think are very misunderstood.



While the industry is trying to be more inclusive towards POC, they aren't really including ALL skin tones in a positive light. For example you always see lightskins/mixed/biracial characters being portrayed as 'beautiful' or 'strong' but when it comes to darkskins, they are almost always cast in movies about slave trade or gangs or something with a negative narrative. That's something that definitely needs to change because the industry thinks they're doing a good job by casting POCs, but they almost always only cast POCs with a lighter complexion and they always portray them as strong, outspoken and gorgeous, but darkskins are almost never seen but when they are, they always seem to get roles where they are horrible or dangerous people.



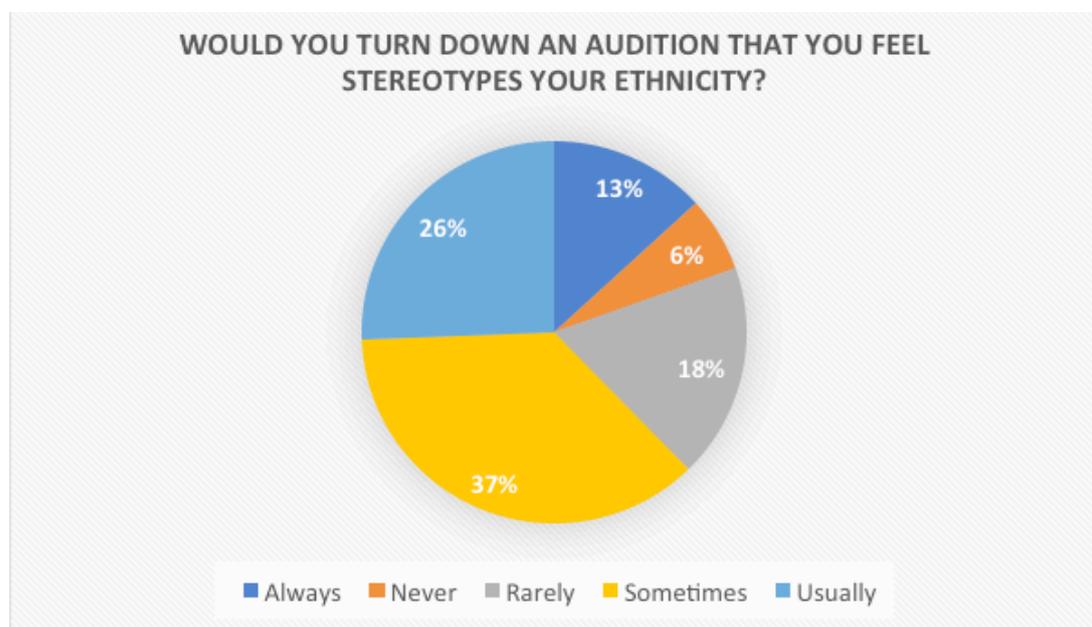
People seem to forget about Asian representation. I've seen people heralding press releases for diversity without true diversity taking place. The trajectory of improvement has become black and white. And quite literally the myriad of brown people in between this are lost in conversation. The problem has not yet been solved. More on this Asians are diverse. We are East Asian, Southeast Asian and South Asian. We do not all look alike. Asian is NOT just East Asian features. And mixed race Asians are Asian too. We deserve as much space in this industry as others.

The individual experiences of exclusion outlined above were confirmed by the study of peak scripted programming mentioned above, commissioned by Equity's Race Equality Committee.



Would you turn down an audition?

Despite the overt and subconscious racism of the audition process, only slightly more than a third (39%) feel confident enough to say they would “always” or “usually” turn down an audition due to racist stereotypes. With the vast majority saying they would only “sometimes”, “rarely” or “never” feel able to turn down an audition if they felt the part to be the product of racist stereotyping, there is a power dynamic at play that contributes to these decisions. With little work on offer, performers of colour have to take advantage of the few opportunities they receive.



Several respondents observed that the dearth of roles for performers of colour was the primary reason for being unable to turn down auditions for stereotypical characters. The near-complete erasure of some communities, such as MENA, from television and film further constricts the option to refuse work:



I wish I could make decisions about auditioning for and accepting roles based solely on my beliefs around authentic ethnic representation. The reality is that I have had to compromise many times in order to work and make a living. I have been humiliated, excluded, underestimated, judged based on perceptions and stereotypes so many times by casting directors, directors, musical directors, choreographers, producers and other actors.



