

# “Where are you really from?” & other racial slights

It's been a month since the murder of George Floyd. His death has sparked a global conversation about the discrimination faced by black people every day.

Other times, you struggle to find words to explain the deep hurt, so you stay silent.

**Black women have had to deal with both gender and racial discrimination all their lives.** To us, the current discussion is nothing new; it is our everyday experience, often only discussed when amongst your black friends. These forums are where we talk about the constant policing and judgement of everything from our hair, our clothes, our body and of course, the tone of our voice. Dealing with microaggressions (covert, subtle slights which demean, belittle and ridicule marginalised groups) is normal for us. The list is endless; from being mistaken for another black woman at work and at Party Conference, to being told “you're pretty... for a dark-skinned woman” or that you should stand for election in a posh area because “you speak quite well”.

These everyday slights are hard to call out, they are more difficult to discuss with the perpetrators who often take offense, immediately becoming dismissive of your hurt. Other times, you struggle to find words to explain the deep hurt, so you stay silent.

While it's impossible to identify every microaggression, I want to give five examples of the most common I encounter.

## **1. No, where are you *really* from?**

Last year I was racially attacked by two white men on a train who asked where I was from. They clearly disapproved when I replied “London”. The situation very quickly led to them unleashing a torrent of abuse, including insults on my intelligence and taking it in turn to guess which part of Africa I actually belonged to. On this occasion, I fought back only because other, non-black people spoke up in my defence and protected me. This support also gave me the courage to report the crime. The two men were later charged.

**As a black person, questions about your background are common. There are no limits to when or where you could be asked this question; usually by strangers, at work, out partying, walking the streets, on public transport and so on.**

When people interrogate you on your heritage, the implicit message is that you don't belong, you're not British, you'll always be an outsider. Probing my background leaves me and many like me feeling like an “other” in a country we were born and raised in.

## 2. Can I touch your hair?

Touching someone's hair, while not as traumatic as being called a racial slur, can be equally unsettling and dehumanising.

Black hair is beautiful, so I can appreciate it when people tell me they love my hair. But what I don't appreciate is people who seem obsessed with examining my hair or even touching it without permission. Black people have mastered the art of ducking when a hand randomly makes its way towards your hair. I've had people grab my afro on public transport, I've had my braids pulled in the middle of a date by a stranger walking past our table, I've had people question whether I wash my hair and if so how often. People have even been offended when I didn't allow them to touch my hair.

To say you don't see colour means you don't see the discrimination and oppression faced by marginalised groups.

**The need to touch my hair unsolicited is not only an invasion of my personal space but a deeply patronising act.** It leaves black women feeling like animals in a zoo; there to be gazed upon, analysed, and studied in a way not too dissimilar to the treatment of Sarah Baartman, a black woman who was exhibited at freak show attractions across Europe in the 19th-century.

## 3. You're so sassy/there's no need to get aggressive

The angry black woman trope is an all too familiar narrative women like me have had to deal with most of our lives. When I speak my mind, often with the same passion and intensity as my white counterparts I'm labelled "sassy", "aggressive" even "threatening".

**Why say sassy instead of passionate? Why aggressive instead of direct? And why threatening over authoritative?**

This narrative tends to only be used to dismiss a black woman's experience of being treated differently to others and to mask the mistreatment of black women, usually in the workplace. This is what I call gaslighting 101. Labelling black women as aggressive can have a major effect on black women's mental health. And how could it not be when you spend every day navigating an environment that mistreats you, whilst trying your best not to come across as angry

## 4. I don't see colour

This is normally something said with the best of intentions to show that someone isn't racist. However, it can be damaging. **To say you don't see colour means you don't see the discrimination and oppression faced by marginalised groups.** Microinvalidations like this also diminish and belittle the racist experiences faced by black people. If none of us saw race how could we combat racism

## 5. Are you sure that's what happened?

When someone tells you they experienced something racist, believe them. Don't question them; instead, listen with sincerity and a genuine desire to understand.

So often when a black person describes a racist experience they are met with: "are you sure that's what happened?" and "I'm sure they didn't mean it like that". These are all ways of invalidating and denying someone's lived experience. **When someone tells you they experienced something racist, believe them.** Don't question them; instead, listen with sincerity and a genuine desire to understand.

Whilst these microaggressions may seem insignificant, having to constantly deal with them is exhausting. Over time, these everyday slights take their toll on your mental wellbeing. Often people are unaware that they have even said anything offensive which is why educating yourself is so important. Before you say something, think about the impact it could have on someone else. If you are called out, don't be defensive, use the opportunity to learn so you can do better in the future. And if you're not black, remember **it's not the job of black people to educate you, you need to do the work yourself.**

*Cllr Julia Ogiehor, Muswell Hill Ward and Opposition Crime, the Community and Equalities Spokesperson; Chair of Haringey Lib Dems*

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## [One Month Since George Floyd](#)

**George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis a month ago today.**

Seeing his last few moments and hearing his final words broadcast across the globe has sparked a renewed revulsion at continuing racial injustice and focused attention on the Black Lives Matter movement.

