



INSI

*"No, they don't get it."*

Covering racial injustice – Dispatches from the newsroom

JOURNALISM | SAFETY | RESPONSIBILITY | ACCOUNTABILITY





Photo: Alamy

## Introduction

As part of INSI's commitment to protect journalists, we spoke to Black and ethnic minority journalists working in British newsrooms about the challenges they face covering racial injustice, while working in a media industry with an entrenched lack of diversity and representation in staff and leadership at all levels.

The killing of George Floyd, subsequent global protests and the reckoning over systemic racism that followed, meant far more journalists began investigating, writing and talking about racism.

INSI's Naseem Khan has been speaking in confidence to Black and ethnic minority journalists about working in this environment, with the added layers of stress, anxiety and the mental health impact of covering something so personal.

What follows are anonymised excerpts from those conversations.



## TV NEWS REPORTER

**What frustrates me most in the newsroom is people talking like racism isn't a thing in this country. It's really hurtful."**

### On the impact of George Floyd's killing

"Since Covid, we have been running ourselves ragged and then George Floyd. For me seeing that over and over again is just horrific. I couldn't watch more than about 10 seconds of that video without feeling ill and it kept coming up on my news feed again and again. As a journalist I have seen a lot, but just seeing that video was just so raw and personal and could have been a member of my own family. It just really hurts."

"I had to come off social media for a while, and then when you come in the newsroom, everyone is talking about it. Covid felt personal, because of stuff in my own family and this felt even more personal. When you come in the newsroom and you are one of the only Black or ethnic minority journalists in the newsroom on that day, it's horrific. You are already dealing with the trauma and then you get into conversations that are just draining."

"You hear conversations like 'oh the racism in America is different, completely different. We don't have guns.' Or some people just ignore you completely. They just forget that you are there. You are invisible until you try to raise something and people think that you just have an agenda because you are Black. But no, if I raise something it's because I am a journalist."

"What frustrates me most in the newsroom is people talking like racism isn't a thing in this country. It's really hurtful and for people who are an ethnic minority and are most likely to be in junior positions it makes them ask then 'why am I not further in my career if racism doesn't exist?'"

**"They are having all these conversations about 'out there' when there is a lot that needs to be discussed 'in here'.**

If you think journalism and the media are really progressive – well actually we need to look inwards and figure out the stuff going on in our own newsrooms. That would help ethnic minorities

feel like something was happening and something good can come out of this. It's really frustrating."

### Are your concerns taken seriously at the senior editorial level?

"When I first started I was really shy. I was on a contract and I didn't want to be seen as a trouble maker. I realise I tone myself down a lot at work. I'm careful not to be 'offensive'. Early in my career I had a white woman who raised an official complaint against me because she said that I was aggressive and bullying. The complaint went absolutely nowhere but it affected me in that I make sure no one can ever tell me I'm aggressive – so I go the other way which is horrible. It's really upsetting when you can't really express what's going on."

"More recently I went to a senior manager over an incident. I wasn't being listened to at all and I got really frustrated to the point I went to cry in the bathroom. I was trying to articulate that I really needed to be listened to on this. It's not just because I'm Black, but because I have done this story before, I know a lot about it. I just felt like I was being dismissed by people in the newsroom and there wasn't another Black person there at the time. So I just felt really isolated, really alone."

**"As soon as the George Floyd story broke it should have been obvious managers should have been having conversations with all their Black and ethnic minority staff."**

"I look across at the senior management all talking about race issues and all of them are white. There is no one in my newsroom who is Black and who is above a certain management level, so it's very hard."

"If one good thing could come out of this it would be to just be more proactive with this. If someone had said to me earlier are you ok? I know this story is a lot, do you want to have a chat? That would have prevented a whole spiral of events and the whole



feeling like crap and the whole crying in the bathroom bullshit that really shouldn't have happened."

