

# *Breaking the concrete ceiling: why the UK construction is still waiting for diversity to 'build' itself*

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# BREAKING THE CONCRETE CEILING: WHY THE UK CONSTRUCTION IS STILL WAITING FOR DIVERSITY TO 'BUILD' ITSELF

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The UK construction industry continues to lag other sectors in achieving diversity particularly in promoting women from ethnic backgrounds into leadership roles. Only 20% of the 3.1 million construction workforce in the UK are women. Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Representation in the industry is 6%. No statistics is available to reflect Female BAME leaders. Despite national initiatives and corporate commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), the sector remains structurally exclusionary with systemic barriers such as cultural stereotypes, unconscious bias, and exclusive workplace practices. This paper investigates the barriers that hinder the progression of ethnic minority women into leadership roles in the UK construction industry. Using a qualitative semi-structured interview approach grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), the study explores challenges of systemic bias, workplace exclusion, and the limited impact of current EDI initiatives. Findings highlight persistent discriminatory practices, lack of representation and role models, and ineffective diversity strategies. The study proposes actionable strategies and recommendations for industry reform including mentoring initiatives, leadership development programmes, and fostering inclusive cultures.

Keywords: construction industry; ethnic females; diversity and inclusion; leadership; critical race theory

## INTRODUCTION

Despite its role as a driver of economic growth, the UK construction industry remains one of the least diverse sectors. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2023), only 20% of the 3.1 million construction workforce are women, and just 6% identify as BAME (CIOB, 2024). The construction industry remains predominantly white and male-dominated, presenting significant challenges in attracting and retaining females from underrepresented ethnic groups due to lack of visible, relatable role models and mentors (Strachan *et al.*, 2020). These challenges are even more pronounced at the leadership level, where there is an almost total absence of women from ethnic backgrounds. This study investigates the systemic barriers impeding the progression of BAME women into leadership positions in construction. It aims to explore the lived realities behind exclusionary practices and the nature of barriers hindering ethnic women's progression to leadership roles.

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## Employment in the UK Construction Industry

Estimates of the UK construction workforce varies depending on the source. The Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2025) Records an employment figure of 2.14 million workers in 2024, while the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB, 2024) Reports 2.67 million. Of these, approximately 270,850 employees within the construction sector are in leadership positions, including roles as directors, executives, and senior managers, yet women, and particularly ethnic women, remain underrepresented. Projections by CITB indicate that to accommodate industry growth between 2024 and 2028, the sector will require an average Annual Recruitment Requirement (ARR) Of 2580 professionals within this occupational category. By 2028, the total number of individuals in these leadership roles is expected to increase to 277,060. Additionally, data from the ONS (2025) Estimates that the total number of job vacancies across all occupational categories within the construction industry will reach 38,000 between December 2024 and February 2025. This figure represents an annual increase of 6.7% compared to the same period in the previous year.

Despite the significant workforce demand projected within the UK construction industry, the progression of women from ethnic backgrounds into leadership positions remains severely limited. While CITB (2024) Anticipates thousands of leadership vacancies annually, and ONS (2025) Reports steady job growth, there is little evidence to suggest that these opportunities are equitably accessible to ethnic women. Deep-rooted structural barriers, including institutional biases, exclusionary workplace cultures, and limited access to mentorship and sponsorship, continue to restrict their career advancement (Suresh et. al., 2025). Without targeted interventions, the industry risks perpetuating a leadership landscape that fails to reflect its diverse workforce. This study seeks to critically examine the systemic obstacles that hinder ethnic women's progression into leadership roles, offering insights into the structural reforms necessary for fostering inclusive leadership pathways in the UK construction sector.