As MENA actors it's so hard to turn down auditions because we never know if we will get more opportunities to work.

- As auditions are hard to come by at this stage in my career, I feel I cannot turn down anything, even if it is culturally insensitive.
- I'm not in a position to turn down work, so even if there was stereotyping happening of my ethnicity, to be perfectly honest I wouldn't say no, unless it was really bad and highly highly offensive. But there's a point up to which I would be willing to do it.
- Most non-white actors are not going to turn down a role due to the lack of representation in media at the moment. However a lot of roles for non-white actors are exaggerated and stereotypical and can be dehumanising at times.

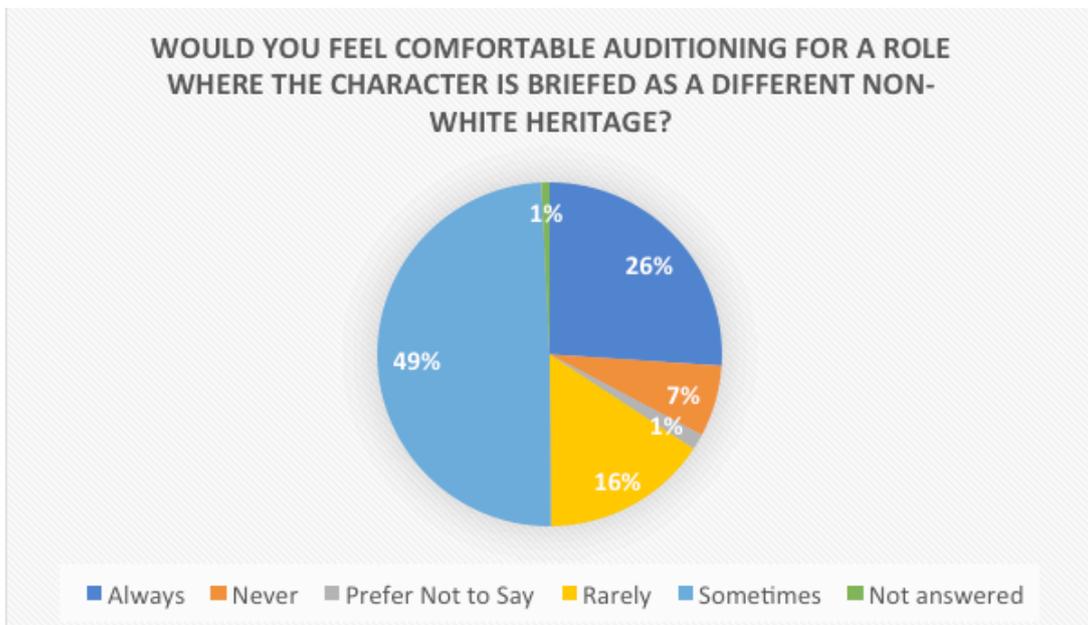
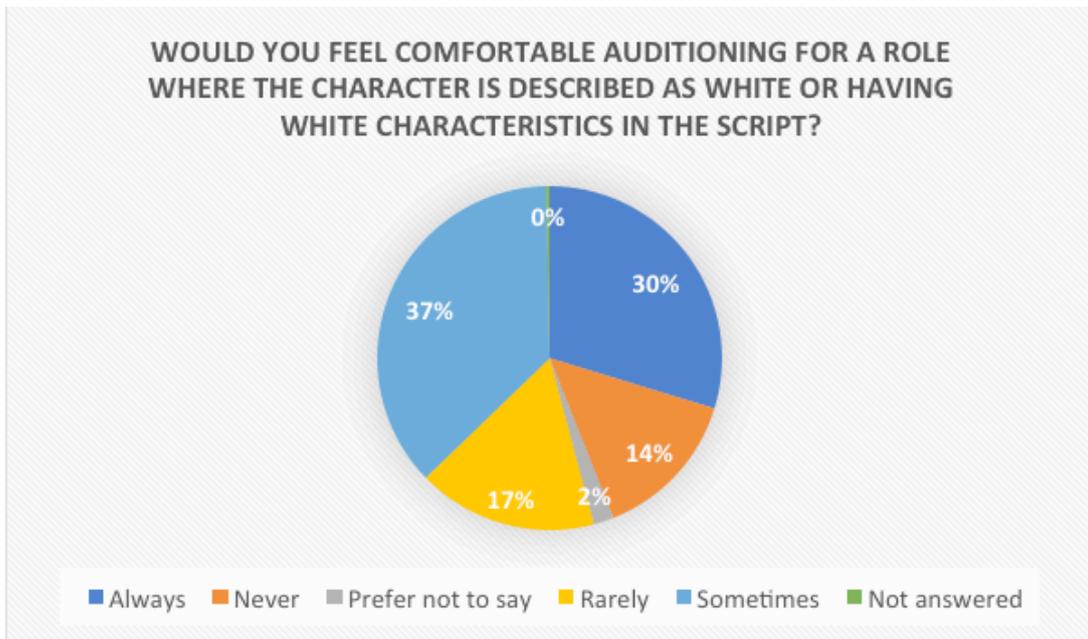
Fear can also play into decisions to audition for stereotypical roles:

- I never know how to turn down auditions without making me look bad to the casting director or my agent. I get scared that I will not be seen again, even if I really disagree with the words that I am saying that are sweeping generalisations of my culture. So I end up usually taping to not look difficult.



Auditioning for roles that are white or a different heritage to your own

The majority of respondents would feel comfortable auditioning for roles that were for a different heritage to their own.



One key reason is that white roles are seen to be measurably more complex than the stereotypes most often encountered in the audition process by performers of colour. The responses also imply that the “whiteness” of the character is not a defining feature, due to the white character’s complexity and nuance. This is in contrast to “ethnically” written characters where race is the defining feature:



I would love to audition for roles cast as “white” because often those are the roles that are most appropriate to me as an upper-class former investment banker and corporate lawyer....The roles are complex, nuanced and interesting. The roles for black women are often simplistic, 2 dimensional and very rarely exhibiting class, vulnerable or softness. In short, WHOLLY UNDERWHELMING.

The dearth of roles is also a contributing factor for some performers of colour, who view playing a character written as white to be necessary for career advancement. It can also be a way to challenge industry stereotypes:



I convince myself to go for the roles that either lean towards or depict in one way or another a white character, mainly to prove something to myself but to show that non-white people have an entire world outside the stereotype they are squeezed into. I will say, it have thrown me a hand full of times as I then start off my audition process by acting like the white version of myself...which makes no sense as that’s not who I am. So it can be jarring when receiving such parts but there is also a point to prove.



If a character is described as being white, I sometimes do submit myself. Purely because I want my face to pop up in their inbox and for them to ask themselves why the character has to be white or why that’s necessary for them. But usually, I don’t actually want the job. Because I don’t think I want to work with people who think like that. Sometimes there are specific reasons as to why characters need to be white of course. It’s for things like “Sarah - office worker - pretty, young, blonde, receptionist” where I like to rock the casting boat. Why must Sarah be blonde?



The thing about auditioning for stereotyped roles...The biggest change happens from within. The way I feel about it is that I have to do the roles that get me to a certain place in my career so that I can have the pull to be able to change scripts/characters. Of course, there is a line with this, and each situation needs to be evaluated as and when they come up on a case by case basis. It’s about seeing the big picture and evaluating what will afford the best/most effective change.



II. THE WORKPLACE

Along with problematic audition practices, the responses to this survey highlight difficulties performers of colour encounter in the workplace.

71% of respondents had experienced hair or make-up artists who lacked the knowledge to work with them on an equal basis to their white co-workers; only 28% had encountered no problems with hair and make-up in dealing with their physical features.

These issues with make-up and hair are particularly acute for the African-Caribbean community, but it is clear that performers from east Asian backgrounds have also faced obstacles when dealing with hair and make-up departments.

-  I normally bring my own foundation on jobs because I'm not sure if the Make-Up department will be used to dealing with my skin tone.
-  I usually have to do my own hair, buy many of my own products, and even with being light skinned artists rarely have my skin tone in stock. Often made to feel uncomfortable for speaking up. Never consulted on hair changes, on set I've been talked about my hair being a problem in shots as though I'm not in the room, and white hair and makeup artists have put the wrong colour make up on me during checks, and regularly have broken my hair.
-  For years, nothing has been done regarding my hair on set. If I haven't styled it appropriately, it's so disappointing to watch myself back and see that it doesn't look as good as it could have done.
-  Hair & Make Up are a HUGE issue!!! For ppl of color specifically black people. If we try to explain what works with our skin or hair the attitude is typically I'm the professional and you don't know what you're talking about! It's rarely collaborative. They automatically feel threatened instead of understanding that we perhaps have had issues in the past AND that we may know our skin or hair better than them and the info we can offer them is only their to help them do their jobs even better!!!! I also feel attitude wise they need to understand they are our first point of contact and they should be welcoming!
-  Never knowing how to do my hair, damaging it - having to do a lot of prework myself. Foundation never matching.
-  I had a bad experience a few days ago and I went to the Head MUA who quietly told me to go to the bathroom and fix my makeup myself instead of directly telling the MUA what she had done wrong. It was embarrassing.