For those of us who do not have to confront racism and discrimination every day in anything we do it has been a **long overdue wake up call that we still have work to do to wipe out inequality in this country.**

It's on all of us to make sure we turn this moment into lasting change – not only raising awareness but taking swift action

**We must make sure we turn this moment into lasting change.** It is time to raise awareness, to pursue swift, effective action to end racial injustice.

The government has announced it will hold a review into race inequality. But that is not enough. We need action. We need a Race Equality Strategy for the whole of the United Kingdom – a strategy that does not avoid injustice, but tackles it head on, and defeats it.

We must build a fairer, more equal society. To do that Liberal Democrats will have to take the fight into every area of our society. As we learn more and the campaign grows so too will our policies and the list of actions we need – we defeat racial injustice wherever it lurks in modern Britain.

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## **[How to nominate a candidate for Leader](#)**

To stand for leader, candidates have to secure a nomination from an MP, as well as 200 members, from at least 20 local parties.

Any member can nominate a candidate and who you've nominated isn't made public.

If you'd like to nominate a candidate, here's what to do:

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## **[Extend the Brexit transition period](#)**

**It's been four years since the EU referendum and the UK has left the EU.**

**Liberal Democrats are passionately pro-European and while this is a hard pill to swallow for many of us, the issues now at hand are not about Leave or Remain.**

It is unthinkable that the government would rush through a half-heated deal, or worse get no deal at all.

At a time when the UK could face the biggest economic crisis in hundreds of years, it is unthinkable that the government would rush through a half-heated deal, or worse get no deal at all.

Food shortages, medicine shortages, and an unprecedented hit to jobs and livelihoods: that is what the UK is facing if we crash out of the EU without a deal.

**That's why today, on the anniversary of the EU Referendum, we are calling on the government to ensure the UK does not crash out of the transition period without a deal.**

It is vital the government extend the transition period. With a week to go for them to do so, there is still time.

Whilst the PM opposes extending the transition period, he must at least be honest about what this means for our country.

Whilst the prime minister continues to oppose extending the transition period, he must at least be honest about what this means for our country.

**Liberal Democrats are also urging Boris Johnson to provide assessments as to the impact of a no-deal Brexit at the end of the year, and to ensure Parliament has proper scrutiny over the decision.**

**The government must put the national interest first.**

We are urging Boris Johnson to provide assessments as to the impact of crashing out of the European Union without a deal, and to ensure Parliament has proper scrutiny over the decision.<https://t.co/wrXUwtqGAa>

– Liberal Democrats (@LibDems) [June 23, 2020](#)

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## **[Windrush Day 2020](#)**

Seventy-two years ago today, HMS Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury. Its arrival marked a significant moment in British History. Many of the passengers on-board came from the Caribbean, by invitation, to support the reconstruction of our country. **Their hard work and skills would later bolster**

**the economy, fill labour shortages and help establish our National Health Service.**

These brave men and women arrived on our shores hopeful, but they were not met with open arms

I came to Britain from Trinidad in 1960 when I was 10 years old and saw first-hand the sacrifices, hardships and challenges faced by the people who responded to that invitation. Those brave men and women arrived on our shores hopeful, but they were not met with open arms. Many encountered racism, discrimination, and rejection. Yet, they persevered. Children like myself also often had to face adversity and hostility on a daily basis, at school and on the streets. Some of those children are now embroiled and caught up in the Windrush Scandal. **They are being asked after 50 years of being in Britain, to prove they have a right to live in this country, a place they have spent all their lives and call home.** I too could have so easily been one of these victims had I not arrived here on my own passport.

The Windrush Scandal openly exposed deep-rooted failings in the Home Office and laid bare the injustices faced by the people who helped to make Britain the success it is today. This was recently portrayed so emotionally in the BBC drama 'Sitting in Limbo'.

**But the scandal isn't over.** Many people are still dealing with the consequences of lost jobs, home evictions and wrongful deportations. And although it's been a year since the Windrush Compensation Scheme was launched, only a handful people out of over a thousand applicants have received payments. This is shameful and simply unacceptable.

The scandal isn't over. Many people are still dealing with the consequences of lost jobs, home evictions and wrongful deportations

**The last few weeks have once again exposed deep-seated racial inequalities.** The disproportionate number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people dying in this pandemic and the killing of George Floyd, are a sharp reminder of the systemic and institutional discrimination in our society today.

I am the Chair of the Windrush Commemoration Committee, charged with commissioning a Windrush Monument to celebrate the major contribution the Windrush Generation has made to Britain. This will be unveiled to commemorate Windrush in 2022.

**Meanwhile on this Windrush Day, we honour the outstanding economic, social, and cultural influence of the Windrush Generation.** As we honour their legacy, let us also vow to never become complacent in standing up to bigotry, hate and injustice. Let us strengthen our commitment to build a new Britain that is fair and just for everyone, without exception. What a wonderful legacy that would be for our children and future generations.

*Baroness Floella Benjamin, DBE is Chair of the Windrush Commemoration Committee*

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