## Women in Leadership: FTSE Overview

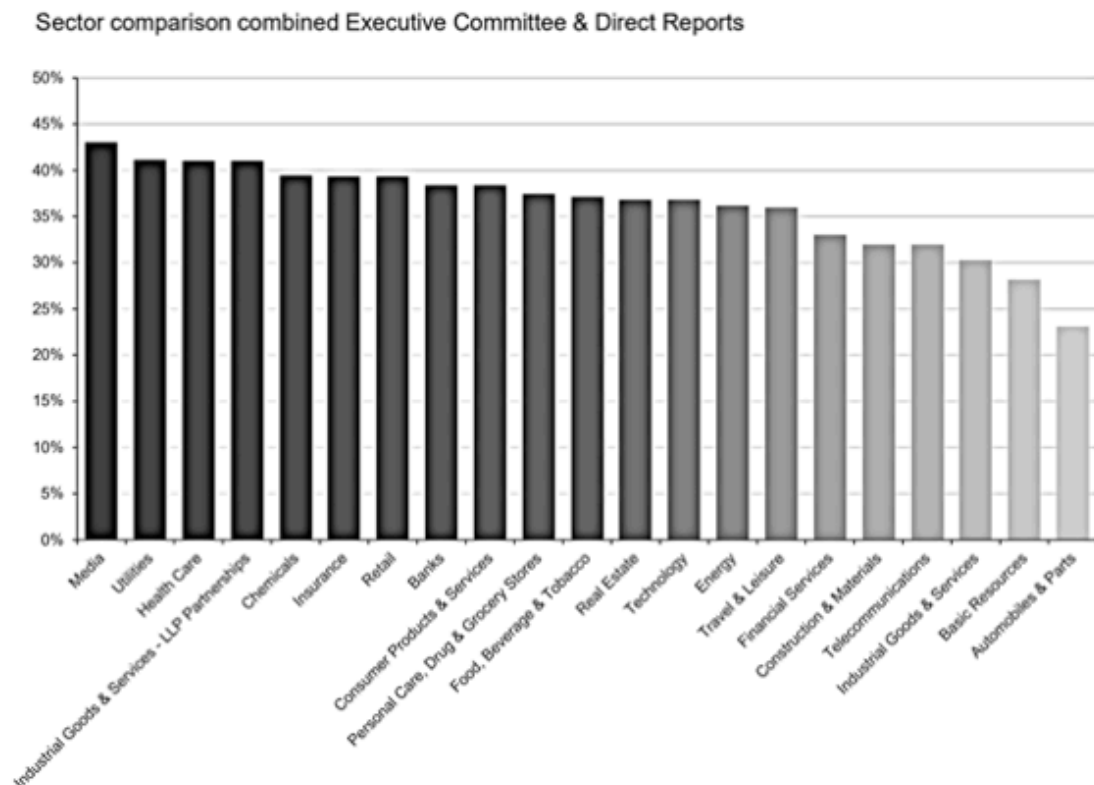
This section reviews latest statistic on women in leadership in the UK construction industry. It draws secondary data from several recent reports (FTSE, 2025), construction companies' annual reports for 2024, and CITB (2024). The section reviews and discusses data on representation of women in leadership in the Financial Times Stock Exchange Group (FTSE) Listed construction companies trading on the London Stock Exchange.

### *Female Leaders in FTSE Companies: Construction compared to other Sectors*

The FTSE Women Leaders Report (2025) Distinguishes between 'Women on Boards' and 'Women in Leadership' with the latter comprising of women in Executive Committees and Direct Reporting to those committees hence focusing on the pipeline of female talent already in leadership positions. The FTSE Women Leaders group is an independent, business-led framework supported by the UK Government to encourage on a voluntarily basis the percentage of women on boards and in leadership. It has set two targets: A minimum threshold of 33% of women on boards; and a 40% representation of women in leadership to be achieved by the end of 2025. The following analysis of female leaders in the construction industry is based on the above definitions and figures set by FTSE Women Leaders.

As can be deduced from Figure 1, the 'Construction and Materials' sector is underperforming in its female representation at leadership level with the sector ranked

5th from the bottom in comparison to other sectors. Moreover, the sector is underperforming in relation to the target of 40% to be achieved by the end of 2025.



*Figure 1: Women in Leadership. Source: FTSE Women Leaders Report (2025)*

It comes as no surprise that the total number of women in leadership positions in construction is low. This should be set against the backdrop of the percentage of women in the industry irrespective of their career position. Figure 2 reflects these statistics obtained from latest figures published by the Office of National Statistics (2025). These provide an overview of the percentage of women in full time and part time roles in the industry. The figure shows that in December 2024, the percentage of women in full-time employment in the sector remains stubbornly below 10%, a growth of just over 2% from December 2015. For the past 9 years, the percentage of women in part time jobs in the industry remains close to the 6% boundary. It can be argued that the low number of women in leadership positions in construction is attributed to the low level of entry and middle management pool from which leadership talent could be drawn.