**"But they just kind of assume you will get on with it."**

Honestly I have had more training to go to far flung places to deal with famine and stuff like that than I have had to deal with this."

### On online abuse

"If I do a race related story the reaction is disgusting. I came off Twitter because it was vile – 'race baiting scum journalist trying to incite a race war'. I have taken Twitter off my phone. It's too much, especially the mentions. Every inch of me wants to fight back and say 'you have no idea about me or my life. I'm trying to be as professional as I

can and you are attacking me personally based on the colour of my skin'."

### Do you think what you bring is valued?

"I have been doing this job for over 10 years and now I feel for the first time people are actually seeing me. I feel like I am but just probably because it's the bandwagon now, but I'm cautiously optimistic that things are changing."

**"However the people in charge are still the people in charge and they are very much happy with the status quo."**

"We still have people that deny structural racism exists as long as they are in charge they are not going to look at it in a meaningful way."



## SENIOR TV NEWS PRODUCER

**“We all at every level have to explain what racism is and why it hurts.”**

“The environment is such that it is a difficult thing to take. I have been in TV for 25 years at different organisations and I feel like I have been having this same conversation for 25 years and I feel like nothing has changed.”

“People tell me to be more optimistic because at least it’s ‘raising awareness’ to which I want to show them their privilege because they are just able to have ‘awareness raised’. But these are the things that affect my life directly. I don’t want awareness to be just raised, I want action and I feel we never get that. We always have to fight for our voice to be heard. I am lucky where I am because I am surrounded by ethnic minorities and we confide and support one another – so we have not gone to management as one lone voice but have reinforced each other’s perspective, so that they really hear us.”

### Are your concerns taken seriously at the senior editorial level?

“I can express myself freely. I only feel heard because I shout really loudly. Junior colleagues do not feel heard, I’m managing their mental health to support them to help them get through this.”

“When I was younger I never felt able to speak out. I used to even be afraid to say I was a Muslim when I worked on a current affairs programme post 9-11. That was so huge and (with) the repercussions ever since, you would think that we would have more Muslim news editors.”

### Do you think what you bring is valued?

“I don’t think ethnic minorities are seen as an asset. They don’t see the value we bring. But they see that it makes their lives easier, because they don’t have to think about it. I don’t think it’s seen in that positive way as you bringing something extra. That would be lovely.”

“The way the conversations are set is from a very white male privileged perspective. They are looking at us and telling us what is happening. It is not we are all journalists in a newsroom trying to put a programme out. They just don’t understand why they can’t just say things like ‘oh we have had a load of BAME [Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic] stories going on today’. It’s a very us and them culture. We don’t have a senior manager who is a person of colour that you can approach with problems.



It’s about changing the whole way you think about a story, not lumping us all together as BAME and hoping it will be all over soon.”

“What makes me feel uncomfortable when discussing this is the language used. This is happening to us and there is still a question as to whether racism does exist or not. Everyday casual racism to them is ridiculous. Some language is assumed is playground stuff and you should be able to take it.”

“It’s really important they use the right language and they don’t. This is not maliciousness, I don’t know if it’s because they don’t care enough about it or they are unwilling to unlearn things.”

**“It’s staggering to me that newsrooms that are reporting on this lack of diversity in other organisations don’t turn their ire onto themselves and have a look at themselves.”**

“We all at every level have to explain what racism is and why it hurts. The emotional toll this takes is not understood, but I think if we keep on highlighting this they will understand eventually.”

“I would like to say have a root and branch look at the set up of your organisation. There is not a single Black or Asian or any other ethnic minority as a senior manager in our newsroom. All the foreign producers are white. They are looking outwards at other people and not doing any self analysis .... Who are your chums? The people you eat and drink with? They are not the ethnic minorities in the newsroom.”







## TV NEWS REPORTER

"It's so tiring. It's nice if someone doesn't pretend to understand and just says 'are you ok?'"