It's unspoken but we get the vibes from being on set that we are treated less attentively than the other predominantly white cast.



I was very recently told "you know who you look like....?" (I said, please don't say Lucy Liu - I don't) and she feeling very proud of herself, was like "yeah, you totally do! It's the eyes" by my make-up artist, who I'd worked with for almost a fortnight. I tried to put her straight and explain why that was offensive and then later on the shoot, when my make-up artist mysteriously changed, I overheard she refused to work with me the following week.



I've noticed they either don't put make up on me or touch my hair at all. Or they try and "age me up" and cover some of my features to make me look like how they picture an ethnicity is supposed to look like. For example (sometime they take 1 shade darker in foundation because in their mind this is the "color I'm supposed to be"), a lot of times they also try and cover my freckles.



I have encountered some artists who seem unfamiliar with doing eye makeup for an Asian eye shape, and it can end up looking awful. At work, I can't recall any specific language or direct action around culture or skin colour that could have made me uncomfortable, but may have sometimes received more subtly dismissive and/or psychologically abusive behaviour later - which I'm sure would have been less likely to happen if I were a white male rather than a non-white female.

Respondents also noted some of the complexities that contribute to their unequal treatment within the context of hair and make-up issues:



The few black hair stylists I worked with knew not only how to tend to afro-centric hair texture, but also Caucasian and thick Asian or Hispanic. But I'm still yet to work with a white hairstylist who knows how to treat afro centric hair.



Hair/make-up experience is so region specific it seems. There are very few Hair/Makeup Artists in Scotland for example who have proper experience with Black hair. I believe this can be linked to the size of the roles that Black artists get on screen up here. If an MUA works with lots of Black artists, but they are only on the shoot for 1 or 2 days, there's no real time to practise. So even with the Afro hair courses they're taking, there's so rarely times to spend a whole 2month+ shoot working with one actor's hair and learning.



I find the bigger the budget the more likely they are to have a team better qualified to provide hair and make up for my black actors. Eg: when I worked on the TV series Gangs of London. I have definitely noticed a shift and a conscious effort from production teams to be more aware and to cater for a diverse cast and crew.



More needs to be done to educate hair and makeup departments about what people of colour require. From working on stage to TV shows or Hollywood movies, my hair and makeup is an issue. Some departments I've worked with - because they've not educated themselves on black hair and makeup - see me as a problem and usually won't listen to what I have to say about my hair and face that I see every day! The debates I've had about the colour of my makeup base and what my hair looks like weeks before filming is so draining and puts a negative air onto the production before the cameras have even started rolling. Time, effort and research are required so that artists of colour feel valued on productions and are made to feel as comfortable as their white counterparts so that we can deliver our best performance without additional baggage.



Culturally insensitive language

Over half of respondents – 55% – have encountered culturally insensitive language in the workplace:

-  Micro aggressions and ignorance are more common because of the lack of diversity in the industry and the majority being white people who don't notice this as a big issue.
-  I have been confused with other mixed raced actors repeatedly on the same project.
-  There have been several occasions where 'casually' racist comments have been made (knowingly and unknowingly) and it scars the experience of working on set. I think there is also an intersectionality at work here too as film sets are massively male dominated, which also does not help the situation.
-  Most riggers are majority white, have used racist remarks, there was an instance where they had the St. George's flag on set which I thought was not appropriate. Also I was referred as the foreign guy even though I'm a born and bred Londoner. My heritage is Arab and was playing a character who is Arab. I was spray tanned as I didn't look Arab enough.
-  The hardest thing to deal with is when it's "a joke" directed at you, and if no one else speaks up/is laughing along, then you become the over sensitive person. I think it's important for allies to speak up, as sometimes the person on the receiving end isn't able to defend themselves.
-  If people do say things, they try to pass it off as a joke, so that you just feel that you are then being over sensitive.
-  Because I am often the only person of colour on a production, it can be uncomfortable to explain a racist incident or micro aggression to another white person whose initial response is to deny it on behalf of their crew.
-  Culturally insensitive language usually in the form of the question "Where are you from?" (and when I respond saying London, being asked "Where are you really from?") "Are you from China?" - Mostly I think people mean to ask, "What's your ethnicity/cultural heritage?" but don't know how to? There is a lack of awareness that if you look Chinese, you can still be British, or you can be from any country really, besides China.

