

# **Threads of Inequality: An Industry-Wide Contradiction**

By Victoria Palumbo

“Women are fashion.” Culturally, this is the perception of the industry at large; women and the LGBTQIA+ community are the tastemakers that drive the industry, determine its direction, and showcase this direction to the world. However, this perception contrasts with the underrepresentation of women, especially Black women, in the industry's most executive positions. Fashion, as an industry, is largely a White Boy's Club. The objective here is not to foster division but to underscore the need for greater inclusivity, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of background, find equitable opportunities for recognition and respect within the fashion industry.

## **The Voile Ceiling**

Fashion is generally associated with modeling before it's associated with design and artistry. Supermodels like Kate Moss, Bella Hadid, and Alex Consani are the most public representatives of 'fashion.' For the average person, this public femininity is enough to create the association between women and fashion, subsequently classifying it as a woman's industry; however, a quick glance at those at the top of the industry and that narrative is almost immediately challenged.

The 2024 Spring/Summer Fashion Weeks saw several of the largest fashion houses debut collections with new creative directors at the helm. Gucci with Sabato de Sarno, Tom Ford with Peter Hawkins, and Alexander McQueen hiring Seán McGirr soon after Paris Fashion Week, replacing Sarah Burton after her 26-year career with the fashion house. All of these men are wickedly talented, bringing true transformative potential to each of these fashion houses; however, these men are all being hired by

men, and considering how the vast number of openings in these executive fashion positions were filled up by men, this phenomenon seems to indicate an issue much larger than any individual hiree.

Alice Bouleau—the head of creative at Sterling International, an employment search firm specializing in fashion and luxury retail—believes that anywhere from 67%-70% of all creative directors or heads of design at the top fashion houses are White men. Compare this to the Fair Trade Certified statistics that 85% of the graduates from top fashion schools are women, that women make up 80% of all fashion purchasing decisions yet only 12.5% of fashion CEOs are women, and that nearly 100% of women in fashion see gender equality as an issue. Fashion is female, especially at the consumer level; however, there is a clear disconnect between how historically female the buyers have been and how male the sellers continue to be.

Taking a quote from The New York Times article, "Fashion's Groupthink Problem," when asked about considering female candidates for vacant creative director positions, the CEOs of these top fashion houses questioned the potential-hires' career experience and ability to move forward in the industry, asking Bouleau: "Do you think they are ready for this next move?" This question, a seemingly natural inquiry when considering the female candidates, was seldom asked about any of the male candidates being considered. Some of these female candidates had more than 15 years of experience compared to their male counterparts, yet this question was still prompted.

### **The Plexiglass Ceiling**

In the current fashion landscape, Black women face the largest barrier to entry, evidenced by their lack of representation in both runway modeling and in executive positions.

Why did it take 20 years for another Black woman to open a Prada show? Anok Yai made history, but it's unfair to treat that as an industry 'win.' Spaces are being made, but those spaces should have always

existed. It's easy to celebrate the positive changes being made in the current industry landscape; however, it's irresponsible to disregard the racist history of an industry that is only *now* beginning to accept that Black people are equally as beautiful as White people. Because Naomi Campbell, Tyra Banks, and Grace Jones were exceptions, they were forced to be exceptional. Not only were they women; they were Black women, making entering the industry that much more difficult, and forcing the industry to treat them like household names being that much more of a challenge.

Transitioning away from the runway, I invite all readers to Google: 'Black female designer.' The reader will discover that Google will present, potentially out of order, Telfar Clemens, Dapper Dan, LaQuan Smith, and Anifa Mvuemba. Three men, and Anifa Mvuemba. What's worse, Anifa Mvuemba won't even be the first designer listed. If you replace 'black' with 'white' in the search query, Google won't understand the question, and will show you articles for the 'best female designers,' and this doesn't mean that those Black women who *are* in the industry aren't as talented, it means that the standard for those female designers is, invariably, White. "'White' female designers' doesn't make sense to Google because female designers have historically been White, therefore setting 'White' female design as the standard that non-White female designers are expected to meet, and must exceed if they wish to have any respect in the industry.

Although executive diversity at major fashion houses is increasing, Louis Vuitton consecutively hiring two Black men, Virgil Abloh, then Pharrell Williams, as their creative directors being among the more public examples of this, only 1% of all creative directors across luxury brands in Europe and North America were from minority backgrounds. Despite this already small percentage, the presence of Black women at this level of the industry is non-existent. According to a Fashion Minority Alliance report published in late 2023, not a single Black woman has ever been hired as the creative director of a major fashion house. The glass ceiling that exists for White women becomes unshatterable for Black women: a ceiling made of

plexiglass. Even if diversity, separate from gender, is increasing industry-wide, Black women fail to be represented by this increase.

Black women have consistently been at the forefront of fashion: Naomi Campbell and Grace Jones, as mentioned previously, Beyonce, Iman, Rihanna, even women like Aliyah Bah (Aliyah's Interlude), who created an entire online fashion aesthetic in her name with AliyahCore. Not only are Black women equal to White women in creativity and influence, especially in fashion; they are often industry drivers responsible for moving the culture forward. The fashion industry is finally ready to admit that. However, they have yet to put their money where their mouths are. Spaces must be made for all women to showcase the abundance of value they bring, and to be regarded with the same respect and consideration that all men have been afforded because of their privilege.