### On the impact of George Floyd's killing

"It's hard to watch personally as a Black person . . . That's the moment someone has died. I have not seen it. I have literally not seen it to this day. I do not watch these videos anymore. This is part of the dramatisation, if you like, of seeing Black men die. It's something we just do now and it has to do with Black lives having minimal value. You would never see a white boy or girl on TV being killed. As a Black person I don't want to see it, it's not good for our community to see that."

**"We have just normalised showing Black men being beaten or suffocated or being shot in the back."**

"It's like that has just become good drama now to see Black bodies being killed and maimed in a way that we wouldn't do for anyone else. Showing this is just not cool."

"I think it speaks to the racism that permeates our newsrooms. The fact is we do not have enough Black and ethnic minorities in our newsrooms and I think most Black people would identify the sensitivity of showing that on a news programme."

"Scripting is so key: 'he died in police custody', that absolves people of blame. We should just tell it as it is when people are killed by the police. I mean it's not even a question of nuance. We should be calling it for what it is. It's a killing."

"Obviously in the States there has been a different level of rioting and looting, but there needs to be a level of understanding about what that is. You have to report these guys are stealing televisions and trainers but there are reasons behind that and that's important to inform the viewer. We are giving you the facts. But I think you need to have those voices, that scripting that gives it a bit more context. In a three minute news segment that is sometimes not possible but we need to make it possible. Otherwise we are misleading our viewers as to the background and context of why they are seeing what they are seeing. (Otherwise) we are just these savages running around looting and killing people."

"I do feel empowered now to talk about things that are race related. Now is the time where we, as Black people and as Asian people, non white people, if we can't speak our mind freely now,

then we never will. Now is the time we should be calling people out. We should be saying it as it is. If this period is just a moment and not a movement we need to grab it now."

**"I'm done with the talking and the kneeling and the BLM shirts. I'm not impressed by that."** I'm impressed by tangible change. We are past talking. We are past discussing the problem and I think newsrooms are going to find out if this is a movement, not a moment, when we can judge it by actual change."

### Do you think what you bring is valued?

"I do at this moment. We can't have it both ways. I know some people get angry because they say you only come to me when it's Black issues, but when they don't come to us about an issue that affects our community we get equally angry. So, of the two evils I'd much rather they came to me when it's my own community."

### On online abuse

"I don't get caught up in the hate. I've had a few white lives matter types. We need to police our Twitter platform better, and we need training on how to deal with it. For your own mental health you can fight back and get really damaged mentally by it or you can come off the platform until Twitter can police it better."

"No one has enquired if I have had any complaints (or) concerns related to discrimination or harassment - nor have I heard of anyone who has been approached by management to ask. If you are not white you would have thought they would be checking in."

"I made a decision a few months ago to stop watching these videos of Black men being shot and killed. Then I accidentally opened one without realising it. I watched the video of the guy in Manchester being tasered in front of his daughter and I cried, really cried all morning and that was the last time."

"A lot of people would be triggered by that and I would expect management to have people in place to reach out to look after their mental health or at least offer the support. It's so tiring it's nice if someone doesn't pretend to understand and just says 'are you ok?'"





Photo: AFP

#### BROADCAST JOURNALIST AND FILMMAKER

**“Where an idea is seen as being positive and assertive or even counter cultural and bringing in ‘fresh thinking’, for someone who is an ethnic minority its seen as them being aggressive.”**

#### On covering racial injustice

“I wouldn’t talk in terms of Black lives matter only. I’d say this is a long term thing. Unfortunately black and brown bodies are killed all the time and everyone is desensitised to it. Now is a big cultural moment but for me it is nothing new or surprising. Yes it’s very hurtful and so is every police killing of black and brown bodies and everything going on in the Middle East. People are desensitised to it almost entirely.”

“My workplace is relatively diverse, but less as you go up the chain. I can speak my mind freely, but whether my recommendations are implemented is another matter. There is an accepted wisdom, especially in big organisations, as a way of coping. An edict will come from up high, where there will be a top level decision that will set the tone of the coverage and that is not something you can push back against easily.