Many white colleagues do not recognise the subtle ways in which racist behaviour manifests itself, from the “jokes” mentioned above to the erasure of difference in the widely used sentence “I don’t see colour”:

💡 People who say they don’t see colour have always turned out to be the least safe people to work with, and the most difficult to all for help when a problem comes up.

💡 Saying they don’t see colour, confirms that they don’t recognise the microaggressions I face in the workplace, audition meetings.

💡 What makes things difficult is addressing and overcoming covert racism in the form of micro aggressions and racially insensitive undertones. Overt racism is much more obvious and simpler to point out. We need more support and effective systems to help combat covert racism which is difficult to prove with concrete evidence.

💡 Organisations like to think they are allies but they do not go far enough with doing the work, they do not budget the time and resources to care for an inclusive and safe space. They have expected me to educate them, to argue my case/prove my point when I’ve been in distress and traumatised. I have been accused of bullying or being difficult when I have asked questions politely, I have been treated with caution and fear. I have been used as a scapegoat.



One set of microaggressions faced by one performer of colour provides a microcosm of the larger picture. This individual's experience shows the subtle ways in which racism manifests itself through damaging stereotypes of African-Caribbeans about educational ability, as this performer's skills and knowledge of Shakespeare and vocal technique was repeatedly undermined by white colleagues:



The mindset of many is solidified to the degree where many don't realise that their actions are racist and, depending on the context, that can be worse than someone being blatant about it. I worked at Regents Park on a Shakespeare piece and the dialect coach and director decided that I was the quietest person in the cast and needed to work on my spoken delivery. As a professional vocalist and vocal coach, I knew that all they had to do was turn up my fader for my spoken lines as the level was set from my singing but they were adamant that I was at fault! Of course they thought I could sing because I'm black but believed that I didn't technically know what I was doing and I certainly didn't know anything about Shakespeare. They tried to single me out and make me sing my spoken lines as that's how they thought they could connect with the ignorant black person. The dialect coach even sent me an email telling me that I was singing the lyrics incorrectly (which I wasn't! The script and score were different) and she proceeded to give me an unsolicited lecture on what "thee", "thy" and "thou" mean and the context in which they could be used... I corrected her and once she had a look at my website and saw what kind of experience I had, she swiftly changed her tune. The quality of my work should've stood out to her but the need of some white people to educate black people is so strong that everything I did was white noise to her until she saw social proof of what I'm capable of. Not only are we learning lines, music, movement, potentially travelling away from home, meeting new people, learning new skills but we're having to deal with racism on a daily basis also and it's a lot to carry.

Speaking openly about issues

- 73% of respondents say they would feel “uncomfortable” “very uncomfortable” or “would not discuss” discussing the issues raised in this survey with the casting director.
- 76% of respondents say they would feel “uncomfortable” “very uncomfortable” or “would not discuss” discussing the issues raised in this survey with the producer.
- 66% of respondents say they would feel “uncomfortable” “very uncomfortable” or “would not discuss” discussing the issues raised in this survey with the director.

The difficulty performers of colour feel in discussing issues related to casting or their treatment in the workplace mirrors its power dynamics:



Speaking openly about issues of race etc when working is not comfortable generally because most if not all of those people within the production excluding actors are predominantly white and invariably middle class.

It is being outnumbered in the room that makes me nervous as I don't want to sound paranoid but I feel less understood and more ignored generally like everyone knows something I don't.

I do feel like I have been more confident talking about issues I feel, no matter the scale, with other actors of colour to see if this is a something that need to be addressed with the director and co. I think that I have a natural reluctance to involve creative management team members because of the fear of backlash or being labelled as “the angry black woman”. If things were to escalate to a point where I felt unsafe or unable to do my job, that would probably be the point I would alert my agent to represent me, however my agent is white and most likely the creative team would be majority white, so I would be feeling uncomfortable throughout the process in fear of being penalised/misunderstood, even if I knew I was right. This may be due to my newness to the industry and apprehensive, so I hope my confidence to discuss this will grow with time and experience.