As this research primarily focuses on women in leadership in construction, the following sections present statistics obtained from the UK FTSE Women Leadership organisation which monitors data obtained voluntarily from FTSE ‘construction and materials’ companies listed in the London Stock Exchange. Two listings are consulted in this paper: Private 50 and FTSE250.

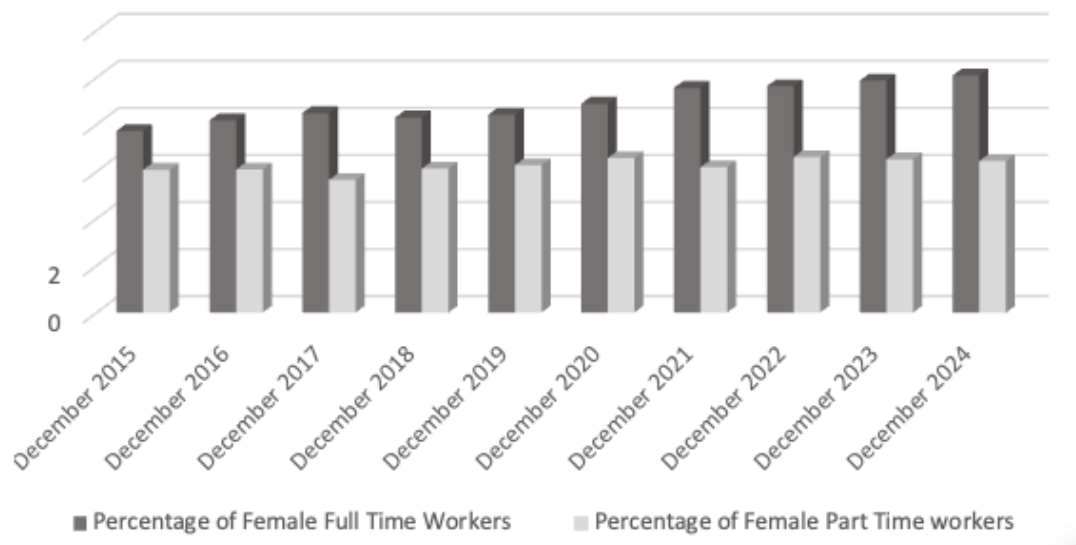


Figure 2: Percentage of Female Workers in Construction. Source ONS (2025)

#### *Female Leaders in Private 50 Construction and Materials Sector*

The Private 50 companies are those top 50 FTSE-listed private companies. Under the category of 'Construction and Materials', there are 5 companies in this group which represent top construction and consultancy firms in the industry. According to FTSE Women Leaders Report (2025), these 5 firms are ranked 13, 16, 20, 35, and 36 in terms of the percentage of women in leadership roles. As previously mentioned, there are two statistics of relevance set by and for UK business which is supported by UK government: the achievement of a minimum threshold of 33% women representation at leadership level and a target of 40% representation to be achieved by the end of 2025. The top performing construction company, ranked 13th in the Top Private 50 FTSE-list, leads the way with a 37.3% women representation in leadership. Whilst this company has met the threshold for Women in Board (44.4%), it is yet to hit the 40% target expected by the end of 2025 for Women in Leadership (37.3%). The second-best performing company is ranked 16th with 36.4% women in leadership positions. The third company is ranked 20th in the group and 3rd from the construction and materials sector perspective. This company reported a 55.6% women representation in its board but a mere 35.2% in leadership positions. All three construction companies have 0% of ethnic women of construction-related qualifications in their Boards/Executive Committees according to published details of their leadership teams. The remaining two construction and materials companies in Top Private 50 have one ethnic woman each in Corporate Functional positions.