Ok there are conversations about this moment I would say, but at the end of the day it’s the executives’ ‘wisdom’ that wins out.”

This hurts and obviously if you are a white male you can’t empathise as much.”

#### Do you think what you bring is valued?

“I would like to see more BAME people in positions of leadership. I’m always doing these workshops and schemes and it’s always the white people doing the hiring. Until they realise that sometimes it means them not getting a promotion in preference of someone else and life isn’t going to be what they are used to, in terms of getting jobs and moving up nothing will change.”

“They always bring out a few people of colour, but they tend not to be as attuned to the issues. They have got to where they have by playing a particular role and not ‘causing trouble’.”

“Not speaking out because you don’t want to be seen as a trouble maker – that’s the environment in general. Where for someone else an idea is seen as being positive and assertive or even counter cultural and bringing in fresh thinking, for someone who is an ethnic minority it’s seen as them being aggressive.

**And seriously the ones that think they are woke are the worst.”**



## SENIOR BROADCAST JOURNALIST

**"It's only news if someone makes it news that's senior and whiter to me which is pretty pathetic."**

### On covering racial injustice

My concerns were that the organisation and the programme felt the need to try and get contrary voices on issues that were specifically the fall out from the BLM movement, such as the issue of taking statues down. There was this need to be a little bit contrary, try and get a white right wing man's view on for the sake of it and I felt it was completely unnecessary, and it was justified for balance. There was the issue of scrambling around when one of the statues came down in Bristol for a Black person to say it was a terrible thing to do. It was that kind of thing just for the sake of balance, rather than having nuanced discussions about taking the statues down or not, which you could do equally with a white man talking about it"

"We are talking about racism here. There aren't sides. So this reactionary scramble for opposing views is disturbing. It's like they are very nervous and keep using the need for impartiality as a fig leaf to get certain viewpoints on. So those kinds of things started to come to the fore and I started realising we are really in a place that is getting it so wrong."

### Are your concerns taken seriously, and are you free to express your views?

"Most of the time no – not when it comes to race you have to tone it down. There is also an issue of Islamophobia and concerns about it not being addressed in a way that other prejudice would be. There is intersections of religion and race, class and gender and that can feel at times like you are left with your mouth literally wide open at some of the things people are saying."

"There will be comments which we are supposed to laugh at but I just don't find funny. When it comes to stories about racism and colonialism there's just widespread derision. Comments like 'do we have to put this on?'. 'That's not really a story is it' or 'It's such group think'."

"We are getting more vocal about how we feel about this, but we have to get vocal as a group. The problem is it's very hierarchical, and everyone just says yes to the boss. That's not a structure that works in journalism. It's only news if someone makes it news that's senior and whiter to me which is pretty pathetic."

### Do you think what you bring is valued?

"As a producer I should be able to talk about economics and have it valued. I should be able to talk about politics and have it valued in the same way I should be able to talk about community sensitivities and race because I am seeing it from an impartial journalist's view as well as coming from a background and that's just not valued."

### On the emotional toll for BAME journalists reporting on racism

"No, they don't get it. There is no dialogue about this in my organisation. Possibly because maybe they think just because I'm brown it can't be assumed I would be emotionally affected or interested in certain things. For example just because I'm brown they wouldn't assume I like Bollywood – in the same way they wouldn't assume I would be upset by someone who lives thousands of miles away with a knee on his neck. It's not understood that there is a huge difference between the experience of racism and a cultural like or dislike of something."

**"The experience of racism is something they really really don't understand and they probably never will."**

"They don't get exposed to it. We don't actually speak about it. I mentioned in passing that I used to get sat on and have my face punched in at school and my colleagues were shocked. But it has happened to many many people in this country. So when you cry racism and they think it's silly – 'oh are you going to say this is racist again' – people really don't get how upsetting it is."

