

HIDDEN FIGURES

Get to know these five Black women working behind the scenes to create diversity you can see in the fashion biz

BY MARQUITA K. HARRIS

Real change is an inside job. Inclusion doesn't just mean having more Black models on the runway and faces in ad campaigns. It starts with those who are rarely seen, the people in corporate and creative positions of power and influence. "I wish I'd known there are many more roles in fashion and media than styling or editing," says Vanessa Kingori, MBE, publishing director of *British Vogue*. Meet five Black women paving the way and creating the kind of change that will last well beyond a season.

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Candace Marie

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Social Media & Strategy at Prada

ESSENCE: What does your job entail?

CANDACE MARIE: I'm the first in my job capacity in the U.S., so the role continues to evolve. In a nutshell, it involves creating and implementing social media strategies in line with business needs. I also monitor the success of social media initiatives, give feedback on activations and align influencer strategies with overall company objectives.

ESSENCE: What's the one thing you wish you knew when you first began working in the fashion business?

MARIE: I wish I'd known to start interning as soon as possible.

ESSENCE: What advice do you have for Black women who want to enter the field?

MARIE: Work persistently hard toward that one yes and surround yourself with friends and mentors who are hard workers as well. Throughout my career I've heard the word *no* so many times, and, to be honest, it can be very discouraging, especially when you have the qualifications and you find out you were overlooked or passed over for someone who brought less to the table.



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Ezinne Kwubiri

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Head of Diversity & Inclusion for H&M North America

ESSENCE: Any words of wisdom for Black women wanting to work in the fashion business?

EZINNE KWUBIRI: Do your research and respect the process—that's true for any business you're looking to go into. The dream job isn't going to be the first opportunity. You have to be knowledgeable, competitive and prepared to showcase your craft. This means building your portfolio and résumé through internships, continuing education, conferences and books.

ESSENCE: What is the proudest moment of your career?

KWUBIRI: There are always going to be wins and teachable moments. I focus on opportunities to influence and contribute but also to learn. I'm proud of all the successfully executed projects I've led both across the country and abroad in places like the U.K., Singapore, Milan. I'm also proud of representing Black women in spaces where people don't usually see them.

ESSENCE: What do you enjoy most about working for H&M in your current role?

KWUBIRI: I collaborate with various departments at H&M (locally and globally), which I love, as well as meet new people. It allows me to learn from others, provide a different perspective, hear their stories and celebrate when we see the fruits of our labor. And, of course, working in fashion!

ESSENCE: What do you wish you'd known before working in the fashion and retail space?

KWUBIRI: It is fast and ever-evolving. You really have to stay ahead of the game and stay sharp. Also, there are so many opinions and perspectives. I knew this, but it is definitely heightened by our customers and employees being from all over the world. You have to take those differences into consideration when you are making decisions. »

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Umindy Francis
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CEO & Founder
of UFCG

ESSENCE: What do you love most about leading Umindy Francis Consulting Group?

UMINDY FRANCIS: I absolutely love that I am able to help others realize their dreams.

ESSENCE: What advice do you have for Black women who want a career in the fashion business?

FRANCIS: Go for it! First figure out what area of the industry may be right for you. There are lots of jobs that many people don't know about. Social media has created new opportunities as well. Try to find someone who can tell you a bit more about the positions that interest you. Informational interviews are great and can also lead to mentorship opportunities. Above all, build a network. The relationships you develop, even if you are an intern, are valuable and can last your entire career.

ESSENCE: When you first began your professional journey, did you have a mentor?

FRANCIS: I didn't. I think a lot of young Black women who wanted a career in fashion didn't have mentors because there just wasn't enough representation, so I relied on friends. We canvassed our networks

to find me two amazing internships, one at *Elle* magazine, where I was able to intern for a young Black woman, Amanda Lawrence, and the other at the fashion brand Nicole Miller. I later became PR director at Nicole Miller. I am eternally grateful to my friends Olivia Brown and Denise Simon, and I never let them forget it! Along the way I did find a wonderful mentor, Agnes Cammock, the former fashion director of *ESSENCE*.



"I absolutely love that I am able to help others realize their dreams."

—UMINDY FRANCIS



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Nicole Cokley-Dunlap
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VP of Diversity & Inclusion Strategy,
Macy's Inc.
&
Co-President of
BRAG

ESSENCE: Tell me more about your current role at Macy's.

NICOLE COKLEY-DUNLAP: I was just appointed in June. I focus on the diversity and inclusion strategy for Macy's Inc., which includes Macy's, Bloomingdale's, Macy's Backstage, STORY and Blue Mercury.

ESSENCE: What do you love most about your career?

COKLEY-DUNLAP: I love that what I do on a day-to-day basis is the perfect balance of art and science. I am often asked, "How did you get into the industry with a degree in speech pathology and audiology and a minor in science?" Regardless of your background, it is important to remember that working in the fashion industry requires strong analytical and communication skills.

ESSENCE: Tell us about someone who helped support you in some

way when you first began your professional career.

COKLEY-DUNLAP: I was fortunate to have a strong network and community at BRAG (Black Retail Action Group) and Bloomingdale's and via family and friends who supported me. Some of my mentors looked like me, and some did not. Many weren't even formal mentors. What they all had in common was their ability to connect and build trust while offering a different and sometimes challenging perspective that pushed me to grow.

ESSENCE: What advice do you have for Black women entering the fashion business?

COKLEY-DUNLAP: The industry needs you and will greatly benefit from your background. Be assured that your uniqueness can bring opportunity and innovation to so many aspects of the industry. »

HALEIGH WALSWORTH

REYN SOFFEE



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Vanessa Kingori, MBE

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Publishing Director of *British Vogue*

ESSENCE: Tell us more about your current role.

VANESSA KINGORI: It relates to the business of *British Vogue*. This includes all financial aspects of running the brand. Interestingly, in my position, business and creativity often overlap. For example, our covers affect sales and attract advertising, so it's an area that I discuss in detail with our team.

ESSENCE: What's the proudest moment of your career?

KINGORI: In 2018 I became the first woman ever to run the *British Vogue* business as well as the first person of color to become publishing director across all Conde Nast brands.

ESSENCE: What do you say to Black women who want to work in fashion?

KINGORI: My advice for Black women or any women of difference working in the fashion business is to always bring your authentic self even when it makes you or others uncomfortable. Often, people feel that they need to conform in order to make it. I've seen so many

instances of imposter syndrome. It's important to remember that you can never be a better version of somebody else, and no one can be a better version of you.



My advice is to always bring your authentic self even when it makes you or others uncomfortable."

—VANESSA KINGORI, MBE



Marquita K. Harris is a senior editor for *ESSENCE* and host of the *UnBossed* podcast. Her work has appeared at *Refinery29*, *Cultured*, *Ebony* and *i-D* magazine, among other publications.