#### *Female Leaders in FTSE250 Construction and Materials Sector*

Data from 9 construction companies listed on the FTSE250 is analysed in relation to the percentage of women and ethnic women in leadership roles. The data indicate that only one construction company achieved an above target percentage of women in leadership of 43.8% (FTSE, 2025). The company is ranked 23rd within the wider group. However, a detailed analysis of its annual report shows that there are 3 women in a 9-member combined executive committee (33%). These women do not have construction-related qualifications. They occupy Corporate functional roles including Corporate Development Director, Chief People Officer, and Corporate Affairs Director. Whilst these are significant positions, they do not reflect core construction professions. None of the women are of ethnic backgrounds. Of the remaining 8 companies with leadership composition datasets in the FTSE250, one company,

ranked 56, achieved the threshold of 33% female representation in leadership and is expected to be on track for meeting the voluntary 40% target in 2025. However, none of the women are from underrepresented ethnic groups. Five companies ranked 98, 107, 109, 114, and 117 have neither met the threshold nor are deemed on track to meet the target. Of interest, the percentage of ethnic women in leadership occupations are 0%, 6%, 11%, 0%, and 11% respectively. The numbers are very low - one ethnic women in each case in Corporate Functional roles. The remaining two companies listed ranked 136 and 146 on the FTSE250's Women in Leadership dataset. They are classified as 'below 25%, adrift from peers and with a significant shortfall to address' Data shows that one ethnic woman occupies a Corporate Functional position in each of the two companies.

### **Theoretical Underpinning: Critical Race Theory**

critical race theory (CRT) is adopted as a theoretical framework for this study. Three constructs are mobilised: Intersectionality of Race and Gender, Lived Experiences, and Narrative Sharing. The theory emerged in the USA in early 1970s as a scholarly movement through the writings of Derrick Bell, the first African American academic at Harvard Law School (Morgan, 2024; Delgado and Stefancic, 1989). According to Delgado and Stefancic (1989, p.467), Bell's early works focused on 'interest convergence' as a 'means of understanding Western race history and the conflict of interest in civil rights litigation'. By early 1990s, scholarly work by prominent Critical research shaped the tenets of CRT leading to the birth of a theory with well-defined themes grounded in 'how racism was connected to the law' (Morgan, 2024). Morgan (2024) Stipulates that despite differing opinions, CRT theorists agree on the main principles of the theory, namely that: A. interest convergence is prevalent where 'white elites and large segments of society' are only interested in addressing racism if it serves their interest, b. racism is normal and common hence difficult to recognise and deal with, c. Intersectionality across multiple social identities overlap to shape discrimination.

CRT has seen a growing interest by UK-based researchers exploring female BAME underrepresentation in leadership in various industries including UK Higher Education (Heslop-Martin et. al., 2024, Omhand, 2023), Football (Godhania, 2024), Finance (Babafemi, 2022), and Arts (Marsh, 2020). A thorough search for scholarly research mobilising CRT in exploring female BAME underrepresentation in leadership in the UK construction industry yielded no return. The author believes that this study may be the first of its kind given the focus and context of the research. There is, nevertheless, considerable studies on Gender, EDI, BAME, and Female underrepresentation in the UK construction industry. Examples include the works of Suresh et. al., 2025; Missa, 2013; Clarke and Gribbling, 2008; and Steele and Sodhi, 2006. Neither of these studies are grounded in CRT nor focused on female BAME in leadership in construction; hence the originality of the study presented in this paper. The near total absence of research into this social category indicates the urgency in the need to understand and support women from underrepresented backgrounds on their journey to leadership.

### **METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews with three women from underrepresented ethnic groups in senior leadership roles within the UK construction industry. The selection was purposive, focusing on participants who matched the FTSE Women Leaders' defining of leadership: executive roles or

those reporting directly to executive committees. Interviews were conducted virtually, each lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. The participants were anonymised and assigned identifiers: Interviewee 1 (Senior Project Manager); Interviewee 2 (Architect/Partner); Interviewee 3 (Civil Engineer/Divisional Technical Director).

## FINDINGS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was conducted manually, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) Six-step approach. Four main themes emerged: (1) Systemic Barriers and Intersectionality; (2) Discrimination and Exclusion; (3) Representation and Role Models; (4) EDI Initiatives and Tokenism.

