

Breaking The Glass Ceiling: Empowerment Comes with Scars



Words by

Emmanuela Kumi

We love the story of the woman who “broke the glass ceiling”.

It’s a neat metaphor, a powerful crack echoing through centuries of exclusion, promising that women and marginalised people can finally climb as high as anyone else. But behind that image lies something far messier: the cuts, bruises and exhaustion that come from smashing your way into spaces never designed for you.

The truth is: the glass ceiling isn’t gone. In fact, some argue it’s been double-glazed. In the UK in April 2025 the gender pay gap for full-time employees stood at 6.9 %, meaning women earned a median £18.87 per hour versus £20.27 for men. For those in the top 10% of earners it jumps to 15.2%. We celebrate token breakthroughs, female CEOs here, young activists there, and mistake them for structural change.

Take the boardroom: on the surface it looks better, as women now hold nearly 45% of board seats at the UK’s largest listed companies. But when you dig deeper the “second ceiling” waits: only about 19 of the FTSE 100 companies have a female CEO. That gap between a woman being in the room and standing at the top of it is exactly what keeps the metaphor alive.

For every figure like Oprah Winfrey who built an empire from the ground up, there are thousands whose ambition is capped: not by lack of talent, but by invisible ceilings of class, race, neurodivergence or background. Even for those who do break through, success often comes at a cost: constant scrutiny, pressure to represent an entire group, the balancing act of being “assertive but likable.” **As one woman put it: “I broke the glass ceiling — but the shards stuck in me for years.”** That line stays with me. It’s the reality of empowerment no one likes to talk about: it’s taxing, lonely, heavy with responsibility.

But still young Black and Brown women are owning that responsibility as a moral imperative. For example, in focus groups conducted as part of **Authoring Our Own Stories** several young women said they felt a moral duty to create opportunities for themselves and hold the door open for others

“For me, as a Black woman, I don’t think anyone has told me this directly, but for me I think my responsibility is to hold the ladder up for anyone that comes after me because when I make it in life and I enter spaces where I’m the only Black person I have to make sure that I haven’t shut the door for whoever comes after me”

Initiatives like **Authoring Our Own Stories** are providing opportunities for young Black and Brown women to, not only learn how to conduct research, but also build soft skills that will be transferable into other areas of their lives such as education, training and employment. For example, one peer researcher said

Authoring Our Own Stories was like a door that opened.

I learned a lot about myself through the project. I developed skills and learned that I am a ‘debriefer’ . I don’t like speaking in public. I like being in my own little bubble, but doing this project allowed me to speak out a lot more and not to feel shy to speak out in situations not just now but in life.

It’s a struggle yet still, people are breaking through. At grassroots levels, young girls such as those of the **Girl Up** community run clubs, lead campaigns, and speak truth even when their voice shakes.

Community organisers such as Vuraidzo Kavithu create platforms that uplift rather than compete. These are quiet architects working from the ground up to quietly redesign what leadership looks like.

Maybe that’s what progress really means: not polishing the old ceiling but refusing to rebuild it at all. The facts show improvement, yes, but the pace is slow. A 2025 analysis found the UK ranked 18th globally for workplace gender equality, its worst ranking in a decade. That tells us the illusion of “we’re nearly there” is just that: an illusion.

.So, what do we do?

- Speak up when you see ceilings, visible or invisible. Use your voice. Create community. Open doors for someone else as you walk through your own.
- Demand structural change: equal pay policies that don’t just exist on paper, meaningful representation not just in seats but in power.
- Be the role model you want to see, because waiting isn’t working fast enough.

And most importantly: remember that empowerment shouldn’t require enduring pain to prove you belong. Real inclusion means being able to rise freely and bring others with you.

Because breaking the glass ceiling isn’t the victory. Building a world without one is.