"I'd like to see a total redistribution at the top and the middle and a fairer crack at the whip of different people with different skills. The issue where I work is overwhelmingly they seem to only give their own kind the top top jobs. Everything is about patronage not skills and experience, because I bet you if they looked at that there would be a lot more of a mix at the top and the middle of people from different backgrounds, so we wouldn't be in this mess that we are in."



Photo: AFP



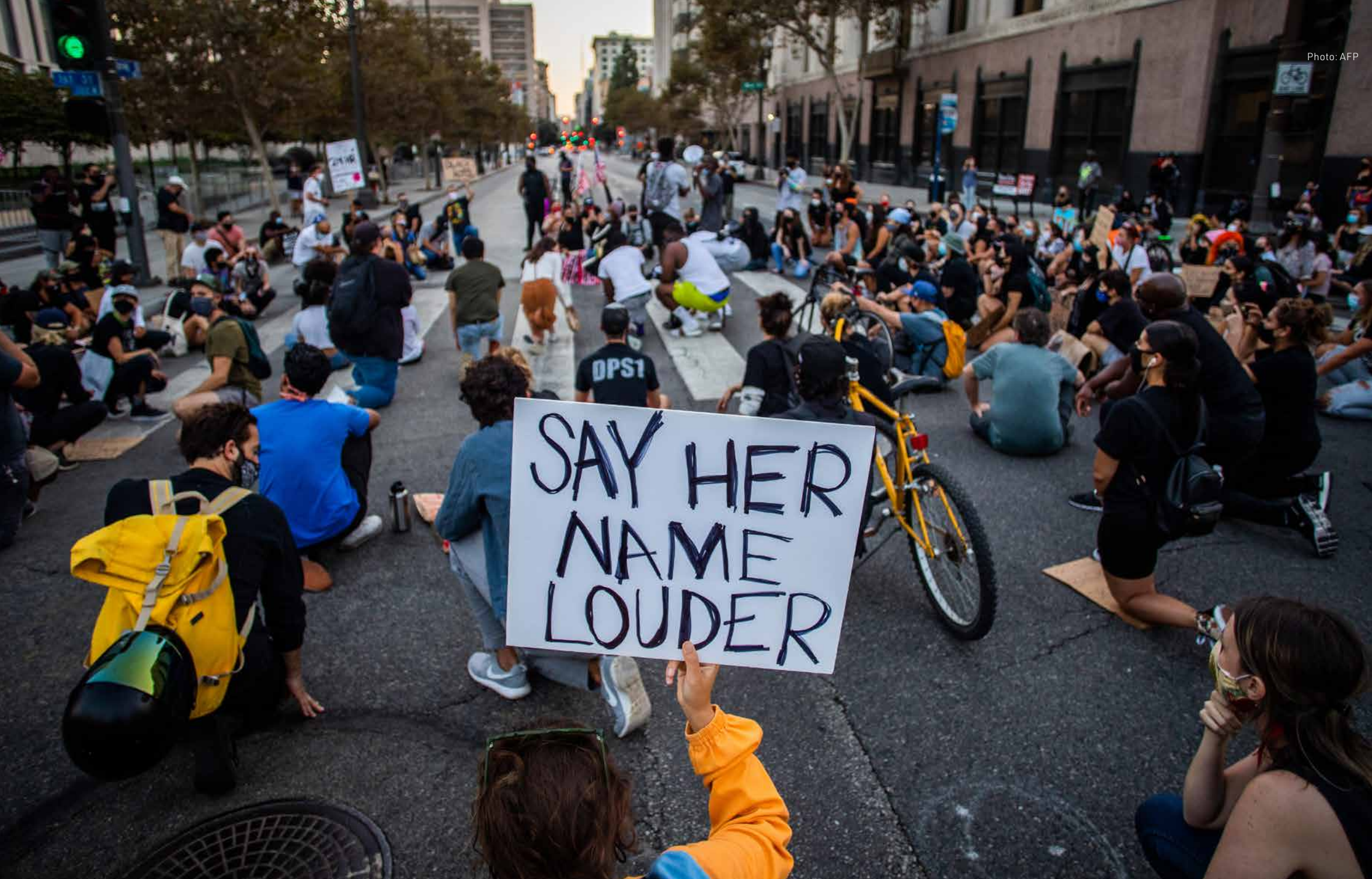


Photo: AFP

public schooled. I think if I wasn't I wouldn't still be in this industry."

### Are you free to express your concerns, and are they taken seriously at the senior editorial level?

"I have had issues in the past, (for example) at one brainstorming meeting for a programme/story about Britain becoming ghettoised because of ethnic minorities moving in. There were about 20 people around the table and I was the only person of colour and expressed my problem with the story. There was stunned silence in the room and the editor turned round and said 'I don't think we should be embarrassed that our core audience are white, middle class and middle aged'. But the stunned silence I'll never forget. My contract was up for renewal and it wasn't renewed... I was too vocal."

"When I first started out it was awful. I was at one stage doing a sports news show and I was in the edit suite with a bunch of white guys in the late nineties and the guys started making monkey noises when they saw Paul Ince and saying 'throw him a banana'. They were making fun of the Black players on the screen. I got very upset, left and made a complaint. My boss who was very nice, supportive and outraged herself, warned me if I did take it further in this very white male environment they would find a way to kick me out and did I really want that at the beginning of my career? She said, 'I hate to tell you this but England is incredibly racist. You are going to have to make the decision now if you are going to fight it or find a way to live with it'."

"I went away for over a decade because I knew as a woman of colour I would never have got anywhere in England. I have had to have an international career, in which I have worked in many places all over the world because I knew it wasn't going to happen for me in England, where I kept being told I was too ambitious or overly ambitious. It would have been fine if I wanted to be a production manager all my life but I didn't."