### Systemic barriers and Intersectionality

Interviewees emphasized the profound adverse impact of systemic barriers and gender/race intersections in their career journeys to leadership. These were cited as daily challenges. Participants described needing to work significantly harder than peers and often being overlooked or underestimated. Discrimination was frequently subtle, embedded in organisational culture, promotion practices, and industry norms such as after-work networking in public houses (pubs). The following extracts depict their experiences:

"... just trying to get yourself heard in meetings... that has been one of the biggest challenges in terms of being able to put your thoughts and your views among many white men in the industry... I do have a very different accent compared to the people in the UK industry, so it does get ignored frequently." Interviewee 1

"I am first generation born in the UK in the late 60s and grew up in an all-white environment... Since young, I saw myself as a white person... As an architect, I needed to totally assimilate and regard myself as one of the lads" Interviewee 2

"It irritates some individuals that I am outspoken, that I speak my mind... my biggest challenge was that certain men did not stomach that I was speeding ahead with my career and tried to halt my progression." Interviewee 3

The intersectionality of gender and race posing significant barriers is reflected in the lived experiences of all three interviewees. It is interesting to note how each woman developed different coping mechanisms. What distinguishes interviewee 2 is that she is UK-born whereas the others came to the UK having completed their undergraduate studies and gained construction experience in their home countries prior to settling in the UK. For them, the pride in their own rich culture, their sense of professional competence, and aspiration for success meant that they had to self-promote and challenge discriminatory boundaries. In other words, they had to break down concrete ceilings to progress to leadership roles whilst maintaining their authentic self.

### Discrimination and Exclusion

Both direct and indirect discrimination were encountered by the interviewees. Some very overt; others quite subtle. Findings can be viewed from CRT's principle that racism is normal and common and is manifested in direct and indirect discrimination. It can be difficult to recognise and deal with when it is subtle. Some of these experiences are evident in the following quotes:

"I'll be honest. It's nothing direct ever... it's very subtle. For me, it's a list of small things which sort of add up" Interviewee 1

"I've been discriminated against on countless occasions. I worked for a company after Part 1 qualification. I was made redundant as an architectural technologist but was



offered a part-time job as an administrator in the same company! I was young and they took advantage!" Interviewee 2

"I was 3 years overdue for promotion to Divisional Technical Director... following amazing reviews by a major Client I was working with, after several tries, I finally put my case in front of my line manager; he said "Oh (name), when I look at you, you don't look like a divisional director to me!" Interviewee 3

## **Representation and Role Models**

The absence of ethnic role models amplified the sense of isolation and slowed career progression. Although informal mentorships were helpful, participants noted that formal structures were lacking. The three interviewees reinforce the challenges relating to underrepresentation and how this had delayed their own career journeys into leadership:

"I've been to events; I've been to talks; I probably will see one other female from ethnic background that is if the organising committees have actually made an effort to look for them and extend an invitation" Interviewee 1

"I am the only women - Director - on our Board and it happens that I am from an ethnic background... the rest are 9 white men... and this is typical of the total lack of role models I experienced in my career journey" Interviewee 2

"How many CEOs are from ethnic minorities in this country? They don't even get you on the executive boards. I'm on the non-executive board of [name] but there are next to no ethnic females on executive boards in construction" Interviewee 3

## **EDI Initiatives and Tokenism**

Regarding EDI initiatives, all participants were sceptical. They perceived them as 'tick-box' activities driven more by compliance than conviction. No concrete implementation checks were in place, and unconscious bias training was viewed as insufficient. Interestingly, one of the interviewees suggested that EDI initiatives are not making real impact or difference for ethnic females in the industry. She suggested that initiatives and policies are often mobilised by firms to win work however, no due diligence takes place to ascertain whether they are implemented effectively.

"There are people pushing policies wherein projects are awarded to companies who have diversity and inclusion initiatives, but there's nobody actually checking whether they are actually being implemented or not." Interviewee 1

Interviewee 2 agreed that some of these initiatives are a "tick-box exercise and genuine efforts are desperately needed to make them effective".