I think as non-white creatives, we have been conditioned to believe or feel like anything we get (roles, jobs, opportunities etc) we should be truly grateful for as we have “beat the odds”, and this feeling, be it conscious or unconscious, expresses itself in work environments as a fear of not wanting to be or sound ungrateful, or disrupt the creative process and/or structure. If we had more non-white representatives in the higher creative circle (casting directors, producers, directors etc) we would feel more comfortable to express our concerns inside and outside of the work environment.



Hopefully, the working environment will change so that people of colour feel like they can speak out when they witness or are victims of racism at work. I'm my Mother's daughter so will always speak out. However, there are many who will not stand up for themselves as they're afraid of the consequences. I worked on a show at Bristol Old Vic before the lockdown. There was myself and one other black female in the cast. The director kept mixing us up and giving us the wrong notes. She would dwell and be especially hard on me about issues that simply didn't exist and in the eyes of many of the crew, we were just 2 black women and not seen as individuals. All of this was occurring while many of the white members of the cast didn't have a clue what was happening lyrically or movement wise and, if mistakes were noted by the choreographer or director, they were laughed off. I went to the company manager and voiced my concerns and nothing happened. The other black female in the cast would complain to me at the end of the day about how we were being treated but didn't want to come with me to highlight our grievances and wore a mask most of the time. We ought to be work in safe environments where we all feel we can speak openly and freely without fear.





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There is also an awareness by respondents that the people with whom they should be able to discuss these issues are themselves unaware of cultural insensitivities:



I don’t feel enough agents are well equipped to adequately support their non-white clients. One instance for example is when I was called for Book of Mormon my agent asked me if it would I was comfortable to do so based on my religion (I was open about being Christian but wasn’t a Mormon) I went away and did research on the show and found it interesting that I wasn’t asked about the negative black/African in stereotypes in the show. With it being one of the only West End shows with a heavy black cast presence I think it was just assumed that I’d be happy for the opportunity.

As with comments related to hair and make-up, in making the work place a more friendly environment for people of colour, the key is education and familiarity:



In an industry where most people in positions of power tend to be white, a great deal of education needs to be undertaken if true allyship is to be achieved. It's the only way these things can be taken into full consideration rather than having multiple ethnicities working on a project in which everything has been facilitated to suit white people. Also a great deal of openness is necessary in order to allow people who aren't white to be able to express themselves concerning their concerns without feeling like it will affect their careers, because that's one of the big obstacles when navigating this sort of thing.



I think it's really important to encourage an inclusive and supportive culture on set. Especially if you feel you're a minority (not just race-related, eg as a woman). Being a [woman of colour] can make it feel especially difficult to speak up without worrying about being labelled a "troublemaker" or "over sensitive", particularly in white, male-dominant spaces. I heard about the Safe Spaces statement that Equity had written on bullying & harassment, created to be read out to cast & crew every day. While that may feel unnecessary to some, I believe making something like that a compulsory part of daily routine would make such a huge difference! It would've made me feel more empowered to address the issue, and perhaps encouraged others to not be bystander.



Policy Recommendations

The survey has highlighted the need for urgent policy interventions to address many of the issues discussed, however it should be noted that no policies, however effective, can replace the need for production companies to actively engage with actors so they can talk about their experiences without fear of reprisals for coming forward. Over and above the need for a better working environment in general the findings of this survey showing clear discriminatory practices in auditions and the workplace, the following policy initiatives are recommended:

1. The need for an independent third party reporting body, such as the CallIt app or as suggested by Bectu in 'Race to be Heard', that actors can access confidentially and anonymously if needed.
2. Creative involvement from people of colour at all levels from the development process through to post-production. The active involvement and input from people of colour with the power to actively engage in anti-racist practice, including the avoidance of stereotypes in writing and casting. Due to the power dynamics of productions this would mean people in substantive roles as opposed to just advisory positions. We therefore suggest that productions set specific and transparent employment targets for diverse representation at various casting levels positions.
3. Ensuring appropriate levels of competency for hair and make-up artists working with actors of all heritages, reflected in the PACT/Equity agreement and BECTU's working practices.
4. Mandating unconscious bias, for this to be effective it would need to be combined with active bystander training for all productions, for all members of cast and crew, possibly modelled on the COVID protocols that are currently in operation.



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