**"Ultimately they don't understand racism, they don't get it. I thought they did but they don't and I find it shocking."**

"Honestly the amount of times I have come home broken by the comments I have faced at work - many times. It used to really affect me and people around me would be like 'come on you are taking this too literally, they are not really being racist' and I would say 'they are, I can feel it'. It used to cripple me. And the amount of times I've wanted to leave the industry precisely because of this ... Just because I'm older now and can deal with it - it doesn't mean it's okay."

"I guess what I find most shocking about all of this is white people saying they understand it now. Why now? **And what have you been doing all this time?** And now it feels like, **'okay, we've listened now. That's enough'.**"

### SENIOR PRODUCER AND FILMMAKER

**"Honestly the amount of times I have come home broken by the comments I have faced at work. It used to cripple me and the amount of times I wanted to leave the industry precisely because of this. Just because I'm older now and can deal with it doesn't mean it okay."**

### On the Black Lives Matter movement

"Initially (post Floyd) I was excited. I thought, finally. I was excited thinking finally the dialogue is happening, finally we don't have to be saying the system is racist. There is incumbent prejudice that we are constantly

fighting against, but then I feel there has been a turn. I feel that suddenly the momentum has gone a bit and the dialogue has gone. A journalist speaking with me recently seemed to bemoan the fact people are talking about this the whole time now. Well when weren't

we talking about this as women of colour? We have always been talking about this, it's just that nobody was listening. And yes in a way I feel empowered to say what I want now. But I think there is an attitude that it's been done now, we don't need to talk about this anymore. But I do know that all of a sudden managers are very touchy about 'ticking boxes' and it's not about that obviously, it's about understanding our value."

### Do you feel what you bring is valued?

"Not initially, not at all. As I have grown older, I have had 25 years experience, my background doesn't seem to play a factor quite as much anymore. But then again I fit the bill as I am privately educated and I have felt that throughout my career, that I'm okay because I am





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