An example was given by Interviewee 3 who went further and suggested that "conscious bias" training should replace "unconscious bias" training by construction companies. She explains:

"I think companies need to start training people for conscious bias. Unconscious, much easier to deal with than conscious bias where people wilfully do things which are wrong." Interviewee 3

## **DISCUSSION**

Findings confirm previous literature suggesting that women from ethnic minorities face several barriers preventing them from reaching leadership positions. Using CRT, this study highlights how race and gender intersectionality operate structurally, often invisibly, within workplace practices. Ethnic women must work much harder to prove they have merit and can succeed in the industry. This finding corroborates with Suresh et. al. (2025) And Otaye-Ebede and Shaffakat (2024) Who explored lived

experiences of BAME women in construction and psychology professions respectively. Furthermore, direct and indirect discrimination experienced by the interviewees can be explained from a CRT perspective that racism is normal and common, yet it can be difficult to recognise and deal with when it is subtle.

Underrepresentation of female leaders from ethnically diverse backgrounds is an undisputed phenomenon across industries (Heslop-Martin et. al., 2024; Godhania, 2024; Babafemi, 2022 Marsh, 2020). Data analysis of the Top Private 50 and FTSE250 construction companies provides sufficient evidence for the total absence of profession-related ethnic female leader. The three interviewees reinforce the challenges relating to underrepresentation and how this had delayed their own career journeys into leadership. The complexity of underrepresentation goes deeper than just lack of role models and raises questions around male-focused career pathways, structures, and policies that disadvantage women (Babafemi, 2022). Intentional exclusion of ethnic groups is highlighted in a study on USA construction industry regarding male BAME in trade and the profession in which the researcher stresses that “exclusion remains the ordinary business of the USA construction industry, with routines, practices, and institutions that perpetuate minoritising and sub-ordinating non-whites” (Piatt, 2023:93). Experiences of the interviewees with promotion suggests that some parts of the UK construction industry exhibit exclusion practices.

The cultural practices of the industry often act as reinforcement of concrete structures hindering career progression for ethnic females. The long working hours and prevalent drinking culture are indicative of a male-orientated model of success and serve as significant barriers to ethnic female career progression. Cultural issues continue to undermine EDI efforts which resonates with CRT’s interest convergence discourse that changing racially discriminatory systems is a slow process and requires interest convergence (Piatt, 2023:92). Interestingly, one of the interviewees suggested that EDI initiatives are not making real impact or difference for ethnic females in the industry. She suggested that initiatives and policies are often mobilised by firms to win work however, no due diligence takes place to ascertain whether they are implemented effectively.

Otaye-Ebede and Shaffakat (2024) Findings corroborate with the interviewees’ opinions and suggest that BAME women are still severely underrepresented in top leadership positions despite increased interest in EDI initiatives and policies which have been put in place to reduce discrimination and improve access to leadership. Findings are further supported by Babafemi (2022) Who believes such policies may not be effectively implemented due to the unwritten norms that persist within the workplace such as after work networking.

Interviewees stipulated that EDI initiatives should not be about increasing numbers or be seen as favouring ethnic women (tokensim) For promotion and career progression but should be grounded on merit. These sentiments feature strongly in the findings of Suresh et. al. (2025) And Godhania (2024) Where recognition of merit and accomplishment are strongly argued for in promotion of women and ethnic females into leadership positions. However, one interviewee questioned calls for EDI initiatives to be applied on merit suggesting that such language is problematic indicating that 'BAME women are not meritorious' hence creating exclusively mutual tick boxes 'BAME' and 'MERIT'.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this study, the following actions are recommended for implementation by UK construction industry plc:

- Establish accountability mechanisms for EDI policy implementation.
- Promote conscious (not just unconscious) Bias training.
- Create structured mentoring and sponsorship programs targeting ethnic women.
- Embed inclusive leadership pathways in professional development.
- Ensure executive recruitment panels are diverse.

Accountability, transparency, ethical practices and professionalism are strongly advocated to ensure better outcomes for ethnic women aspiring to take their rightful place in leadership roles within the UK construction industry.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has revealed how ethnic women in UK construction industry face systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers in their pursuit of leadership. Despite the presence of EDI policies and initiatives, practical implementation is ineffective, and accountability is minimal. Furthermore, the scarcity and invisibility of females from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds in leadership positions raises serious questions about the industry's engagement, efforts, and effectiveness of these initiatives in addressing equity, diversity, and inclusion concerns. The use of CRT has provided a powerful lens to understand how exclusion persists, and how targeted, systemic change is needed to transform the leadership landscape of the industry. The study makes recommendations which may help deliver change in the industry.

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